

Weekend

Saturday, March 8, 2008



All aboard for the smiling coast

Why The Gambia is the perfect place to unwind: Pages 8 & 9

Travel

Basking in the glory of the

The Gambia is not the place for an African safari, but its stunning beaches, luxury hotels and friendly people make it the perfect place to unwind, as **Steph Elmore** discovered . . .

BE around the pool in six hours? Check. Glorious uncrowded beaches like those of the Caribbean? Check. Exactly the same time zone as the UK so no jet lag? Check. Interesting culture, non commercialised, unspoilt land yet with luxury hotels and hot, hot sunshine that doesn't cost an arm and a leg? Check mate!

Now, you would think the next thing I needed was a reality check on my list but this is exactly what is on the agenda when I reach the blaze of green, tropical flowering trees away from the crowded resorts of European destinations in the Gambia.

It is no wonder they call it the smiling coast of Africa as not only will you spend your time beaming from ear to ear here but the Gambians are the friendliest, most hospitable people I have ever come across. Even at passport control they greet you with a smile rather than with that unnerving stare that makes you seriously wonder whether someone could have actually smuggled something into your bag while you weren't looking and you are about to be hauled off to a cell instead of your hotel (or is that just me who does that?).

No, not even could the heightened tones of Jade Goody's mum on the plane and bumbling around at Banjul airport distract me from the fact that I knew this was going to be one fantastic trip!

Situated on the unspoilt coast of West Africa on approximately the same latitude as Barbados, Gambia is dominated by the majestic River Gambia from which it bears its name and is the smallest country on mainland Africa.

This isn't the place to come if you are looking for a safari adventure, however. It isn't littered with wild animals – except for the baboons, 560 different species of birds and the odd hippopotamus lazing around in the river, but it offers a whole other adventure that takes you right to the heart of African culture.

My first visit was to the 100-acre Makasutu Cultural Forest, (Makasutu means 'holy forest') and there is a real history here. Legend has it that tribal wars



➤ **RHYTHM OF THE NIGHT** Traditional dancers entertain the tourists staying at the Mandina eco lodges in Makasutu, right

took place here, a king was said to have been killed in the forest and his head, throne and crown are buried there.

Aside from its rich past, however, this is one of the key attractions in the Gambia for tourists, the result of 15 years of hard work of two Englishmen, James English and Lawrence Williams that earned them the Best Overseas Eco Development Project award from the British Guild of Travel Writers.

A journey here begins at base camp where you can enjoy all those African delights. Typical local dishes are 'benachin' (rice and vegetables) or 'domoda' (meat stewed in groundnut puree and served with rice). From base camp it's off to explore the dense forest on foot to see the many varieties of spectacular looking birds, monkeys and baboons until you reach the mangroves of the Gambian river, climb aboard a dugout canoe and set off for a magical and tranquil trip along the African waters.

It was here I noticed the luxu-

rious 'Mandina Lodges', also part of Makasutu forest. Many people choose to stay in these riverside lodges if they really want to get away from it all. The lodges are built on stilts over the water and are solar powered with their own private roof terrace, bedroom and upstairs day-room and are so eco-friendly they have a roofless and self-composting toilet.

During the evening there is a real magical feel to Makasutu, especially when they put on a tribal dance show – men and women in African costume thrashing about doing acrobatics, real African dancing, singing and chanting all around a 15 foot bonfire.

Another way to experience the real Gambia would be to take an off the beaten track adventure and drive through the town of Serrekunda to get among the Gambians trading on the streets, see the hustle and bustle of the market, the fish huts choking with steam as they smoke that day's catch, and if you fancy doing business, get



haggling. Solid wood carvings are the Gambians' forte, I haggled a top-notch African mask carving down from £80 to £20.

Tourism in the Gambia began around 1965 and has been developing slowly ever since. It is still behind many European destinations but the vast majority of Gambians earn their money from the land or the seas. I took a trip to the beach late afternoon and watched the fishermen bring in the catch.

Just to see a sea of men, and women with babies strapped to their backs, all dressed in vivid colours wading through the waters to haul in the shoals of fish and dish them out into buckets

while you watch the sun set is a picture postcard memory I will never forget.

Do remember to take plenty of water with you, suntan lotion and mosquito spray on any excursions, but remember, toilets are not so readily available, as I found out. Needs must, however, and I was kindly invited into a family's 'compound' where, aside from the use of the necessary, I was even offered food, to hold the new born baby of the family and had a good chat before leaving to get back on the truck.

Now I wouldn't let a tourist into my home to use the toilet but that is just another example

of friendly, hospitable Gambians.

There are no classification systems to the hotels in the Gambia, most travel agents will grade them based on feedback but all the hotels I visited were in the five star league, like the Mandina lodges in Makasutu Forest, they all had character and were not the 'sterile' places you often find in the West.

I stayed in the new Sheraton Gambia Hotel Resort and Spa, which was more like having your own little villas overlooking the beach and the restaurant food was as good as you would expect to find in the Lowry hotel back home.

he smiling coast



I never managed to make it to any of the nightclubs, with so much to explore by day I didn't need to, but if you do fancy finding your rhythm with the locals, the main clubs can be found in Kotu.

For me, the Gambia is the perfect choice if you want to go somewhere that's not going to give you a crippling plane journey, jet lag, where you can enjoy the beaches of Barbados, great all year round sunshine and an awesome culture.

It may be the smallest country in Africa, but the Gambia has certainly got a big personality.

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» THE Gambia Experience is

the UK's only specialist and biggest tour operator to The Gambia. Reservations: Tel 0845 330 2087, or gambia.co.uk/travel. We stayed at the newly-opened five star Sheraton Gambia Hotel Resort & Spa. gambia.co.uk/hotels. B&B cost from £699 per person in a twin classic room. This price is inclusive of return flights, departing Manchester, as well as hotel transfers and airport taxes. Makasutu: Details of accommodation at the Mandina Lodges, consisting of the stilted lodge, floating and jungle lodges, can be found on gambia.co.uk/hotels.



GETAWAY GUIDE

■ **JERSEY:** Modern Hotels (01534 735 511) offers 'Winter Warmer' breaks of three nights' B&B at three-star hotel in St Helier for £149 per adult, £83 per child, for travel until Mar 31, excl Easter. Package incl return Condor Fast Cat foot passenger crossing ex-Weymouth or Poole, transfers. Add £56 to take own car.

■ **TUNISIA:** Wigmore (020 7836 4999) offers five nights breaks for price of four in five star The Residence in Cotes de Carthage or £820, ex-Heathrow by sched flights on Suns until April 3. Package incl private transfers, pocket-sized guide, pen and silver luggage tag.

■ **NEW YORK:** Hayes & Jarvis (0871 664 0246) offers three nights' room-only at three star Warwick Hotel, departing Good Fri on American Airlines, for £649. Optional add-on is Harlem Gospel Tour on Easter Sunday from £39, with walking tour of Harlem's heritage areas.

■ **ST MALO:** Condorbrea (0845 603 3118) offers four-night breaks from £129 until Mar 26, incl fast ferry crossings ex-Weymouth and Poole.

■ **MALTA:** Malta Direct (0845 604 0035) offers seven nights' B&B at four star hotel in St Paul's Bay for £279, ex-Gatwick April 2, incl transfers.

■ **BARBADOS:** Carrier (0161 491 7620) offers seven nights' B&B in garden view suite at Treasure Beach Hotel from £1,765 from Mar 15. Two children stay free on room-only basis when sharing with parents.

■ **CHINA TWO CENTRE:** Sanya China Travel (01256 863 060) offers eight-day twin centre stay in Beijing and Xi'an from £1,095, incl all flights, transfers, hotel accom, selected meals and sightseeing in Tian'anmen Square, Forbidden City, Peking opera, Great Wall, Ming Tombs, ancient city wall and Grand Temple in Xi'an.

■ **CUBA:** Directline (0208 239 3399) offers seven nights' all-inclusive from Mar 27 at three-star hotel on beaches of Guardalavaca for £704, incl transfers, with diving school, underwater caves and coral reefs to be explored.

■ **ULTIMATE SAFARI:** Kudu (01722 716 167) offers 14-day itinerary across Botswana from April 12, incl private game reserves and Kalahari Desert. Land-only package at £3,490 incl 13 nights' accom, all meals and wine/beer, private transport, private charter flights, flights, entrance fees, games drives and walks.

■ **MOROCCAN ADVENTURE:**

Adventure Co (0845 450 5311) offers eight-day Magical Morocco trip from Mar 22, incl city tour of Marrakesh, mule trek in Atlas Mountains, seaside town of Essaouira, for £719 per adult, £639 per child (min age 2), incl flights ex-Heathrow, all transportation, some meals and group leader. Regional deps available.

■ **ICELANDIC WONDERS:** Transocean (0845 430 0274) offers 12-night voyage ex-Tilbury June 27 on Marco Polo from £849 (inside) 'Land of Ice and Fire' via Orkney Islands, Grundarfjordur, Akureyri, Reykjavik, Faroe Islands and Shetlands

■ **ANTARCTIC DISCOVERY:** Hurtigruten (020 8846 2666) offers once-in-lifetime voyage in Nov/Dec from £1,795, saving £500 if booked by Mar 31, with eight nights on board after visits to Buenos Aires, Ushuaia before voyage through Drake Passage. Package incl flights, three nights' B&B in Santiago, transfers, in packages from Nov 26, Dec 4, 12, 20 and 28.

■ **BALTIC:** Holland America (0845 351 0557) offers 16-night fly-cruise on Midnight Sun Explorer, ex-London June 17 and sailing from Amsterdam through Kiel Canal to Warnemunde (for Berlin), Tallinn, St Petersburg and Helsinki, then Hudiksvall, Stockholm and Karlskrona in Sweden, followed by Copenhagen, Alborg (Denmark) and Oslo and return to Amsterdam. Package from £1,449 incl sched flights and transfers.

■ **POWYS:** Lake Vyrnwy Hotel (01691 870 692) offers three night breaks from £232.50 for Good Fri arrivals, incl full Welsh breakfast and dinner in Tower Restaurant. Add £20 at time of booking for day's use of hotel spa's thermal suite.

■ **AUSTRIA SKI:** Total Ski (0870 163 3633) offers seven nights' catered chalet accom in St Anton from Mar 23 with dinner and wine on six evenings for £644 (down from £839), with transfers and ski hostings.

■ **GOA:** Jewel In The Crown (0870 067 2352) offers 14-nights' B&B in Calangute for £479, ex-London and from £469 ex-Manchester.

Optional extra is two-day Jungle Book excursion to wildlife sanctuary for £69.

■ **MONACO:** Directline (0208 239 3399) offers three nights' B&B in three star hotel from Mar 21 for £395, ex-Gatwick. Flights from regional airports also avail.

■ **ITALY:** Travel Counsellors (0800 195 8852) offers seven nights' half-board at three star hotel in Folgarida ex-Gatwick/Manchester Mar 15 from £419, incl transfers.