

In my youth, my idea of the perfect holiday would be lying on a beach and worrying about what shade of mahogany I could go. Now that I'm 'maturing', my tastes are definitely changing... I'm taking more interest in the garden, enjoying stronger cheeses and finer wines so I suppose it's only natural that I will look for more from my trips abroad.

# OUT OF AFRICA



**When the opportunity of visiting The Gambia presented itself, I thought this would be the perfect destination to be able to see more than just the usual tourist fare.**

My journey began at Bristol Airport. I've only flown from Bristol once before and that was many years ago. It has changed a lot since then with an abundance of good quality shops and a very hi-tech look about it and regulars will be pleased to hear there are plans to extend the facilities to include an internal corridor to save you from the weather which should happen sometime next year. I made the most of the short stay at the airport by checking in to the executive lounge, with its complimentary drinks and snacks and a view over the retail area.

We flew with Hamburg International on a flight lasting six hours but the time flew (excuse the pun) with the help of Matthew McConaughey relieving himself of yet another white cotton shirt in a movie, the title of which, I fail to recall. What I do recall is the very polite and efficient cabin staff.

Our party was greeted at Banjul Airport by our tour operator representatives, Jo and Louise, from The Gambia Experience, the UK's only specialist tour operator to The Gambia. After a short coach trip, we reached our hotel, the four grade Corinthia Atlantic. An older hotel but very charming nevertheless and, we were enthusiastically informed, a refurbishment of the pool area had recently taken place. With its beachfront position, you couldn't ask for more when it came to location.

My bag was whisked away and I was shown to my room which consisted of twin beds and a bathroom with shower and balcony. The room was pleasant enough and, most important to me, it was spotlessly clean.

Before dinner, I had the opportunity of meeting other guests. There was a good mix of ages and we were soon chatting enthusiastically about what was ahead of us. The a la carte menu was very good. Not surprising as our chef is a bit of a celebrity in area, with several TV appearances under his belt! The manager of the hotel, Rod, and his lovely wife joined our table and gave us a brief overview of the hotel and The Gambia as a whole. Our hosts were both knowledgeable and charming and had obviously fallen in love with the country that they'd chosen to make their home. We relaxed and looked forward to a good night's rest ahead of a busy schedule the following day. I availed myself of the complimentary mosquito net which was kindly put in place and I had no trouble falling sleep.

Breakfast was an informal affair with plenty of choice; from cereals, fruit, meats and cheeses and the obligatory full English breakfast. They even had an omelette and pancake bar, which I found on the second morning, much to my delight - I must confess I do love a good omelette.

The staff at the Atlantic Hotel are extremely helpful and genuinely eager to please. John, the waiter who served me each morning, was on hand to fill my coffee cup and equally as eager to ask about my stay and was genuinely interested in my response.

Our transport was in the form of a giant Land Rover type vehicle which was provided by West African Tours and our guide Muctarr Yankuba (or Mucki as he liked to be known) was, hand on heart, the best tour guide I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. A trained journalist, there wasn't anything about The Gambia, its inhabitants, bird life and attractions that Mucki didn't know. This information was relayed in such a way that Mucki could easily add entertainer to his CV.

We met in the reception for our first trip to Sandele Bay Eco Retreat, which is set on a palm-fringed expanse of unspoiled, white sandy beach in southern Gambia. The retreat is being built by a British couple, Geri and Maurice, in conjunction with the local community of Kartong who will personally benefit from the development of the resort as they will assume complete ownership in twenty five years' time.

**"The Gambia Experience contributes to the local economy and set up a School Fund in 1989."**

**"The weather was glorious, the accommodation and food superb."**



Deluxe suite at Cocco Ocean Hotel

“Gambia was fabulous! I can easily understand why people fall in love with this beautiful country and its utterly enchanting people. My tan faded within a fortnight but my memories will certainly last forever.”



Mandina Lodges, Makasutu



## THE GAMBIA EXPERIENCE

### Accommodation

We stayed at the four grade Corinthia Atlantic Hotel [www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk)

Prices from £399 per person based on seven nights bed and breakfast inclusive of flights from Bristol and East Midlands. Check prices prior to booking.

### Excursions

Trips are provided by West African Tours. Our guide was Muctarr Yankuba.

### Places we visited

- Sandele Bay Eco Retreat at Kartong (exclusive)
- Mandina Lodges at Makasutu (exclusive)
- The Gambia Experience offers the ‘Makasutu by Night’ excursion with West African Tours, which can be booked locally through hotel reps
- Kombo Beach Hotel
- Coco Ocean (exclusive)
- Coconut Residence - sister hotel to Coco Ocean (exclusive)

### Prices

The Gambia Experience are freezing prices for next winter and their winter 09/10 prices are on sale in January 09. For details of current winter offers call **0845 330 2087** or visit [www.gambia.co.uk/specialoffers](http://www.gambia.co.uk/specialoffers)

### When you can go

For the current winter season (which finishes April 09), Friday flights are offered from Bristol and Manchester with Tuesday and Friday flights also available from East Midlands and Gatwick enabling popular 10 and 11 night holidays as well as long weekend breaks plus traditional one and two week holidays or longer.

### Useful reading

The Gambia priced at £13.99 available at [www.bradtguides.com](http://www.bradtguides.com)



The Gambia Experience  
Reservations 0845 330 2087

[holidays@gambia.co.uk](mailto:holidays@gambia.co.uk)  
[www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk)



Sandele Bay Eco Retreat



The first phase of the Eco Retreat opened in November 2007 and was built by local craftsmen using sustainable and eco-friendly construction techniques and materials sourced from the surrounding area.

Nestled among the trees, about 100 metres from the beach are the unique, individual suites each benefiting from a private roof terrace. In keeping with the eco philosophy of Sandele, there is no swimming pool but there is a sunbathing area with plunge pool for every two suites. Inside, the circular rooms are light, airy and spacious, complemented by rustic furnishings under a high, beautifully designed, domed ceiling.

There are currently four suites, with six more planned for 2009. Each suite will also have its own private cabana on the beach; these are due to be in place for 2009 and will comprise of a washroom as well as a day bed and sunbathing deck.

We dined in the restaurant and enjoyed what I thought to be the best meal of the whole trip. Not surprising then that Maurice and Geri are hoping for an accolade for the cuisine.

There are a variety of activities on offer at Sandele, including bird-watching, fishing and bush walks or you can explore the area with trips available into the village to see local artisans at work and you can try your hand at the local crafts. I liked what Maurice and Geri stood for. Yes, here are two canny business people but they are building this retreat with the intention of it being owned, ultimately, by the Gambian people so I had to tip my hat to them.

From Sandele we continued to Makasutu Forest for a walk in the forest, a canoe trip and to visit the resort's Mandina lodges. The lodges have been built on a tributary of the River Gambia in the heart of the African bush. As with Sandele, Mandina is the brainchild of James English and his nephew Lawrence Williams. The resort boasts an enormous pool which the eight lodges have use of. I can easily imagine lazing by that pool all day but they do have expert guides to help you explore the thousand acre forest to see the wildlife, including birds, monitor lizards, baboons and monkeys. Our party particularly enjoyed the canoe trip, despite it being low tide and, at one point, having to push the canoe into deeper water!

Dinner was a buffet at the forest camp, followed by a spectacular show of African dancing and fire eating. The dancers arrived at camp via canoe up the river. Their arrival announced by distant African chanting which got louder as the canoe arrived at camp.

The last day of the trip for me was by far the best. We visited Campama School. Before leaving the UK, it was suggested that I bring along some pencils to give to the school. Education in The Gambia is not paid for by their Government and not all parents can afford to send their child to school. The Gambia Experience contributes to the local economy and set up a School Fund in 1989. To date they have assisted over eighty schools across The Gambia by funding building, renovation and equipment. As soon as we arrived, the children ran to greet us. We sat with them in their classroom and heard from the head teacher about the education system. My bag of goodies which was kindly donated by Staples, Cardiff Bay ([www.staples.co.uk](http://www.staples.co.uk)) was gratefully received. We then danced with the children in the playground with them all vying to hold our hands. This really was a moving experience and one I shall never forget!



Sandele Bay Eco Retreat

Later, we got the opportunity to meet a local Gambian couple and their eight children. Most Gambians live in compounds, a group of mud huts which house the extended family. This, I have to say, was very humbling. The huts consist of empty rooms apart from a communal mattress on the floor upon which everyone sleeps. There is no running water or electricity. The families are not considered poor but describe themselves as ‘normal’. I asked how the family spent their time and was told that the children play outside all day (these particular children were not schooled) and the mother prepared a meal which they all ate together.

The rest of the evening was spent together talking; a stark contrast to my own homelife with my nine year old in school while we work, then a meal (not always at the table or together), then more work while he plays on his Playstation. Food for thought...

I enjoyed my time in The Gambia for a number of reasons. The weather was glorious, the accommodation and food superb but most of all I'll remember the people. John the waiter summed up their philosophy succinctly when I asked him if he enjoyed his work.

He replied, “I work to support my family but I enjoy my work. I am a Gambian and everything we do, we do from the heart.”

Gambia was fabulous! I can easily understand why people fall in love with this beautiful country and its utterly enchanting people. My tan faded within a fortnight but my memories will certainly last forever.

#### Reasons to go Gambia

- Fantastic winter sun - over 30°C
- Uncrowded sandy beaches
- Under six hours flying time
- Same time zone, no jet lag
- Short transfers
- Unspoilt and not commercialised
- Friendly people and exotic culture
- English speaking
- Wide range of restaurants
- Variety of quality accommodation
- River, bush and beach excursions
- Spectacular bird life and fishing
- Holidays to suit all budgets and tastes

“This really was a moving experience and one I shall never forget!”