



AFRICAN DREAM

The Gambia is known as West Africa's smiling coast with good reason – easy-going locals, tropical beaches and year-round hot weather make it hard to resist, says **NICOLA GILL**

Let's get this out of the way, Africa doesn't appeal to everyone – and is often perceived as a 'difficult' place to travel for many reasons. But when it comes to the West African country of The Gambia, you don't need to think twice.

There's no more an issue with health concerns than in the many other exotic destinations we Brits travel to. Blessed with constant year-round sunshine,

it's also an area untroubled by hurricanes, typhoons and other environmental worries.

It's an odd-shaped country, extending several hundred miles from the Atlantic into inland, surrounded by Senegal, with the Gambia River flowing through its centre. To top it off it has enough variety to please every type of holiday maker – a visit here is a vibrant kaleidoscope of African wildlife, food, markets

and endless warmth. And even if you're not a birdwatcher, you will be mesmerised by the many species, and you don't have to go far or spend hours in a hide to see them. The Gambia is so famed for its spectacular birdlife in fact, *Springwatch's* Chris Packham is a regular visitor and even runs tours here.

The Gambia may not have giraffes, elephants or hordes of zebra, but it has plenty more to

Eat, drink and shop at the markets

Hygiene standards in The Gambia are high and the food is delicious. Sampling exotic juices, like the cloudy liquid from the fruit of the local Baobab tree or the red sugared sourness of hibiscus flower juice, is a highlight. Food relies heavily on fish, rice and mild spices, often with onion and tomato-based sauces. The two most popular markets, Serekunda and Albert, are probably not for the faint-hearted, being packed with lively sellers and all the usual dust and daily



trading, but go with a guide and you'll feel totally safe. Handicrafts from colourful local wax cloth, wooden carvings, batik, bags and much more are on sale here – good-natured haggling is part of the fun, but even if you pay full price it's still cheap by our standards.



offer to make it the kind of place visitors return to time and again.

Africa is a vast continent and it would be a shame to miss the beauty of The Gambia because of troubles hundreds of miles away. As the Gambian proverb goes, "No matter how long a log may float in water, it will never become a crocodile". In other words, The Gambia may be in Africa, but it may not be the Africa you'd expect!

RISE WITH THE BIRDS

A guided birdwatching trip by boat and on-foot from Lamin Lodge is essential. It's an early start (5.30am pick up) so you can be boat-borne for sunrise after breakfast in a floating lodge. Gliding upriver through mangroves, and seeing giant African kingfishers swoop in the water while your guide points out myriad other species, is very special. After a couple of hours in the boat you take a walk through a tourist-free, unspoilt, Gambian landscape, rich in jewel-bright bee-eaters, startling red-billed firefinches, huge hornbills and more. Binoculars are provided but there's still plenty to see up close and around you.





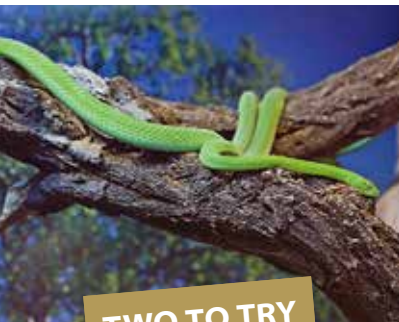
Cuddle a croc

Well, not quite, but certainly stroke one (if you're brave enough!) at the Kachikally Museum and Crocodile Pool, maintained in lush perfection by volunteers who believe the crocs, which have lived and bred here in peaceful harmony with humans for hundreds of years, are sacred. Local Gambians come here for the healing powers of the pool's water – it's supposed to bring luck to women who wish to conceive. Special rituals are still held here sometimes, accompanied by dancing and drumming, and the crocodiles are docile and happy enough to be stroked under the supervision of the caretakers. To date, no one has even been so much as scratched, and feeling their cold, leathery bellies is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. There is also an astonishing range of birdlife to see in the forest.

MARVEL AT THE MONKEYS

The nature trail in Bijilo Forest Park covers over 4.5km of signposted footpaths, winding its way through contrasting habitats of forest, coastal scrubland and sand dunes. There's also a watering hole in the forest, which is a good place to spot species in the dry season. But whenever you go, the rainforest is home to so many invertebrates, reptiles and mammals you'll be spoilt for wildlife to marvel at. Troops of green vervet monkeys, callithrix monkeys and western red colobus monkeys tramp through the canopy, some almost in touching distance. Other species include the sun squirrel, African civet, bushbaby and the brush-tailed porcupine. There's agama, rainbow and monitor lizards and you can also see fire ants, dragonflies, termites, butterflies and the golden silk orb-weaver among the numerous insects. There's three or four other equally good wildlife preserves in The Gambia, and if you go upriver you can also see hippos and chimpanzees, but this involves at least a two-night stopover and a specially organised trip.





TWO TO TRY

1 Gambia reptile farm

Not a farm, but a charity project dedicated to educating Gambian people about their once native reptile species, and how to preserve them. Open to the public, for a small fee you can take a tour and handle a variety of non-poisonous snakes of all sizes. It's well worth a visit – and OK just to look if you aren't feeling brave!



2 Tanji Fishing Village

A riot of traditionally painted fishing boats, fishermen, sellers and makeshift smokehouses, here you will find African life in all its unmanicured glory – with a pungent smell to go with it. It's safe, but most people take a tour guide so they can easily navigate through the thronging crowds and to find the best bits of the market.

WHERE TO STAY

The Kombo Beach Hotel

is a small but charming, family run hotel, with traditional African-style thatched eating and drinking areas and a homely feel. Set right on the beach among palm-filled gardens that attract birdlife, you can wander safely from the hotel to the many local restaurants and fruit shacks that line the beach and village roads around it. It's perfectly situated for getting around the rest of The Gambia, or you can hop in a local taxi (or a regulated tourist taxi), which are always parked outside. A seven night half-board stay starts from £485 per person. gambia.co.uk/kombo-beach



FACTFILE

CURRENCY Gambian dalasi (GMD)

TIME DIFFERENCE GMT +1

VISA Not required for short stays

CLIMATE The Gambia sub-tropical climate makes it warm all year round (25-35°C) with a dry season from October to May and a more humid wet season with daily bursts of short, sharp downpours (sometimes longer) between June and October. The wet season can be uncomfortable with more mosquitos and occasionally closed roads, but tourists visit all year round

GETTING THERE The Gambia is 6.5 hours from the UK with Titan Airways (titan-airways.com)

TO FIND OUT MORE Visit gambia.co.uk

Alamy, thinkstockphotos.com, istockphoto.com