

Timeless tranquility



PICTURESQUE: Above, one of Senegal's stunning beaches. Right is the colourful marketplace which sells everything from soap to spices.

We have a saying here," our guide Monty tells me – in perfect English – on our second night in French-speaking Senegal. "In Europe they are always running after the time. In Africa we let the time run after us."

I hadn't known what to expect from a trip to the West African coast. Scorching sun? Check. Palm trees? Check. Picturesque beaches and luxurious hotels? Check. Just like plenty of other holiday destinations frequented by British tourists then? Not quite.

The holiday – sorry, work trip – turned out to be everything I hadn't expected and more. But there is much more to Senegal than what you see in the brochures.

The country is becoming increasingly popular with European holidaymakers, but remains largely undiscovered by British tourists, who have been visiting neighbouring Gambia in their droves for more than a decade. The heavily-starred hotels in the resorts of Saly and Sine Saloum, which all have private beaches, can offer serenity and solitude, and the perfect place for an idyllic, peaceful getaway. But it doesn't have to be all tranquillity.

After our first night at the spectacular 5* Lamantin Beach Hotel in Saly, roughly 50 miles from the capital Dakar, the trip slipped into second gear as a convoy of excited schoolchildren pretending to be journalists set off in motorised buggies on a intrepid exploration through coastal villages and arid bush and across vast sandy plains.

Reporter Dave Goodban writes about his experiences in Senegal.

We ended up at the stunning, secluded Bouba beach – worthy of gracing any postcard.

A five-year drought from 1968-73 devastated the landscape and wiped out much of Senegal's native wildlife. But the Bandia Nature Reserve, a short drive from Saly, has slowly reintroduced animals to the country by importing them from other parts of Africa and now boasts giraffes, monkeys, rhinos, and zebras, all wandering free in a natural environment. A far cry from seeing oversized animals crammed into undersized pens in European zoos.

The delightful Tama Lodge hotel, where accommodation comes in the form of a smattering of impressive beach huts, provided the setting for an exquisite seafood lunch on day two of the Senegal experience. Afterwards, we set off for our second hotel – the charming 4* Hotel Espadon. Although perhaps not as luxurious of the Lamantin, the Espadon offers a unique homely atmosphere perfect for families. It has three bars, a fishing centre, and even has its own pet – a pelican called Popsy!

A trip to the traditional Ndiagianiao market on our third morning provided a real glimpse into what everyday life entails for many natives. The men, women and children trading everything



from clothes and crayons to soap and spices was a sight to behold, but the afternoon provided the trip's real eye-opener.

The tiny village of Gour, near Sine Saloum, consists of a handful of huts and only basic facilities – a simple life and a humbling experience seeing the delight on the faces of the children receiving gifts our Western group take for granted as everyday essentials.

Our final overnight stay was at Le Royal Lodge in Sine Saloum, about 50km south of Saly – another 5* and one of most stunning and luxurious hotels I've ever had the fortune to stay at. In keeping with the laid back attitude we'd come to expect during our short visit to Senegal, the hotel's French owner and manager David Lefebvre

doesn't even wear a watch. His staff will respond to your every whim and guests can eat, drink and be merry at whatever time of the day or night they like. The huge suite-like rooms all have a television, mini-bar, spacious sitting area inside and a private balcony outside. Oh yes – and all the rooms have their own jacuzzi in the bathroom.

Our final excursion was a flying visit to the tiny island of Goree, an UNESCO World Heritage Site and former slave trading port with 1,200 inhabitants and not a single car. A visit to the slavery museum, where children as young as six were held before being traded in the 16th century, provided a poignant and stark reminder of the comparative luxury we had left be-

hind in Britain.

On the short journey back from the island to Dakar I thought about what British holidaymakers would make of Senegal. If you're after an exotic, but affordable break with a difference, look no further. But you might want to leave your watch at home.

■ Dave Goodban travelled with The Senegal Experience, the UK's only specialist tour operator to Senegal. Seven-night holidays start at £749 and all prices include half-board accommodation and return flights with Brussels Airlines from Birmingham, Manchester or Gatwick (via Brussels).

The reservations team can be contacted on 0845 3388706, or you can order a brochure online at www.senegal.co.uk.