

September 2010

YOUR EXPERIENCE

The Gambia, Senegal and The Islands of Cape Verde

GAMBIA on TV

Presenter

Anna Williamson

talks about

her first visit

WILD SENEGAL

A photography

trip to Bandia

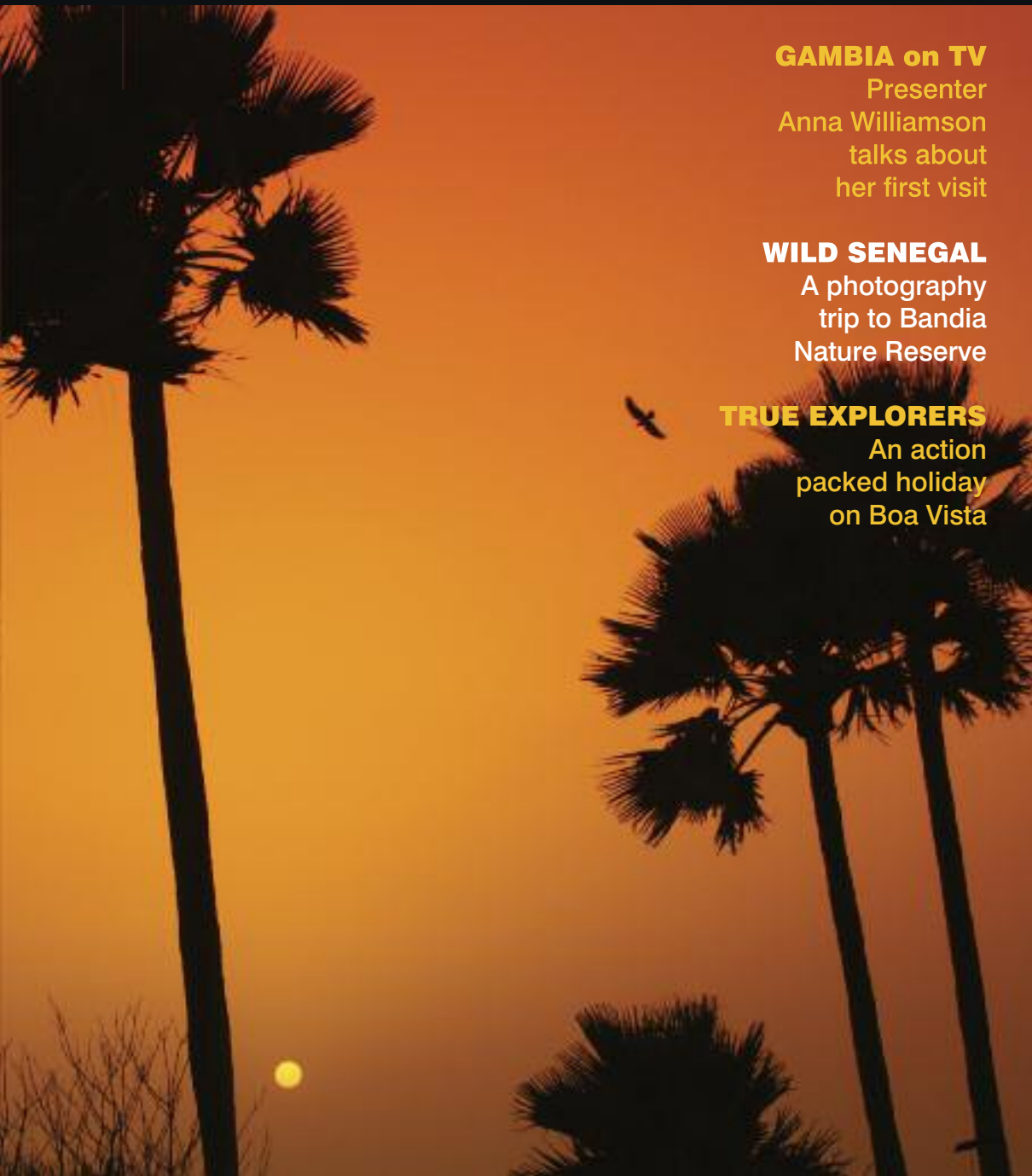
Nature Reserve

TRUE EXPLORERS

An action

packed holiday

on Boa Vista



Welcome to the third edition of *Your Experience* magazine, produced by the staff of Serenity Holidays. We want to share our passion for West Africa and hope you'll share your experiences too.

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£100 holiday voucher for every article published.

Front cover image: Ngala Sunset by Heidi Page

CONTRIBUTORS



Anna Williamson is a TV presenter; her children's show Toonattik has recently moved from ITV to Nickelodeon. She was recently filming in The Gambia; find out what she thought.



Heidi Page works in our marketing department and has recently returned to The Gambia on her first photography assignment for us. You can read all about it and see some of her amazing pictures.



Shahid Naqvi travelled to Senegal with us in 2008 whilst working as a journalist for The Birmingham Post. His article recounts his first trip to Africa, summing up what first time visitors can expect.



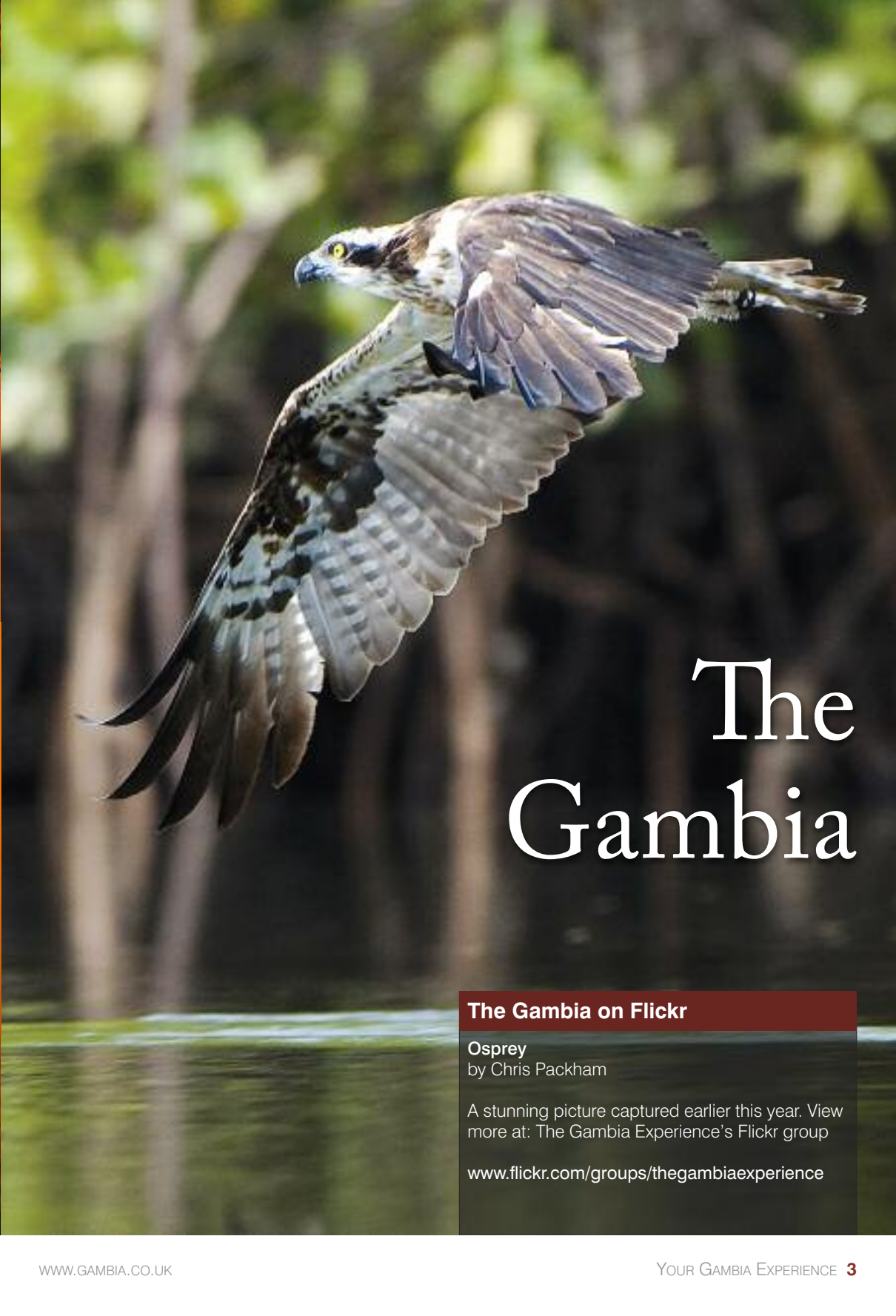
Kathy Burrington is our in-house graphic designer; in this issue she writes about her trip to Bandia Nature Reserve in Senegal and shares some of her photographs.



Salome Munuo Mum of one, Salome Munuo is a fashion journalist and stylist for a national paper and runs a personal styling company www.fashionsos.co.uk She spent a romantic week in Boa Vista with her partner Lance discovering all aspects of the island.



Romina Andreini has been a PADI instructor for over 10 years and has lived in Cape Verde since 2003.



The Gambia

The Gambia on Flickr

Osprey
by Chris Packham

A stunning picture captured earlier this year. View more at: The Gambia Experience's Flickr group

www.flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience

MY GAMBIA EXPERIENCE

TV presenter Anna Williamson spent a few days in The Gambia earlier this year, filming a holiday competition for a TV programme. Here you can read her views of her first trip to Africa.



I've never been to Africa. Always wanted to go, but never had the opportunity. That is until I received a frantic phone call from one of my producers.... 'Can you go to The Gambia to film....tomorrow morning!!' Guaranteed sunshine, a luxury hotel, my favourite film crew...the answer was of course, most definitely, YES! I've been hosting holiday competitions for a few years now. I've been lucky to have visited some lovely places but none quite so unique as The Gambia.

After a last minute scramble to get my stuff together (typically I'd left my passport at home) and an emergency trip to the doctor to get some malaria tablets...I found myself in the airport lounge at Gatwick Airport with my team and Jo Wedeman from The Gambia Experience. It is often a myth that TV is glamorous, believe me...behind the gloss of the finished product you (hopefully) enjoy, there is often a lot of stress, waiting, unforeseen problems, unhelpful people...you name it...we encounter it. So it was a great start that upon arrival at Gatwick the lovely Jo got us checked in and whisked us all to the special airline lounge assigned to The Gambia Experience.

After a quick complimentary breakfast and the obligatory mad dash magazine purchase (still essential on a work trip!), we boarded our (on time) flight to Banjul, the capital of The Gambia. Six hours, and a most satisfactory aeroplane lunch of chicken curry later, we touched down at the small airport of Banjul. Don't you love that moment when you've left rainy England and arrived in a hot country, when the aeroplane doors open and you get that first waft of warm air on your face....nothing quite beats it!! Well, The Gambia didn't disappoint and by the time we'd made it down the plane steps into the tiny terminal, my jeans were already most uncomfortably hot!

Resort Manager Joyce (total legend and ex pat who knows literally everyone!) met us at passport control and within minutes had our passports stamped and returned and whisked us onto our minibus to be taken to the hotel.

One tip for you – take your read magazines off the plane and give them to the airport workers...their wives love the pictures and fashion apparently!! As I soon realised with the people of The Gambia, it's the simple things we take for granted, bring the most joy to others....a theme that was recurrent throughout my week.

Upon arrival at our luxury hotel, The Coco Ocean, we were met by Mary who showed us the complex. WOW. This hotel really does have it all. From the moment we arrived it was champagne cocktail welcome drinks, wicker hand fans to keep us cool, and the rooms and facilities are second to none.

I was very kindly given a Beach House room which overlooked the ocean and shared a pool with only a few other rooms. The bed was a huge, comfortable four poster, and there were all the mod cons and luxuries one would expect from a 5 star hotel. I had the best night's sleep in that bed, listening to waves crashing..... In addition to the top notch rooms, there was a small gym and a beautiful spa that really is the pièce de résistance for this resort. I experienced a herbal bath massage which was most relaxing and their signature 'hamman' is really worth a try.

A tired and hungry crew require feeding and the restaurants absolutely delivered in quality, choice and service. From fresh sushi, to Thai, to traditional African cuisine, our taste buds were spoilt for choice.



A special mention to the wonderful staff who always greeted us with a smile and couldn't have been more helpful. It was quite humbling.

Out and about in The Gambia is a must do. We went on a four wheel drive excursion which took in all the local life, wildlife and gave a real insight into the poverty and culture of the country. The locals are so welcoming and thanks to our guide, Mucki, we learnt the traditional greeting which is pronounced 'al – saam-a-day' which helped us feel like we were making some effort!

A trip to the mangroves is a must, and I thoroughly enjoyed a trip in a canoe meandering along the river listening to sounds of the native drums. Bliss. In a nutshell, The Gambia exceeded my expectations. If you go (and I would definitely recommend it) my tips to blend in and understand what you're in for are:

- Take magazines, pens and sweets for the locals. They will ask so if you want to do your bit, do stock up.

- Be firm when saying NO. The locals are great but persistent. A Westener (understandably) is a pound sign to them so if you're not going to buy, say no there and then otherwise you will continue to be hassled.
- The Gambia is a developing country. Fortunately food isn't a problem but be prepared to see quite a bit of, sometimes heartbreaking, poverty in the streets and villages.
- As such, internet and phones don't really work. Best to not bother to be honest, or use the hotel land line if you really have to make a call. It is expensive on mobiles and that's if you're lucky enough to get signal!
- The Gambians love football. Indulge a local in footy knowledge and you'll have a friend for life!

The Gambia Experience is a great way to do just that, experience a country that has it all – culture, sunshine, beaches and fine cuisine. This time I was there for work, next time I'm going back for a holiday!!

IMAGES OF THE GAMBIA

Keen photographer Heidi Page returns to The Gambia to try to capture the “essence” of The Gambia and share the country’s secrets which attract so many holidaymakers to return for a second, third or even 20th visit!



I have worked for The Gambia Experience for four years and following five previous visits to The Gambia, my sixth visit was a photography trip in April for this winter’s ‘new look’ brochure. As a keen photographer I was sent to capture the ‘real’ Gambia so we could share the soul of the destination with you and show there’s a lot more there than just glorious sunshine (although that is obviously a massive draw!).

Understandably, I didn’t need much persuasion to fly out and shoot The Gambia as it’s incredibly vibrant and colourful; some might say a photographer’s dream. I had five days to capture as many aspects of the true Gambia as I could find; needless to say it wasn’t long enough and many nooks and crannies of the country were left unseen. I returned home with just a snippet of the vast amount of sights and experiences there are to be had.

I think I found most activity wandering around Serrekunda market and the infamous Royal Albert market in Banjul whilst weaving around locals loudly haggling over their purchases of the day. My camera did me proud by capturing the intense level of colour of bizarre looking fruits I never knew the names of and every colour of fabric piled up to twice my own height, not to mention the locals fully dressed in them; and even the taxis are colourful!

It’s unfortunate that photography cannot capture the fusion of smells and sounds that accompany what you are seeing, although it can certainly give you a feel for a place - I can assure you, however, it’s not half the experience you’ll have when you actually go there!



Discover more about The Gambia

To find out more about the country and holidays visit www.gambia.co.uk or telephone 0845 330 4567 to order a copy of The Gambia Experience brochure. Read more personal experiences and submit yours at www.thegambiablog.co.uk

View more images and upload yours to www.flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience



Senegal

Senegal on Flickr

Gorée Island
by Kathy Burrington

An image from Kathy's photographic trip to Senegal (see page 10). View more at:
The Senegal Experience's Flickr group

www.flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience

A WARM WELCOME FROM SENEGAL

Former journalist Shahid Naqvi spent a few days in Senegal visiting the luxury hotels of Saly and the Sine Saloum Delta on his first ever trip to Africa, discovering there's a lot to attract more adventurous travellers.



Africa. Cradle of humanity. Home to one seventh of the world's population and a fifth of its total land area. Up until now the nearest I've got to the great continent has been BBC wildlife documentaries, Bob Geldof and that song by Toto. All that changed recently, however, following a trip to Senegal. Of course, one country with a population of 11 million cannot be representative of a land mass made up of 61 nations and 922 million people. But the former French colony is stable, keen to promote itself to Western tourists and therefore a good place to start.

Its west coast location will already be familiar to some Brits who have visited the ex-British colony of The Gambia. Senegal is a bigger country with a different history and its French connection means, if nothing else, you can get a decent cup of coffee.

The good news is unlike other popular long haul winter sun destinations, Senegal is on the same time zone as Britain between the tourist season of November to March, meaning no jet lag to contend with.

Stepping off the plane at Dakar airport the first thing to hit home is the heat – 32°C is something of a contrast to the single figure temperature in Britain. Luckily, though, it was the end of the rainy season, which runs between July and October, meaning it's a dry heat which you adjust to surprisingly quickly.

The second thing that strikes the senses is the hordes of people walking on the motorway on the

drive south to the holiday resort of Saly about 50 miles out. It felt as if Dakar's entire population of two million was spreading out from the city the entire length of the journey. Among the many sights you wouldn't ever expect to see on the M6 was a goat strapped to the roof of a car.

Arriving at Saly's "most luxurious hotel", the Lamantin Beach provides just the kind of escape from the maddening crowds you'd want after more than 12 hours' travel. This was the first example of Senegal's Government-controlled bid to capitalise on the lucrative Western tourism market.

Though the country's climate, attractive beaches and decent standard hotels have been familiar to people from other parts of Europe, it's a relatively new destination to British holidaymakers. The five star Lamantin Beach offers the kind of standard of luxury many western tourists have come to expect with good food, quality wine and a spa. In addition, there's a private sandy beach and – best of all – warm tropical waters to swim in. A far cry from my last buttock-clenching dip in the sea off the Cornish coast this summer. There are a string of similar hotels along the coast. In Saly we also visited the four star Hotel Espadon which features a bar built on a jetty and the boutique-style Tama Lodge.

Further south in Sine Saloum is the sleepy Delta Niominka, accessed by boat, and the marvellous Lodge des Collines de Niassam – one of the world's most unusual hotels with rooms built into



trees overlooking a lagoon. But perhaps best of all was the luxurious Le Royal Lodge which has 28 beautifully appointed hut-style suites all of which contain a sunken Jacuzzi!

Away from the pampered hotel world, there are a number of ways to explore Senegal. One of the most fun is heading out into the countryside on a souped-up golfing buggy-type vehicle where you get to see sights such as a massive ant hill, a crab-infested lake and local villages. We also visited a colourful local market where we bought supplies to pass on to villagers living a traditional rural life. Though on the edge of poverty, it was impossible not to be struck by their sense of community, humour and spirit. Something that was underlined many times during our visit.

Saly also boasts the Bandia Nature Reserve, where a trip on the back of a jeep will bring you into close proximity to wild rhino, giraffes, zebras and various other animals native to Africa. Visitors to Senegal should also make an effort to visit the famous Gorée Island – once a staging post for the transportation of slaves to America and Europe. It's a moving experience, though watch out for the super-persistent street hawkers!

Senegal may have bugs the size of a small child's hand, but for the more adventurous tourist the country offers a memorable holiday experience. And a great introduction to Africa.

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BANDIA NATURE RESERVE

Kathy Burrington, Graphic Designer for Serenity Holidays, enjoys a close encounter with African wildlife.



For as long as I can remember I have had a keen interest in animals, both wild and domestic, in fact, although I now work as a graphic designer, my main subject at University in Bristol was Zoology and one of the first jobs I ever had was in a zoo. I'm also an enthusiastic photographer so you can imagine my delight when, with just three days notice, I was asked if I'd like to visit Senegal to photograph some new hotels. The visit would also include a mini-safari to Bandia Nature Reserve, near the coastal resort of Saly. Before you know it my bags are packed, I've got my malaria tablets and I'm on my way.

I was only in Senegal for three days but we did so much, visiting many hotels, the beautiful Sine Saloum Delta, Gorée Island, craft markets, a fishing village and, of course, Bandia. One of the highlights was the chance to see these wonderful creatures up close. "Could that rhino turn this truck over?" I thought, as he (or it could have been a she) stood just a few feet away serenely posing for my camera.

My favourite animals, however, were the giraffes. We were allowed to get out of the truck and move closer to the family of three - a little shyler than the rhino but never the less a close encounter. A family of ostriches were also delightful - the father on constant guard of his mate, youngster and four little ones. The males can be quite aggressive so we photographed them from the truck.

Antelopes, impala gazelles, buffalo, monkeys, tortoises and crocodiles were all caught on camera but sadly the herd of zebra in the park proved too elusive. We did not even catch a glimpse of a black and white stripe. I guess I'll just have to return someday!



Discover more about Senegal

To find out more about Senegal and holidays visit www.senegal.co.uk or telephone 0845 338 8700 to order a brochure.

View more images and upload yours to www.flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience

The Islands of Cape Verde



Cape Verde on Flickr

Faded Memories
by Kathy Burrington

An image from another of Kathy's photographic trips. View more at: The Cape Verde Experience's Flickr group

www.flickr.com/groups/thecapeverdeexperience

WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED

Journalist, Salome Munuo, explores all that Boa Vista has to offer from stunning beaches and all-inclusive hotels to snorkelling over dramatic shipwrecks and dancing the Funana with the locals at the annual Harvest festival.



There are not many holiday companies that give the customer a sense of discovery. Travelling to the island of Boa Vista with The Cape Verde Experience my partner and I certainly felt like true explorers.

We stayed at the all-inclusive resort of Iberostar Club Boa Vista, a four-star luxury hotel in Praia das Chaves on the west coast of the island. Set along white sandy beaches with crystal blue seas, the location is postcard picture perfect.

The hotel boasts three pools including a breathtaking infinity pool. Also on site is 'Renova', the tranquil spa and a high-tech gym. During our stay we both enjoyed an invigorating massage in the spa, and I also found a little time to fit in a luxury pedicure!

The hotel houses two main restaurants: a buffet-style restaurant with open grill cooking and one with a seafood menu. The hotel also has three bars, which provide a delicious selection of cocktails, a fantastic way in which to while away the evening whilst enjoying the most breathtaking sunsets.

During our stay we also enjoyed the daily shows, put on by the in-house entertainment team. For those more active holidaymakers there is a wide choice of exercise classes, from pool volleyball to poolside dancing, as well as live music. The entertainment continues well into the evening with a variety of live cabarets.

The day after we arrived we were guided through the catalogue of activities. Snorkelling among the coral reefs, quad bike safaris, full or half-day tours

by 4x4, discovering ship wrecks, visiting local towns, or trailing across the Viana desert - Boa Vista's answer to the Sahara.

We took part in a wide range of the trips, by far the favourites being the snorkelling for its amazing sea life and dramatic shipwrecks, and the cross-country trail for its volcanic landscapes, vintage villages, and breathtaking beaches.

For an island that is only 620 kilometres squared and with a population of only 5,000, you certainly get the full 'Tardis' experience with such a wide choice of adventure.

During our stay we enjoyed day shopping trips to the capital village of Sal Rei. At night we visited a festival in the smaller village of Estancia de Baixo, which was the annual end of Harvest celebration. Traditionally held on the last Saturday of May, it's a carnival mix of local food, dance, drums and live music. The evening was a magical mix and we easily embraced the spirit, dancing the Funana (the traditional salsa style dance) in the street with the rest. The Cape Verdeans are a naturally friendly population and guests are given a warm welcome in all the local towns.

The Cape Verde islands are such a melting pot of cultures and races due to its rich history of influence from the French, Dutch and Portuguese colonies. The international influence is clear in the beautiful architecture of the local towns and villages of Boa Vista. The colonial style buildings, though weathered, are painted in candy colours making for a beautiful backdrop against the arid landscapes.



Cape Verde is famed for its mouthwatering seafood cuisine. The locals are gifted in mixing spices with traditional cooking techniques, producing some amazing dishes. On our last night we enjoyed an enchanting lobster dinner, with live music from the locals, arranged as another excursion booked through our tour guide. The evening was filled with aromas from the food fused with the heady atmosphere of the music. We dined on the most succulent dishes and danced the night away.

The whole trip was a truly colourful carnival experience.

The Cape Verde Experience really provides you with the true essence of Cape Verde, changing us from ordinary tourists into adventurous travellers. We were left satisfied but wanting more...

Extract of article by Salome Munuo, as featured in The Daily Express.

Ten things you must do in Cape Verde.

- 1 Book a fishing trip.
- 2 Head to Ervatao beach on Boa Vista to catch a glimpse of the famous loggerhead turtles.
- 3 Visit the old ceramic factory in Praia da Chaves.
- 4 Go for a sunset walk along the unspoilt coastline for the most breathtaking views.
- 5 Visit the villages' bustling markets for a true taste of traditional Cape Verde.
- 6 Enjoy diving among the colourful coral reefs and wrecks along the shoreline of Boa Vista.
- 7 Hire a quad bike or 4x4 to discover the island at your own leisure.
- 8 Visit the old fishing village in Spinguera and enjoy a seafood lunch.
- 9 Book a round island boat trip and enjoy views of the island from the sea.
- 10 Animal lovers can enjoy a rustic horse riding tour across the picturesque coastline.

CAVE DIVING

Sal is known for its fantastic beaches but beneath the water there are fantastic dives. PADI instructor Romina Andreini from Cabo Verde Diving describes a recent dive to the cave systems of Buracona and Regona.

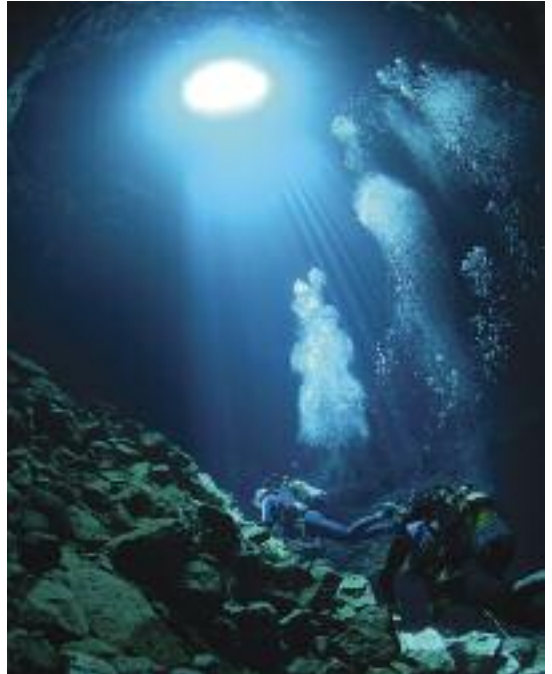


On arrival at the first dive site, Buracona, we entered the water with a giant stride, conditions were excellent and descended to about 24 metres to the mouth of the cave. A tunnel of about 100 metres extends from the mouth of the cave which has gentle turns and is made of rock. For the initial few minutes torches were used to guide divers through the tunnel until they arrived at the heart of the reef; it is here that divers are treated to a most spectacular light display. A large dome ascends to the reef top, where it breaks free into the daylight and the power of the sunlight creates majestic beams that light up the interior of the cave and reveal her true beauty. The group spent a good deal of time playing in the surreal beams of light and taking some fantastic photographs.

I was surprised that the group even enjoyed their safety stop by having fun hanging onto each others' fins in a long line, and four of the group had an underwater rodeo, much to the enjoyment of all the other divers! If you visit Sal you really shouldn't miss this dive.

After the surface interval on the boat we moved to the second dive site of Regona - another amazing dive. Regona is a series of horseshoe-shaped tunnels that interconnect and emerge into the open sea, providing much excitement and shark encounters. After entering the mouth of the cave the tunnel initially runs for approximately 20 metres before turning left and continuing for a further 400 metres, running parallel to the reef and with frequent exits to the reef's edge.

This dive site is fascinating and unique in terms of the marine life that is living inside the cave. Crustaceans, sand tiger sharks, nurse sharks, rays, slipper lobsters,



catfish, moray eels and large schools of fish including jackfish and tuna can be found in abundance. If you're a certified diver visiting the Island of Sal then an excursion to the unique underwater caves at Buracona and Regona is an absolute must. Whilst cave diving is considered an advanced form of diving it is possible for those with their advanced licence and a minimum of one dive in the local waters to experience these dives – and for less experienced there are beginners' courses.

Discover more about Cape Verde

To find out more about Cape Verde and holidays visit www.capeverdeexperience.co.uk or telephone 0845 330 2046 to order a brochure.

View more images and upload yours to www.flickr.com/groups/thecapeverdeexperience

WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE?

Do you have an experience of The Gambia, Senegal or Cape Verde that you would like to share with us? We are looking for guest writers to contribute to our magazine and also to feature on our blog site www.thegambiablog.co.uk

Perhaps you have worked with a charity in The Gambia; or you are one of the many people who have been travelling to The Gambia for years; you may have honeymooned in Senegal or been hiking in Cape Verde. Whatever your experience, however long ago it was, if you fancy yourself as a bit of a travel writer please send your articles (of either 350 or 700 words) to: Your Experience, Serenity Holidays, Atlantic House, 3600 Parkway, Solent Business Park, Fareham, Hampshire, PO15 7AN

or email experience@serenityholidays.co.uk
If you have any photographs that you would like to share, please upload them to flickr.com/groups and search for The Gambia Experience, The Senegal Experience or The Cape Verde Experience.

Any article chosen to feature in our magazine will receive a £100 holiday voucher valid against any holiday with Serenity Holidays.





www.gambia.co.uk
0845 330 4567



www.capeverdeexperience.co.uk
0845 330 2046



www.senegal.co.uk
0845 338 8700



The Gambia Experience, The Senegal Experience and The Cape Verde Experience are all trade names of Serenity Holidays. We also offer holidays to the Mediterranean islands of Corsica and Sardinia and European short breaks with Great Escapes.

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