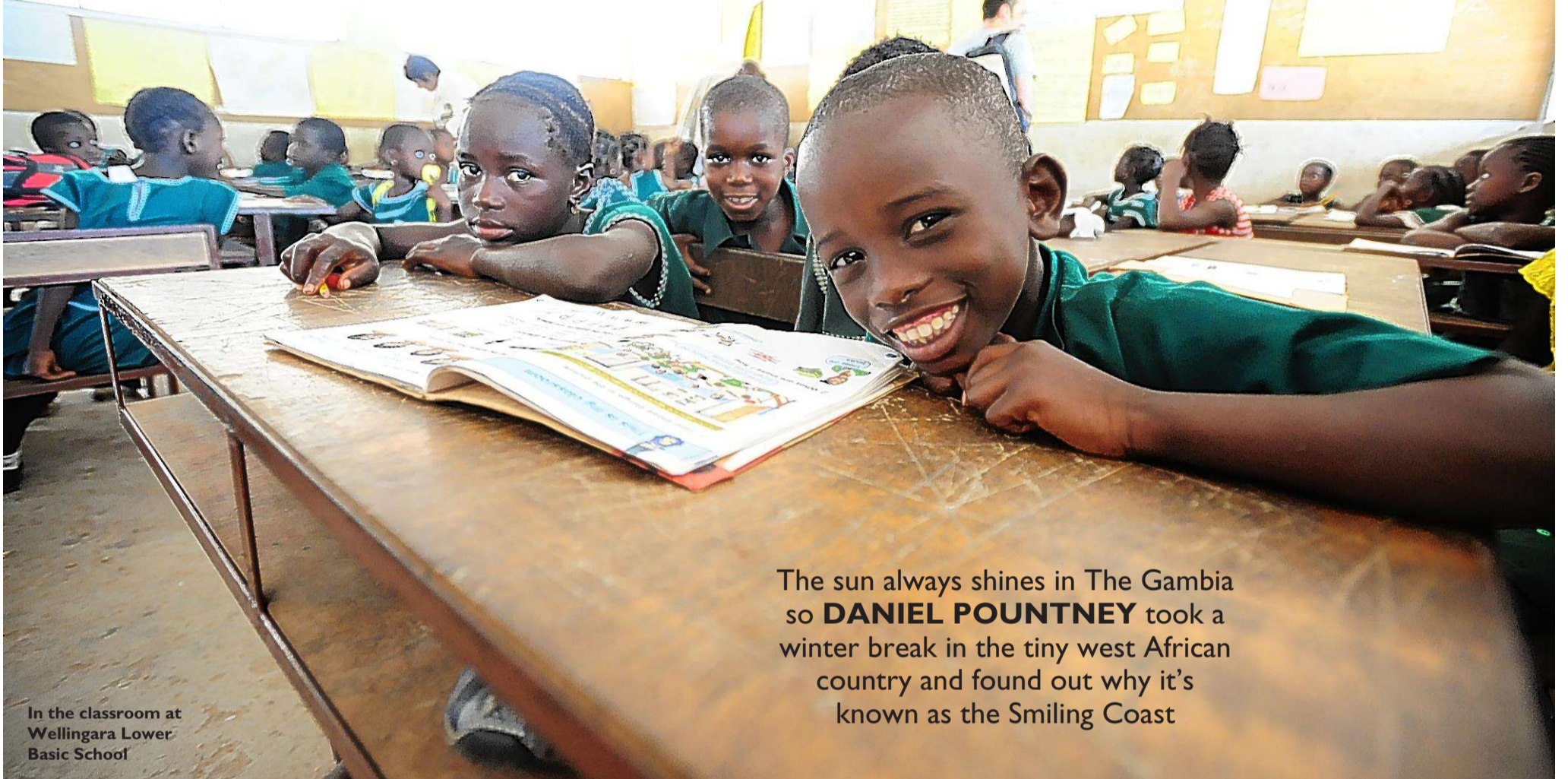


Pictures: Simon Galloway

An African adventure



The sun always shines in The Gambia so **DANIEL POUNTNEY** took a winter break in the tiny west African country and found out why it's known as the Smiling Coast

In the classroom at Wellingara Lower Basic School

THEY hear the engine of our 4x4 roar and they start running towards us.

By the time we have parked on the school playground we are totally surrounded.

We descend the short ladder of the trailer in to a sea of school children wearing baggy green uniforms and smiles as wide as Africa.

Immediately they thrust out their hands and each one has to be shaken.

One of our party introduces the high five to the mass of seven and

eight-year-olds and they go hysterical with excitement.

You will never receive a warmer welcome than the one you get when you arrive at a school in The Gambia. Inside, we unload our bags of pens, pencils, crayons and books on to the desk of Malamin Badjie – headmaster of Wellingara Lower Basic School in Kombo.

The walls of his office are plastered with charts showing the scale of the task of educating the children we just met.

There are 1,644 children at the

school aged between seven and 16.

They belong to nine tribes – Mandingo, Wolof, Fula, Jola, Sarahuleh, Serer, Manjago, Aku and Bambara – each with their own language, customs and defining characteristics.

The problem, he explains, is affording enough text books to teach the standardised curriculum.

In the classrooms, the teachers lead lessons in English but spend too much time writing out passages on the blackboard because there aren't enough books to go around. Even so, the classroom seems a happy place with the children singing out responses to her questions in unison.

We board our noisy 4x4 again, and leave with smiles on our faces but plenty to think about.

I HAVE always been fascinated by Africa but both attracted to it and terrified by it at the same time.

The continent seems infinitely vast, mysterious, full of wonder but also dangerous.

I find the colours, climate, landscape, food, wildlife and differing cultures

that exist below the Sahara utterly intoxicating.

But until now, I had been intimidated by the poverty, living standards and lack of education of the population in the poorest part of the world.

During my previous visits to the continent I had also felt a little ashamed to be walking amongst the people knowing how far the money in my wallet would go for a family in the place I was visiting.

Visiting The Gambia changed all of this.

It's a tiny country on the west coast – one of the smallest on the continent – but it's amazingly diverse in terms of landscape which makes it a paradise for animal lovers, especially bird watchers.

The people, of which there are only around 1.5 million, are the friendliest you're ever likely to meet wherever you go in the world.

Around 90 per cent are Muslim, but they are relaxed, tolerant and everyone speaks English.

First they stare at you, then a huge smile breaks out across their faces. "Welcome – Gambia no problem," they all say.

The first time we heard it was at

Tanji fishing village – a place that overwhelms the senses and makes you realise that you are truly in Africa.

It had been a concern of mine that we would only see a sanitised version of the real country on the trip.

It was a holiday after all, not a fact-finding mission or a charity expedition.

We were staying at the five-star Coco Ocean Resort & Spa – the country's most luxurious hotel.

Opened in only a year ago and styled with Moorish domes and arches, it has nine swimming pools and the first spa in the country.

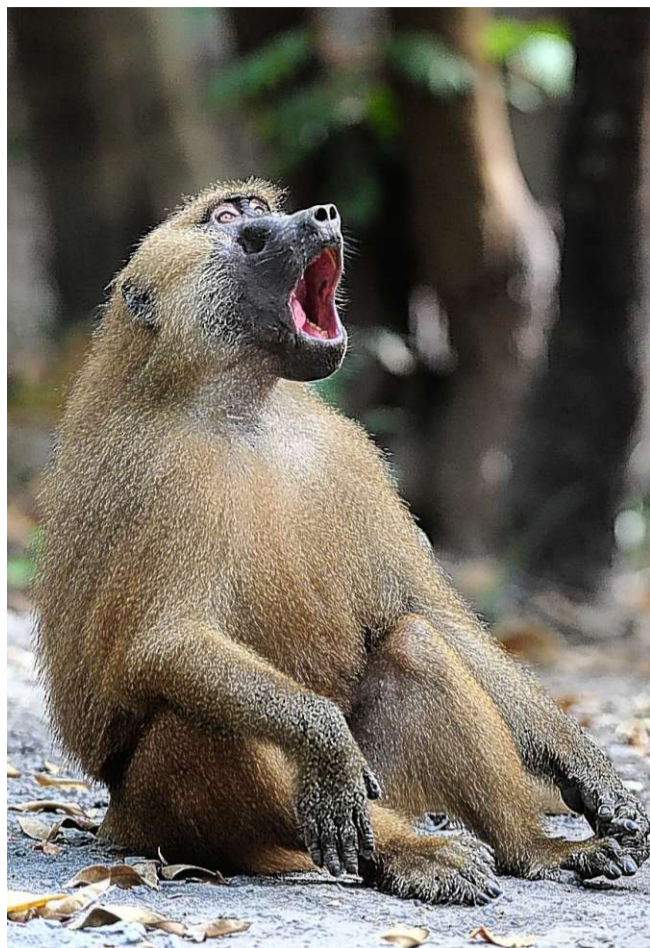
Massage tables, a sauna, steam room, gym, plunge pool and other treatment rooms are all included in the 1,800 square metre facility which surrounds a pond filled with exotic fish in a courtyard in the hotel's grounds.

Standard rooms which are simple and calm are part of the main hotel building.

My suite was part of the Beach Club and was actually a detached villa with a huge bed, seating area, walk-through bathroom and dressing area. It also had a patio where at least 20 people could sit together to enjoy



The sun shines every day and it rarely rains from November to June



Baboons welcome visitors to Makasutu



The country's diverse landscape makes it a paradise for animal watchers

a Julbrew – the lager from The Gambia's one brewery.

When I first saw the spacious seating area I wondered who I was sharing it with.

In fact, it was all mine and 13 other Beach Club residents all had their own.

From it I could lean back on my giant Prada cushion and watch the Atlantic Ocean roar into the beach where the hotel met the sand.

The only thing that could get me out of that position on the first night was dinner.

Coco Ocean has a fabulous restaurant and I tucked in to my shrimp and avocado salad, Thai chicken and the local dish butter fish benichin in that way that you can only do when you're on holiday.

Spending time at the hotel was bliss, but to stay in the comfort of its grounds would have been doing a disservice to the country we were visiting.

The Gambia Experience, the holiday company who had sold me the idea of visiting this part of the world, had no intention of letting that happen.

The next day I was standing on the beach in Tanji as the air – heavy with the smell of fish – filled my nostrils and my eyes and ears tried to make sense of the riot of colour and noise.

Men hauled the catch from the wooden boats that bobbed up and down in the crystal clear sea, seagulls squawked constantly and swooped in and out of the crowd of fabulously dressed women on the beach.

They were cleaning the fish and then children, usually in fake English football shirts, were ferrying it back to the market stalls behind on huge dishes balanced on their heads.

I had never felt so far from home. We were taken to Tanji by Ida Njie

who runs a Gambian home cooking course from her home in nearby Brufut.

Before we left her courtyard, she had dressed us in traditional clothes.

I felt self-conscious getting out of our van at the market but within 10 minutes at least three local people had said I look good in my oversized white shirt with gold trim.

One of our group looked so splendid that a Gambian lady threw her shawl on the ground for her to walk over.

Back at Ida's house we were taught how to make benichin and then ate it with our hands, sitting on the ground in her shaded garden.

// OH, we thought The Gambia was our little secret," said an English lady as another couple took their seats next to her on a packed plane from Bristol to Banjul.

"You'll love it, but don't tell too many people."

She doesn't want floods of other tourists bypassing the Algarve, the Costa del Sol and the south of France and invading her favourite holiday destination.

Here are the facts that the well-informed traveller doesn't want the masses to know:

You can fly to Banjul direct from Bristol, East Midlands or Birmingham and it only takes six hours to get there.

When you arrive, none of the hotels are far from the airport – Coco Ocean is just 15 minutes away.

And because there's no time difference, if you leave England in the morning you can be on the beach that same afternoon.

Located midway between the tropic of cancer and the equator, The

Gambia enjoys virtually uninterrupted sunshine and high daytime temperatures with almost no rainfall from November to June.

Today it'll be around 90 degrees F without a cloud in the sky.

If you like the convenience of a large hotel with several restaurants and plenty of activities led by friendly staff, The Sheraton Gambia Hotel is the place to go and is the only all-inclusive resort in the country.

For a more romantic break, you could try the Ngala Lodge on a peaceful cliff-top where children aren't allowed.

There's plenty to do too like 4x4 adventures through the villages away from the coast, fishing and birdwatching.

"That's a blue-bellied roller," announced Mucki pointing out a beautiful bird.

"B-l-u-e b-e-l-l-i-e-d r-o-l-l-e-r."

Our guide from West African Tours, who lead excursions from the hotels, had a habit of spelling out all names after he said them.

He took us to the 1,000 acre reserve and eco-tourism centre Makasutu.

Here two ex-pats, Lawrence Williams and James English, have negotiated with the government to take over the land and protect the forest from tree-felling and over-grazing.

Baboons strolled around the eating areas, butterflies and rare birds flew along the paths through the trees and we were on the lookout for Nile Crocodiles as we took a canoe trip along the river.

Lawrence and James not only employ more than 100 local people as drivers, chefs, managers and guides, they also encourage visitors to go and see the people who live on the land who give demonstrations of woodcarving, music and traditional

fortune telling.

A new venture for Makasutu is floating lodge accommodation for 12 guests.

At night everyone gathers around a campfire to watch traditional dancing, storytelling and fire-eating.

Over dinner that night Mucki mentioned that he coached a local football team who were playing in a cup final the next day.

A few of us told him we wanted to go along and cheer his boys on.

So the next morning he picked us up on the way to the ground in his home town of Brikama.

Again, we were welcomed to a place where few tourists go with momentary stares and then wide smiles.

The Gambia is a wonderful place that is everything I love about Africa and nothing I feared about it.

If you haven't been to the continent before, it would be the perfect introduction.

Gambia no problem.

THE GAMBIA

FOR reservations call The Gambia Experience on 0845 330 2087 or visit www.gambia.co.uk Prices at Coco Ocean Resort & Spa this winter start from £1,028 per person based on seven nights b&b in a junior suite and £1,364 per person for seven nights b&b in a Beach Club villa. Prices include flights from Bristol, Birmingham or East Midlands.

This Christmas, the company is offering 10 or 14 nights b&b at Kombo Beach hotel (four star) from £599 per person departing December 18. The price includes a gala dinner on Christmas Eve. More special offers are available at www.gambia.co.uk/specialoffers and WEEKEND readers can claim an additional £50 off for January departures from Bristol at any of The Gambia Experience's Luxury Collection of hotels. Simply quote WEEKEND when booking.



A Beach Club villa at Coco Ocean Resort & Spa