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Holidays In The UK

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UK Hols: Hotels & Apartments

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TRAVEL

If you fancy a spot of winter sun, why not head for The Gambia, just six hours away on the west African coast? **Simon Galloway** did and he loved it

The Gambia may only be half the size of Wales but boy does it have a lot to offer - from sun-drenched white sandy beaches to the stunning 1,000-acre Makasutu Culture Forest.

Only a six-hour flight from Bristol and with no time difference, The Gambia, located midway between the Tropic of Cancer and the equator, enjoys virtually uninterrupted sunshine and high daytime temperatures with almost no rainfall from November to June.

My Gambian adventure began as we travelled the short distance from Banjul airport to our hotel.

I could not help but gaze out of the bus window as we passed stalls selling fresh melons, shacks with old men fixing bicycles and small children waving at me.

From that moment, I was hooked on the street life that was going on before me. I asked myself how these people could be so happy when they appear to have so little... the answer is simple. This is The Gambia - known as "the smiling coast of Africa".

After resting up overnight at the luxurious Coco Resort and Spa, I was ready to take the 45-minute journey south to the award-winning Makasutu Cultural Forest set on a beautiful tributary of the River Gambia.

Makasutu, known as "sacred deep forest" in the local Mandinka dialect, is home to wild Guinea baboons and numerous birds. It was conserved by two Englishmen, James English and Lawrence Williams, back in 1992.

As we take a slow canoe ride along the river, passing pied kingfishers and fiddler crabs nesting in the mangroves, we find ourselves at the stunning Mandina River Lodges as evening draws in.

We settle down to sample beautiful local food, and enjoy an evening of local tribal partying that includes of Malcesine, Torbole, Riva del Garda or Limone, all set in one of Italy's most charming locations.



Life's a beach: Meeting the locals in Tanji fishing village. Below, a baboon at Makasutu Nature Reserve



their bottoms. Next up was a home cooking workshop with Ida Njie at her home in Brufut.
We changed into traditional Gambian dress and headed to Tanji fishing village to buy some local produce. What followed next at Tanji will stick in my mind for a long time.
As I stepped on to the beach, my senses were hit for six... fish, fish everywhere - the smell was almost overwhelming. In what appeared like a conveyor-belt production, men were landing fish, there were fish in wheelbarrows, fish being gutted and fish being de-scaled. A few yards up

from the beach, we walked through the endless stalls selling fish, vegetables, nuts and other fresh produce. Ida took the lead and bought food for our lunch. We headed back to her house and began to prepare the meal.
On the menu was benachin - rice cooked with fish, vegetables and tomatoes. Ida demonstrated the traditional way to eat the dish - with our hands - and we all tucked in. We finished with attaya (green tea).
Mucki, our tour guide from West African Tours, had told us of his love of football and informed us that his local team, Blackpool, were playing in a local

cup final that afternoon. The match between Blackpool and Chimo United turned out to be a fast-paced game played in a run-down ground comprising two old concrete stands and a pretty good synthetic pitch.
Unfortunately for Mucki, Blackpool found themselves on the wrong end of a 3-0 thrashing.
A visit to Wellingara Lower Basic School in the district of Kombo turned out to be the highlight of the trip.
As we pulled into the school playground, we were greeted by hundreds of children running out of the two-storey concrete building. After

what seemed like a thousand handshakes, we made our way to the head teacher's offices where he explained that the school has more than 1,600 children but is constantly struggling to buy essentials such as books.
I stepped in to the classroom and was faced with a sea of smiling children. They burst into song, singing *Wind The Bobbin Up* in perfect English - which is widely spoken, along with local tribal languages, including Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Jola.
After our school experience, we took a thrilling 4x4 off-road trip across some

pretty bumpy tracks. We stopped at various points so Mucki could point out some of the local birdlife, including the small red-throated bee-eaters and huge hooded vultures that circle high above.
Our 4x4 pulled up on what I can only describe as a picture perfect beach. The white sand was so hot I had to hop, skip and jump my way to the hammock while the others had a dip in the warm Atlantic Ocean.
It's then that I realise the real meaning of GMT - Gambia Maybe Time. I for one can't wait to sample it again.

IN ASSOCIATION WITH **This is Travel**



Picture perfect: Children on the beach at Sanyang
Class of their own: Pupils at work in the Wellingara Lower Basic School



Serene: Mandina Floating Lodge at Makasutu Forest

FACTFILE



■ Simon Galloway travelled to The Gambia as a guest of The Gambia Experience, the UK's only specialist and biggest tour operator to The Gambia (www.gambia.co.uk; 0845 330 2087).
■ Seven nights bed and breakfast in a junior suite at the Coco Ocean Resort & Spa costs £1,014 per person.
■ Seven nights bed and breakfast in a beach club villa costs £1,350 per person.
■ Prices include return flights from Bristol International Airport, in-flight meals, hotel transfers and taxes.
■ All clients receive a complimentary foot massage as part of their booking.



On the buses: Oxford Street, London

- ☐ Sunvil Discovery has launched one-off, special offer winter weeks to the mid-Atlantic islands of the Azores from £345 per person. Valid for departures between February 13 and March 20, this deal is based on two sharing at the Hotel Talisman in Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel and includes return flights and transfers. More details: www.sunvil.co.uk; 020 8758 4722.
- ☐ Looking to take a trip to London to catch the end of the January sales? Save more than 40 per cent a night when you stay at SACO's apartments in Holborn - rated as one of the top three small hotels in the city at the 2009 Visit London awards. A one-bed apartment costs £135 per night, saving £98. More details: www.sacopartments.co.uk; 0845 122 0405.
- ☐ Ski Total (www.skital.com; 01252 618 333) is offering

Destinations

- ☐ a week's skiing in Tignes, France, staying in a catered chalet, three days' free ski hosting and flights from Bristol departing on February 7 for £648 (was £928).
- ☐ Travelbag.co.uk (www.travelbag.co.uk, 0871 703 4240) is celebrating Australia Day (January 26) by offering a nine-night bed and breakfast break to Sydney, Brisbane and Tangalooma Resort (on Moreton Island, Queensland) from £1,159 per person. The price includes flights from Heathrow with China Airlines. Bookings must be made before January 31 and travel completed between February 1 and March 13.

- ☐ Until the end of January, The Priory Inn, Tetbury (www.theprioryinn.co.uk), is offering an overnight stay with full English breakfasts and three-course dinners for two (from the à la carte menu) for just £99 per room per night. Just quote "dinner on the house offer" when booking on 01666 502251.
- ☐ Esprit Ski (www.espritski.com, 01252 618 300) is offering a week's skiing in La Rosiere, France, staying in a catered chalet, with three days' free ski hosting, free baby/child listening service and flights from Bristol departing on January 31 for £338 per person (based on a family of four; total price £1,395).
- ☐ Stay seven nights at Camping Ty Naden by the river Elie in Brittany, France, from £339 per family with Canvas Holidays. This price is based on two adults and

- up to four children with arrivals on site on April 3 with accommodation in a two-bedroom mobile home, including a return midweek Dover to Calais ferry crossing for a car and passengers. More details: www.canvasholidays.co.uk; 0845 268 0857.
- ☐ A winter break at Whitsand Holiday Park's self-catering lodges, nestled above the cliffs in Cornwall's forgotten corner, offers great value and a spot of luxury. The lodges enjoy breathtaking panoramic views of the coast and over Plymouth to Dartmoor, and include en suite bathrooms, sun decks and all modern amenities. The week beginning January 30 costs £262 in Penlee Lodge, which sleeps four; £314 in Tamar Lodge (sleeps six); £329 in Cawsander Lodge (sleeps six); and £367 in Whitsander (sleeps eight). More details: www.whitsandbayholidays.co.uk; 01752 822 597.



Get on board: Visit La Rosiere in France