

# Dress up to find the real Gambia



Ida with the finished dish and, below, buying spices in Tanji market

**Cooking benachin**  
THE fresh ingredients we purchased at Tanji were transformed into a delicious traditional lunch to eat beneath the shade of a big old mango tree in Ida's courtyard garden at Brufut Village. A group of ten, we helped sort, peel, chop and pummel the vegetables, pick and wash the rice in her outdoor kitchen, while she and her family members fried up the fish.

For authenticity, the benachin was served on a couple of large communal platters. We sat on carpets on the ground and scooped the food with our right hands, learning how to squeeze and roll the rice into little balls. It was absolutely delicious; most of the ingredients are readily available in the UK – only the bitter tomatoes may be tricky to get hold of, but it works equally well without. Ida's recipe below is a flexible one – she offers no set quantities; use your instinct and gauge according to how many are eating.

**Ingredients**

- big pieces of fish, gutted but with heads on if you like, or you can use chicken pieces or beef chunks*
- vegetables cut in big chunks: bitter tomatoes, pumpkin, sweet potatoes, potatoes, okra, aubergine (known as garden egg in The Gambia), cassava root*
- garlic cloves, onion and fresh tomatoes, mashed in a pestle and mortar*
- tomato paste*
- carrots, diced very small*
- fresh sorrel leaves (like spinach)*
- par-boiled white or brown rice*
- fresh lime cut in wedges*
- soya bean oil*

**Method**

Heat the oil in a large pan. Add the mashed garlic, onions and tomatoes, with a healthy dollop of tomato paste.

Cook on a slow heat for about an hour, adding a little water now and then. When the mixture is very soft add more water and the vegetables along with the fish. This can be fried in advance or fried in the pot before adding the veg. If using chicken, you must fry it in advance, but beef can be added now. Add sea salt to taste.

Steam the cleaned sorrel leaves, mash in a pestle and mortar and set aside.

Let the stew simmer for at least 30 minutes. Remove all the ingredients, leaving the broth behind, covering to retain the heat. Add the rice and carrots to the broth. When the rice is cooked, serve on a platter, laying the vegetables and fish on top, with dollops of sorrel paste and lime wedges around the edges.



**Jackie Butler flies to The Gambia from Bristol for some cultural enrichment and winter sun**



**M**RS Ida Cham Njai strolled through the market, head held high, gently weaving through the chattering crowds towards the waterfront, her proud and striking red-clad figure standing out against the mass of ramshackle wooden stalls and patchwork of huts to either side of the dusty pathway.

I followed close behind, feeling self-conscious in my borrowed lime green apparel, a traditional Gambian three-piece of floor-length wrap skirt, with matching overdress and a simple scarf, which Ida had conjured into an elaborate headdress to rival her own. But in the morning heat, already nudging 30C, if not cool, I was far more comfortable than my Western clothes would have allowed.

Trotting down a gentle slope, suddenly the scene opened out on to Tanji beach and the most extraordinary assault to the senses I have ever experienced.

There was an overwhelming odour of fish, enough to catch in the throat at first; on the crowded sands scores of women crouched over buckets wielding big, sharp knives, deftly removing heads and guts from the day's catch and throwing the waste towards the water's edge, where seagulls swooped for an easy breakfast.

A little way out at sea, teams of fishermen lolled lazily on a dozen or more long, open boats, their work done for the day; children no older than seven or eight carried big round trays of fruit or bread on their heads, urging us to buy, while others hassled for money or gifts; men old and young stand around smoking cigarettes.

At a cloth-spread table staffed by a row of laughing, gossiping assistants, Ida poked and prodded some fierce-looking fishy specimens and prompted me to hand over a couple of crumpled Dalasi banknotes. With some of our lunch in the bag, we moved back into the market throng to select vegetables, rice and spices from assorted sellers. A woman with a plump sleeping baby bound tightly to her back approached, pointing at me, smiling and saying something in her native Mandinka. The two women laughed.

"What did she say?" I asked.  
"She says you look very beautiful and asked if you were wife number two," Ida replied, laughing, explaining that men in this chiefly Muslim country were allowed up to four spouses. The young mother was making a gentle joke.

So, this was shopping, Gambian style – an honest slice of everyday life in this tiny West African country. With no refrigerator in the average home many housewives go through this ritual twice a day.

It made a striking, but welcome, contrast to the addictive splendour of the Coco Ocean Resort and Spa a short drive away, where I could have remained indefinitely cocooned in the most divine vacation luxury. I love all that five-star treatment, of course, but I also get immense pleasure from engaging with the real people of the places I visit. In The Gambia this is not only possible, but it's a major part of their sustainable tourism strategy and it's helping to keep threatened traditions and customs alive.

The Yabouy home cooking day run by Ida is an excellent example. A regular excursion, run by West African Tours and easily bookable as part of a



PICTURES: JACKIE BUTLER

Above, the busy scene on the beach at Tanji fish market; below right, a shopper chooses vegetables from a table-top stall; below left, girls share a precious workbook in class at a Gambian school



Gambia Experience holiday, it offers tourists a chance to shop, cook and eat in traditional style.

The following day my party set off bright and early, climbing up a ladder into the back a huge four-wheel drive lorry. We trundled down the dusty tracks that pass for roads in The Gambia – only the two major routes are Tarmac – to catch some snapshots of town and country life in the company of our most charming and chatty tour guide, football fanatic Muck.

A former British colony where English is the main language alongside local dialects, The Gambia is not only small – half the size of Wales – but it's incredibly flat. As we drove, people and buildings emerged abruptly from either side and it was impossible to anticipate what was coming up ahead.

We negotiated the low-rise shanty metropolis of Serrekunda, a sea of tatty shopfronts and single-room business premises, the noisy streets simply swarming with people.

Nothing could have prepared us for the enthusiastic reception waiting at one of the local schools where tourists regularly call in to look around and give donations of greatly appreciated pens, pencils and books.

Every child, immaculately turned out in green uniforms, wanted to say hello and shake our hands, and in the sparsely furnished, electricity-free classroom they proudly demonstrated their immaculate English pronunciation as the teacher



led them through their "Jollyphonics" chanting routines.

Back on the lorry and deeper into the unknown, lofty vegetation sweeping past our ears, Muck pointed out the plethora of colourful birds, naming each one carefully and accurately, throwing in a smattering of football-themed humour. "Red-beaked hornbill: Gambia 2, England, nil."

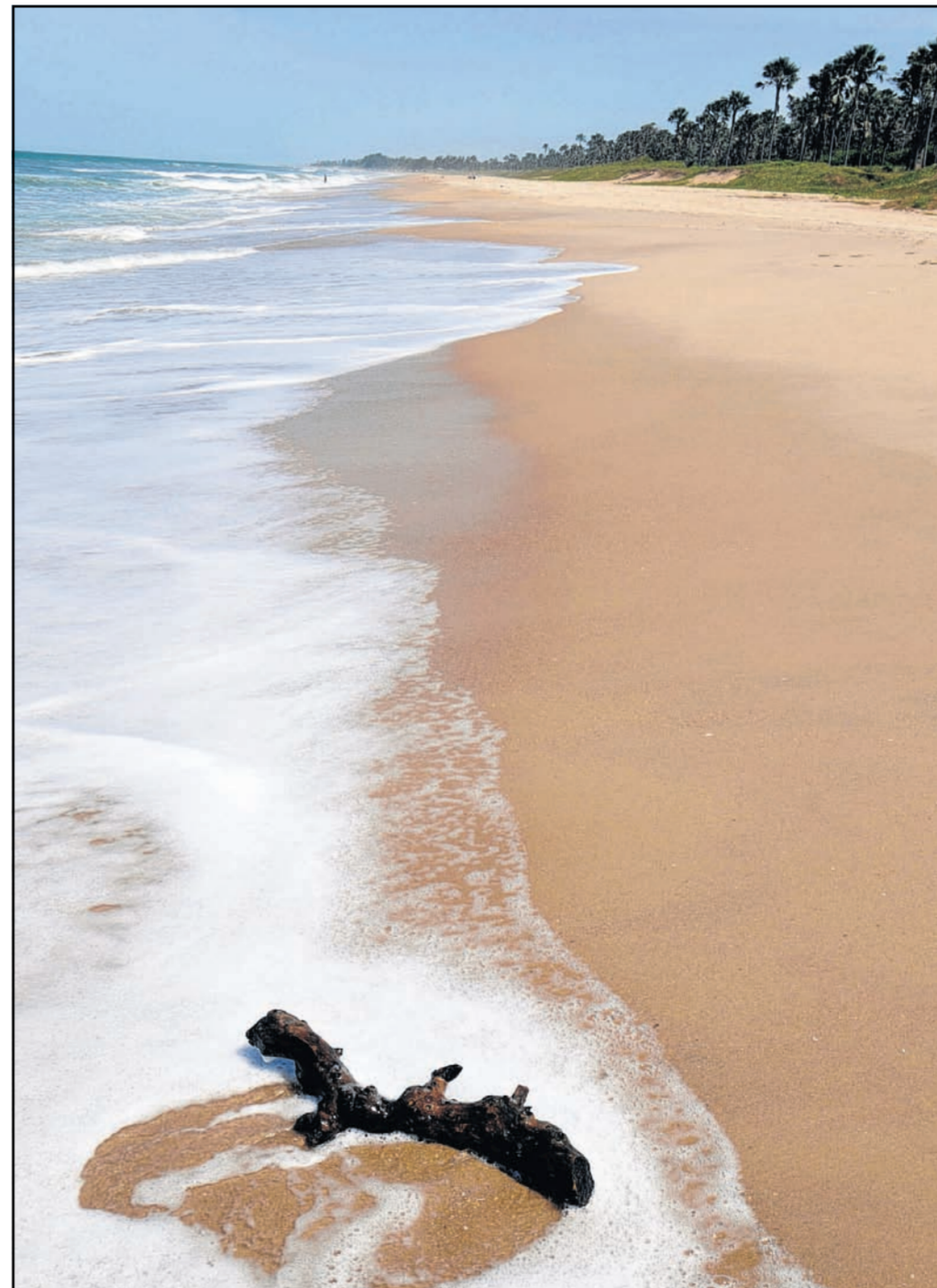
Eventually we emerged onto a deserted seafont where a lone cafe overlooked an idyllic beach. We quenched our thirst with fizzy pop and selected a light lunch from a laden hot and cold buffet before hopping across the baking sand and plunging neck-deep into the balmy waves for a leisurely swim. I dried off dozing and swinging gently in a string hammock. Total bliss.

We drove some of the way back along the smooth wet sand, calling in to check out some of the different kinds of hotels The Gambia Experience packages offer, including the smart, high class Western style Sheraton Gambia and the exclusive and very private boutique chic of ocean-front Ngala



In the lap of luxury at the Coco Ocean Resort and Spa. Clockwise from top left, a monkey enjoys the shade on the grand, stepped walkway down to the restaurant and the sea; the huge terrace of my Beach Club villa, and the spacious and stylish interior. Below, a plate of fresh fruits from the restaurant including papaya and starfruit from the estate; the idyllic, deserted sandy beach outside the hotel (main picture)

DORSET MEDIA SERVICE



Lodge. Earlier in the week we'd enjoyed dinner at the mid-range Kombo Beach Hotel in the Kotu district, where a more British ambience prevails.

That night, we dined at Jojo's bistro and grill, known for its fish and steaks, in the busy and popular Kololi resort, home of the Strip, where there are restaurants of all nationalities, except Gambian, loads of bars and a couple of clubs.

If you're looking for winter sun, sea and sand, but with a slice of authentic local flavour, then The Gambia is an ideal choice for a variety of budgets; it's only a six-hour flight from the UK and, being in the same time zone, there's no jet lag to worry about. Over the winter – from November to April – long hours of dry sunny weather are guaranteed, with comfortable temperatures peaking at around 32C. You are wise to have some precautionary jabs,

take malaria tablets (it's in an active zone) and make sure you spray yourself with insect repellent and slap on high factor sunscreen regularly.

● *The Bradt Guide to The Gambia (£13.99) is packed with excellent travel advice and offers a comprehensive guide to the whole of The Gambia.*

■ **Next week I'll be writing about my visit to The Gambia's Makasutu Culture Forest and to schools in the Ballabu Conservation Project area, where they are working to preserve food growing traditions with help from the Eden Project's Gardens For Life educational endeavour.**

## FACTFILE

JACKIE Butler travelled with The Gambia Experience, the UK's only specialist tour operator to The Gambia and the only one to offer flights from Bristol International Airport. The last Bristol departure for this winter season is on February 19.

■ Jackie stayed at the Coco Ocean Resort and Spa. Prices are from £988 per person based on seven nights bed and breakfast in a junior suite and £1,324 per person for seven nights bed and breakfast in a Beach Club villa. Prices include return flights from Bristol, in-flight meals, hotel transfers, Government tourist tax and airport taxes. The above prices apply to departures up until the end of January 2010.

■ The following late offers are currently available departing from Bristol:

*Two grade hotel allocated on arrival (AOA):* seven nights – £249, departing January 29 and £349, departing February 5.

*Kairaba Beach Hotel (5 grade):* seven nights departing January 29 and February 5 – £829 (deluxe room), representing a saving of up to £142 per person.

*Sheraton Gambia (5 grade):* seven nights departing January 29 – £699, representing a saving of up to £204 per person.

The above prices are based on bed and breakfast and include return Bristol to Banjul flight, in flight meals, airport taxes, government tourist tax and hotel transfers.

The company's Gatwick flights operate year round; Birmingham and Manchester flights operate until April.

● *For all bookings and further information call reservations on 0845 330 2087 or visit [www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk).*



## RURAL GETAWAYS

THIS year's Farmhouse Breakfast Week from January 24-30 encourages people to actively pursue a healthier lifestyle with the theme Breakfast Benefits, and it's happening right on your doorstep. Cartwheel members offer mouth-watering farmhouse breakfasts using delicious local produce, stunning locations to relax and recharge and quality accommodation.

### Higher Bodley Farmhouse

RELAXED, silver award winning, four-star farmhouse B&B combining luxury with Exmoor tradition, near the Devon coast at Barnstaple. Traditional English breakfast with locally sourced ingredients, smoked salmon and vegetarian option. Homemade bread, preserves and local honey. Packed lunches and flask top-ups for long walks. Dogs welcome. Prices from £32pppn.

### Bre Pen Farm

WARM Cornish welcome with tempting farmhouse cooking awaits you at this four-star National Trust farm on the Cornish coast at Mawgan Porth near Newquay. Hearty breakfast with vegetarian option. Farm shop and tea room on site – a showcase for local produce and homemade food. Price £65pn for a double room.

### Wood Advent B&B

ELEGANT four-star country house B&B, situated in beautiful Exmoor National Park near Roadwater in West Somerset. Choice of breakfasts – hearty traditional with fresh ingredients and local sausages, plus extensive vegetarian option. Evening meals also available in the farmhouse. Price from £30pppn.

### Rezare Farmhouse B&B

BEAUTIFULLY furnished four-star B&B in peaceful hamlet near Launceston in Cornwall. Enjoy a tasty breakfast of fresh bread, homemade preserves and locally produced smoked salmon or treat yourself to a full English. Cycle the Tamar Trail and unwind with a glass of local wine or cider. Well-behaved dogs welcome. B&B from £31 pppn.

### Burton Farm

AWARD-WINNING 15th century four-star farmhouse in area of outstanding natural beauty near Kingsbridge in Devon. Four-course farmhouse breakfasts including porridge with homemade clotted cream. Explore sandy beaches and beautiful countryside. Country restaurant on site. Water sports at nearby harbour town Salcombe. B&B from £35 pppn.

### Tredinney

DELICIOUS award-winning homemade food on dairy and beef farm. Three-star accommodation set in peaceful and unspoilt countryside near St Buryan near Penzance, Cornwall. AGA-cooked breakfast using local and homemade produce. Special diets catered for. Watch the early morning milking and enjoy the milk at breakfast. B&B from £30 pppn.

● Visit [www.cartwheelholidays.co.uk](http://www.cartwheelholidays.co.uk).

