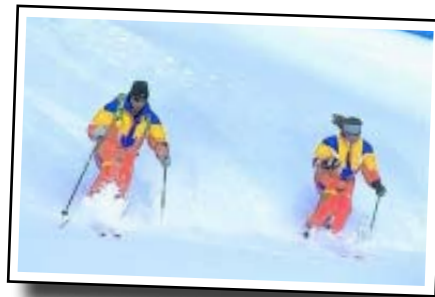


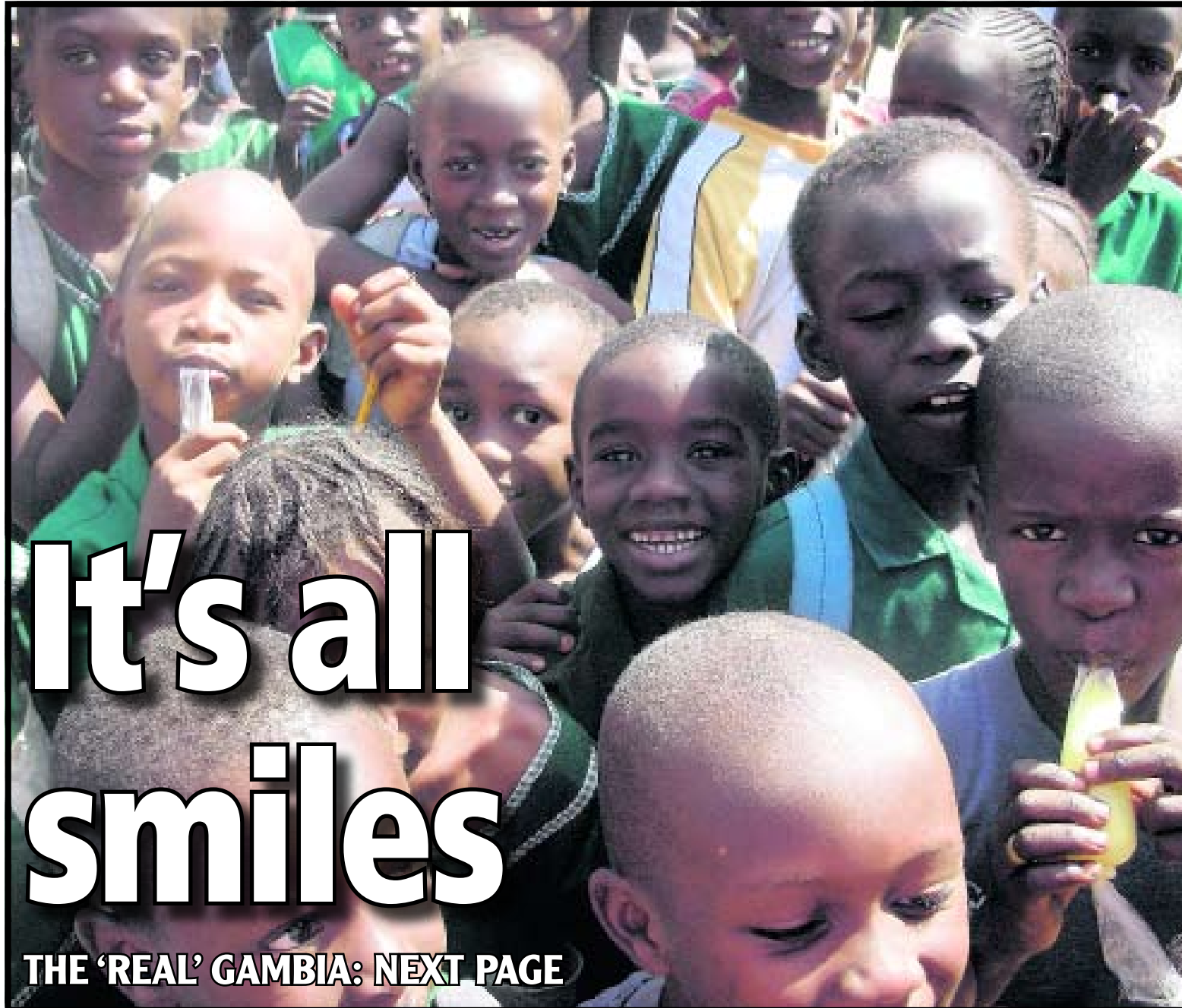
Travel



**7 nights skiing
in Andorra for
just £219pp**

PAGE 28

HELPING YOU SAVE WITH LOW-COST GETAWAYS AND FAMILY FAVOURITES



**It's all
smiles**

THE 'REAL' GAMBIA: NEXT PAGE

Pleased to meet you: The children of Wellingara Lower Basic School give our traveller an overwhelming welcome to Gambia.

Revolving to have a fit and healthy 2010

AFTER the indulgences of Christmas and New Year, one of the most popular resolutions is the promise to get fit and healthy.

For all those who are not the gym-going types, Center Parcs now offers something a bit different – the hula-hoop.

The hula-hoop has recently experienced something of a comeback with Michelle Obama managing 142 revolutions on the White House lawn in October.

Center Parcs noticed a significant increase in people trying this activity, with the numbers more than doubling in the last year.

The popularity of hula-hooping is largely down to its wide appeal; adults and children of any fitness level can enjoy it and have fun.

Now Center Parcs offers Hula-Hoop-A-Cise as a funky, fresh routine that's guaranteed to put the fun back into fitness.

With slightly weighted hoops, it is easier to hula-hoop and there are health benefits like the toning of abs, trimming the waistline and boosting mood.

If hooping is not for you, there are a whole host of other innovative ways of getting fit at Center Parcs which are great fun with family and friends; from raft building to cheer-leading.

A short break for a family of four at Center Parcs starts from £229 if you book this month. But make sure you book early for best price and availability. For more activity information or prices, visit www.centerparcs.co.uk or call 08448 266 266.

Skiers urged to use heads

LESS than half of all British skiers wear ski helmets, despite a greatly heightened awareness of the risk of head injury in recent years.

The statistics from ski equipment hirer Ski Republic and the Ski Club of Great Britain, come as many of Europe's ski resorts are experiencing the first snows of winter.

"Around 44 per cent of skiers and boarders wear helmets," says Betony Garner, a spokesperson for the Ski Club of Great Britain.

"Yet even this very low percentage shows a considerable increase over the last five years. We urge people to take the risks very seriously and advise that all children under 13 wear ski helmets and adults do so at their own discretion."

Mark Warnes, of Ski Republic, said "We give all of our customers free ski helmet rental, yet time after time the offer is declined or the customer puts the helmet on one side."

Cookery tips for health conscious

RED Funnel Holidays is offering new healthy eating cookery courses at the Four Seasons Cookery Academy in Fishbourne on the Isle of Wight.

The new two-night residential courses run from Friday to Sunday on three weekends in early 2010 and cost £295 per person, including all accommodation, tuition, meals, plus fresh Isle of Wight produce and guide books.

Accommodation is offered at one of two holiday cottages. Those interested should book early for the confirmed dates of January 15-17, January 22-24 and February 5-7. To book, visit www.redfunnel.co.uk or call 0844 844 9988.

Recession means less pampering

BRITONS are still being pampered at spas, but for shorter lengths of time.

Britons aren't forgoing their personal wellbeing in spite of the recession, they're just spending less time on it.

"Rather than ten-night stays, we are seeing an increase in overnighters and daybreakers at the resorts," says Champneys spokesperson Sharon Scott.

"Because of the recession, the resorts have been treated a little more like the spas, with people making 'quick breaks' to Champneys resorts."

She added: "These are the same people that would have been booking in for a week or ten nights before."

**NEXT
WEEK**

**Tunisia:
Land of
contrasts**

Experiencing the smiling coast of Africa



All aboard: West African Tours guide Mucki Bojang and the 4x4 truck that helps tourists explore the 'real' Gambia.



Tranquil: A scene at Makasutu Culture Forest.

Great Escape

By Andy Walker

AS the towering 4x4 truck passed through a narrow gate into the dusty school playground, it was as if a Hollywood A-lister had arrived in town.

Hundreds of smiling children, smartly dressed in a green uniform, swarmed around the truck like bees around a honeypot.

Yet there wasn't a multi-millionaire celebrity or even a sports superstar in sight, just ten English tourists.

However, as we clambered down the steps to be swallowed up by the beaming crowd, we were given an overwhelming welcome that would have brought a tear to the eye of even the most hardened VIP.

This was Wellingara Lower Basic School in the Kombo North district of the Gambia's Western region and for the second time in 24 hours I had an experience that will live long in my memory.

The previous day, my senses had been sent into overdrive with a trip to Tanji fish market.

Wearing traditional African dress, I found the experience both fascinating and intimidating (purely because we were centre of attention). The sight of fisherman bringing in their next catch and seagulls swooping for leftovers, the sounds of marketing traders haggling and bellowing to attract custom and the unmistakable smell of fish, both fresh and rotten – all of it unforgettable. This hive of activity felt a million miles away from any English market and was the moment that I realised I had stepped into West Africa.

I travelled to the Gambia, the tiny gateway to this vast continent, not knowing what to expect

but left knowing that I wanted to return.

For regular holidaymakers to this part of the world, the Gambia is something of a secret and I soon began to see why they would want to keep it under wraps. The country's potential for mass tourism is obvious – no time difference, fantastic winter sunshine, English speaking, exotic settings, one of the safest countries in Africa, the list could go on. Yet remarkably it still remains unspoilt and uncommercialised.

The school visit had been part of an 'off the beaten track' adventure that allowed us to see the real Gambia. We had the opportunity to chat to Wellingara's headmaster about education in the country, donate some gratefully-received stationary and observe a lesson or two.

Meanwhile the journey to Tanji's coastline of hustle and bustle was all part of an enjoyable morning and afternoon at Yabouy, a homecooking workshop and the brainchild of housewife Ida Cham Njai, an inspirational businesswoman who left a career in tourism to pursue a hobby.

"Friends would regularly come over to my house to eat and say how nice my food was, so I decided to turn my homecooking into a business – people thought I was mad," explained Ida.

After getting into character by slipping on Gambian clothing, we made the short journey to Tanji with Ida to gather ingredients for Benachin, a rice-based West African dish that can be made with either beef, chicken or fish and translates as 'one pot'.

After the frankly unique shopping experience, we returned to Ida's home in Brufut to be guided through a lesson in how to prepare fish Benachin, before settling to tuck in to the delicious creation in her courtyard.

Our tour guide, Mucki Bojang, of West African Tours, helped paint a true reflection of Gambian culture throughout our trip. A young father-of-one with the responsibility of providing for a wider family of 33 members,

Winter sun destinations taking off

GUARANTEED sunshine and value for money have seen Egypt and Morocco become the fastest-growing holiday destinations this winter, easyJet has revealed.

The low fares airline has launched a new route from Luton to Sharm El Sheik, in Egypt, with the first flight proving to be one of the strongest sellers at already more than 90 per cent sold out.

Additional flights from Gatwick to Agadir and Manchester to Marrakech have also been launched to cope with increasing demand.

EasyJet claims that despite the continuing recession, Brits are still determined to find destinations that offer both value and sunshine.

Paul Simmons, easyJet's UK general manager, said: "Many Brits, including those who chose to holiday at home this year, are looking to jet off this winter as an antidote to this summer's disappointing weather.

"While traditional winter sun destinations such as the Canaries are still very popular, we have seen a surge in demand for destinations in Egypt and Morocco.

"The new regular low-cost flights to these destinations give customers the flexibility to take shorter breaks, rather than being restricted to traditional package durations."

Travel team win national award

A WEST Midland travel agency has scooped a major national accolade.

Midlands Co-operative Travel in the Parade, Sutton Coldfield, has received the Kuoni Co-operative Travel Trading Group Travel Agent of the Year award.

It was presented to the agency's assistant manager, Lyndsey Prestleton, during a Kuoni educational visit to Sri Lanka.

Manager Stephanie Wills said: "The award was open to all Co-operative travel agents throughout the country and was based on the number of Kuoni holidays sold throughout the year. To receive this award is a great accolade and I am really proud of all my team's hard work to achieve this."

Superstars head for Isle of Wight

THE iconic three-day Isle of Wight Festival is back with a bang for 2010.

The festival will feature something for everyone, with a host of international superstars including Jay-Z, The Strokes, Blondie, Pink, Orbital and Squeeze descending on Seaclose Park.

To buy your festival and ferry tickets visit www.redfunnel.co.uk/iwfestival. Weekend tickets including camping are £163.50 for adults and £85 for children.

Children six and under are free, but must be booked with at least one adult ticket. Non-camping tickets are available for £143.50 for adults and £75 for children.



Baking hot: Andy Walker (second left) and his group dressed in traditional Gambian attire, ready for their homecooking experience.

“Mucki typified the Gambian people's laid back approach to life when he said: "GMT means Gambian Maybe Time over here."”

Mucki typified the Gambian people's laid back approach to life – 'GMT means Gambian Maybe Time over here', was how he welcomed us – as well as their unquestionable friendly nature. They don't call it the Smiling Coast of Africa for nothing.

While fruitful fields of the country ensures that there is no shortage of food, the Gambia is still a developing country but there's a simplicity to life that most Brits would struggle to fathom. Mucki told us how he had become frustrated and disillusioned with the TV culture in

England that had appeared to have broken up community spirit. Most Gambians aren't flush with money, but the majority appear to be happy with life.

As well as experiencing the real Gambia, I was also fortunate enough to sample the luxurious five-star side of this beautiful holiday destination. We were staying at the Coco Ocean Resort and Spa in Bijilo and it was easily one of the most relaxing and tranquil premises I have ever had the pleasure to spend a night in.

'Wait'. I hear you cry. 'You hypocrite, how can you gush about the real Gambia but then retire back to a luxury pad?'

Well, rather settling is the fact that Coco Ocean, like several other hotels we visited, isn't simply milking this land for its glorious weather and beautiful beaches, reinvestment is key. Furnishings are carved by Gambian craftsmen, fresh food is supplied by Gambian traders, Gambian builders are unobtrusively building a second phase of development to Coco Ocean, which only opened its doors in December 2008.

In fact, there doesn't appear to be too many individuals that have stumbled upon The Gambia and started abusing the people and country for their own gain.

You are unlikely to find a better example of foreigners that have arrived, embraced the beauty of the area and set about opening it up to the wider world in an ethical way than the men behind the Makasutu Culture Forest.

Uncle and nephew partnership, James English and Lawrence Williams, have spent 17 years turning an ever-increasing area of forest on The Gambia River into a truly unique tourist project.

A base camp, eco lodges and a cultural centre have been built, but the surrounding area has been left untouched. Trees haven't been cut down, local villagers remain and even baboons still prowl the area.

After a day at Makasutu exploring the forest on foot and canoe, eating a buffet lunch as the sun set before watching a traditional dance act around a camp fire, it was clear to see that this was tourism at its most tasteful.

The Gambia may be a British holidaymakers' secret, but not for much longer.

Getting There

The Gambia Experience - The UK's only specialist and biggest tour operator to The Gambia. Reservations tel: 0845 330 2087. Web address: www.gambia.co.uk. Accommodation/Lead in price - Coco Ocean Resort & Spa - <http://www.gambia.co.uk/Hotel/6001/51261/Coco-Ocean-Resort-Spa.aspx>. Coco Ocean Resort & Spa is exclusive to The Gambia Experience. Prices from £949 per person based on 7 nights b&b in a junior suite and £1289 per person for 7 nights b&b in a beach club villa. Prices include return flights, inflight meals, hotel transfers, Government tourist tax and airport taxes. Flights from Birmingham, Manchester & Gatwick. More details on the country can be found in: Bradt Travel Guide - "The Gambia" priced at £13.99 and available at www.bradtguides.com