

Here comes the SUN

Escape the cold, grey UK with a holiday abroad. We sent Siân Merrylees to sample the warm, friendly climate in Gambia



Listening to the waves gently crash on to the beach just 100 yards away, while a skilled therapist uses warm aromatic oils to give me a head massage, is blissful enough. But it's even more heavenly when I remind myself that just hours ago I was battling through London traffic.

My sister and I are in Gambia to sample Coco Ocean Resort & Spa, the country's first spa hotel. Upmarket hotels are popping up all over this West African country, as more of us discover that Gambia is

an ideal destination for winter sun. Not only are you almost guaranteed year-round sunshine, with average temperatures hovering around 30 degrees, it's also less than a six-hour flight from Gatwick airport and, in winter, there's no time difference.

The hotel – a stunning mix of African and Moroccan architectural styles – is built on a slope that leads down to the sea and the unspoilt Bijilo beach, with suites and villas situated to give guests plenty of ocean view. Although our journey from the airport is through a dry,

dusty landscape, here the lawns are lush and villas are hidden behind hedges of bougainvillea and jasmine.

The spa is a whitewashed Moroccan-style minaret with high ceilings and blue stained glass. The only sounds inside are the slap of flip-flops on tiles and the gurgle of the thalassotherapy pool. The atmosphere defies you to do anything other than relax.

The Moroccan hammam, similar to a Turkish bath, is the perfect antidote to winter months spent hiding under woollen layers. In the steam room, my therapist gives





Above: The Coco Ocean Resort & Spa boasts a luxurious Moroccan-style spa, three swimming pools and tranquil treatment rooms

me a brisk body scrub using black olive soap, rinses this off, then covers my body in Rhassoul mud, a mineral-rich clay from the Moroccan Atlas mountains. I'm then left in the herbal-smelling steam to allow the treatment to penetrate my pores. Another favourite is the Gold Pearly Wrap, an exfoliating and conditioning treatment that finishes with your body being gently slathered in a moisturising cream to give it a beautiful golden shimmer – ideal for enhancing your tan.

Very quickly our days fall into an easy pattern of leisurely breakfast, a laze beside the sea or one of the three swimming pools, then a spa treatment before or after lunch. There are three restaurants, with a slight bias towards Asian influences (the chef is Thai). Portions are large and it would be incredibly easy to give up any attempt to stick to your **POINTS** values. However, help is at hand. When my sister looks slightly daunted by the tempting croissants and fried breakfasts on offer, our smiling waiter suggests the chef whip up a simple omelette for her. And it is this friendly attentiveness of the staff that truly makes our stay. Beach towels arrive instantly and sun umbrellas are constantly adjusted for us as the shade moves.

But 'real' Gambia is waiting, so we rouse ourselves to explore. At the nearby market in Serekunda, we're overwhelmed by young boys, who are desperate to sell us key rings, bracelets or animal woodcarvings. But it's all good-natured and we laughingly push our way through to the older female stallholders in traditional African dress, who sit patiently beside their wares. Smiling and teasing goes a long way when we barter and I buy some wooden bowls that I tell myself wouldn't look

out of place in The Conran Shop.

Determined to eat healthily, we've gorged on local barracuda, ladyfish and prawns. So when we pass a fishing village, we're keen to explore. Shoeless children slip their hands into ours and ask us where we're from. Poverty is obvious but charm and banter are in ready supply. When I say we're from Wales, the kids shout 'Bora dal' (good morning!).

The gulf between hedonistic luxury at the hotel and living conditions outside isn't lost on the many visitors to Gambia. On the flight over I met several returnees who, while pointing out how much the Gambian economy relies on tourism, admit they've packed gifts of biros and schoolbooks. And perhaps one day I'll be among them. For although I was seduced by the sun and the spa, it's the people who truly make you fall in love with Gambia. 🇬🇪

Way to go

The Gambia Experience (0845 330 2087; gambia.co.uk) offers seven-night holidays at the Coco Ocean Resort & Spa from £979 per person B&B, based on two sharing a Junior Suite, including flights, transfers and taxes.

Closer to home...

■ Walk off that Christmas excess on La Palma in the Canaries. Intravel (01653 617945; intravel.co.uk) has seven days' self-catering from £332 per person, including car hire and comprehensive walking notes (flights cost extra).

■ Visit Morocco's coastal Agadir with The Best Of Morocco (0845 026 4585; morocco-travel.com) and spend seven nights' B&B at the Ibis Moussafir hotel from £555 per person, including flights and transfers.

■ Another favourite warm spot is Cyprus. Stay at the newly renovated Ayii Anargyri Natural Healing Spa Resort, near Polis. Sunvil (020 8568 4499; sunvil.co.uk) has seven nights' B&B from £619 per person, including flights and transfers.

Or try these far-flung hotspots...

■ Soak up the music as well as the sun on the Isle of Youth, off the coast of Cuba. Captivating Cuba (0844 412 9916; captivatingcuba.com) has a week's package from £1,015 per person, including flights, two nights' B&B in Havana and five nights' full board at the Hotel Colony.

■ Sunshine with no jet lag is on offer from Fleewinter (020 7112 0019; fleewinter.co.uk) with a week's beachside self-catering at Big Bay penthouse in Bloubergstrand, Cape Town, from £890 per person, including flights.

■ Soak up the exotic Seychelles with Expert Africa's (020 8232 9777; expertafrica.com) seven-night Cowfish Island holiday in Praslin and Mahe, from £1,472 per person, including flights, B&B and car hire.

■ Get stuck into history with On The Go Egypt (020 7371 1113; onthegotours.com) and its Pharaoh's Adventure, from £599 per person including flights, B&B, train ride to Luxor and guided tour.

■ Luxury awaits at Jumeirah Beach's Le Royal Meridien Beach Resort in Dubai with private beach and Roman spa, plus lots of shopping nearby. Five nights' B&B with Thomson Tailormade (0871 664 0273; thomsontailormade.com) is from £1,039 per person, including flights.

■ The Caribbean is the winter sun destination. Head for the private Palm Island at the tip of St Vincent and the Grenadines with Tropical Sky (0870 907 9600; tropicalsky.co.uk), which has seven nights' half board from £1,969 per person, including flights. Or head to Dominica and spend seven nights at the Anchorage Hotel with Q Holidays (0870 720 1127; qholidays.co.uk) from £919 per person, including flights and room-only accommodation.



Sun, sea and sailing are on offer on Palm Island