

TRAVEL

By Mimi Bior

WITH sunshine all year round and just six hours from the UK, you might well think that Gambia, Africa's smallest country, would be packed with tourists – but you would be wrong.

Only the size of Devon and Cornwall, this friendly nation offers a varied landscape – a mix of wide, uncrowded sandy beaches, lush tropical forest, swamps, marshes and big areas of woodland – and a wide mixture of ethnic groups.

The country gained independence from the UK as recently as 1965 and English remains the official language, though you can expect to hear other languages such as Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, Jola, Serahuli, Serer, Aku and Manjago.

The main religion is Islam so it's important to be respectful of this and reserve beachwear and revealing clothes for the beach.

The Gambia has adopted the nickname "The Smiling Coast" and it's easy to see why. It's one of the friendliest countries I've visited and the locals are genuinely hospitable.

If you're looking for a holiday with a difference, a beach holiday, a cultural holiday or just a change from the norm, Gambia is well worth checking out. It's a tempting alternative to the Caribbean, with guaranteed sunshine, great beaches, friendly English-speaking locals and an exotic, vibrant culture.

Our Gambian experience started the minute we touched down at Banjul airport – the air-conditioned coach proving a welcome haven from the hot night. We arrived at our hotel – the five-star Sheraton Gambia Hotel Resort and Spa – late, so it was straight off to bed to prepare for a hectic, event-packed visit.

Sunday

9am: We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, with a wide selection of hot and cold choices. All fuelled up, we were taken on a tour of the hotel and its facilities. Unfortunately, the spa was still being built at the time of our visit but completion is expected by next month.

WE departed for Ngala Lodge, a former colonial mansion located in the resort of Fajara, about 20 minutes' drive from our hotel. After a warm welcome at the iron gates, we were impressed by what the luxurious boutique-style hotel had to offer.

Each suite was unique and varied in size, and all were extremely comfortable and spacious with many individual features and little touches – there was even a Mick Jagger-themed room.

I couldn't help but feel a million miles from home, the surroundings were serene and tranquil, with idyl-

lic cliff-top settings, the perfect place to relax and unwind with your partner or friends.

After a delicious lunch of seafood pasta, and a local soft drink made from a purple flower called "Wonja" or "Bisab", we set off for our next destination.

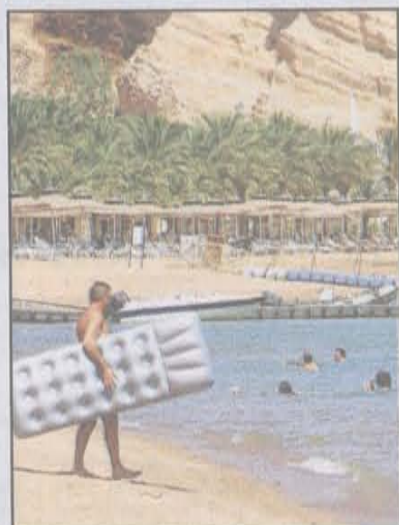
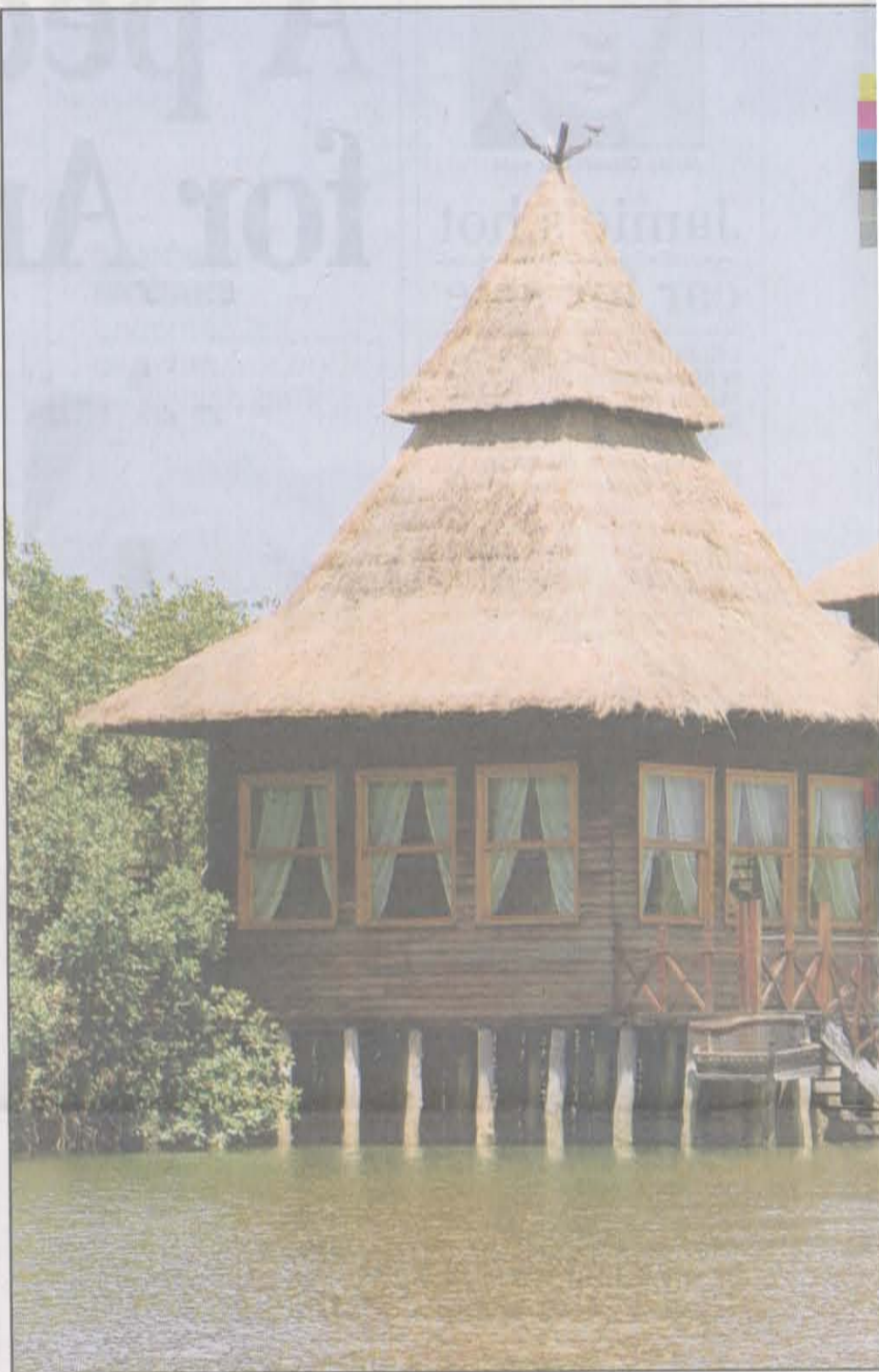
3.30pm: The Mandina Lodges at Makasutu are unique lodges situated on the tributary of the River Gambia in the heart of the African bush. The 1,000-acre Makasutu Cultural Forest is about 45 minutes from the coastal resorts and is the result of more than 15 years' hard work by two Englishmen, James English and Lawrence Williams.

After a refreshing drink at "base camp" we were off again to explore

the dense forest on foot and the mangroves in dugout canoes.

We learned a lot about Gambian nature and the history of the forest – Makasutu translates into "the Holy Forest" in Mandinka. During our visit we were able to catch a glimpse of the resident baboons, visit the forest's fortune teller (locally known as a Marabu), swim in the pool, then enjoy a spectacular evening show of fire-eating and dancing with a local Jola tribe in traditional costume.

We had all worked up an appetite and settled down for a feast. Gambia is definitely the place for food lovers. We ate barbecued beef, ladyfish, chicken, couscous, rice and various sauces, which included delicious domada and yassa.



Sea and sand: Experience the Red Sea

GO sailing and diving in the Red Sea, on a LiveAboard Adventure. Itinerary takes in the classic sites of the Red Sea and combines wreck and reef diving. Minimum experience required is 15 logged dives. Flies January 4 from Gatwick, full-board for seven nights, for £699pp. Details: 0870 145 1376; or see website at www.crystalactive.co.uk

BOOK the luxury five-bedroom Villa Nayia Paradise in Cyprus for five nights, or more, and save 20 per cent. Prices from £516 for a five-night break travelling at any point up until March 15. Details: 0844 847 1318; www.bowhills.co.uk

EASYJET flights for the summer from Bristol include: Biarritz from £19.99;

Destinations

Olbia (Sardinia) from £21.99; Bordeaux from £21.99; Split from £23.99; and Madeira from £29.99. Book before January 10 and enter prize draw to win a Vauxhall Astra TwinTop Convertible Sport. Details: easyjet.com

BOOK a fly/cruise holiday around Spain, Canary Islands and Morocco, and save £400, prices now from £625pp (based on two sharing). Includes flights from Heathrow, 10-night cruise, meals, entertainment and taxes/fees. Starts and ends in Barcelona, Spain. Departs February 6. Details: 0845 165 8330; www.royalcaribbean.co.uk



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A taste of paradise



FACTFILE

Mimi Bior travelled to Gambia with The Gambia Experience (0845 330 2087 - www.gambia.co.uk/travel)

She flew with Aestreu Airways. The airline operates on Tuesdays and Fridays from Bristol International Airport until April 29, 2008. There are also departures available from East Midlands, Manchester and Gatwick airports.

She stayed at the newly opened five-star Sheraton Gambia Hotel Resort and Spa, which is part of the Gambia Experience's luxury collection of hotels. Prices for a week's holiday on a bed and breakfast basis cost from £749

per person in a twin classic room with sea views. This price is inclusive of flights from Bristol or East Midlands airports, transfers and airport taxes.

All vehicles and tour guides were arranged through West African Tours (see website at www.westafricantours.com) and can be tailor-made to suit your budget and individual requirements.

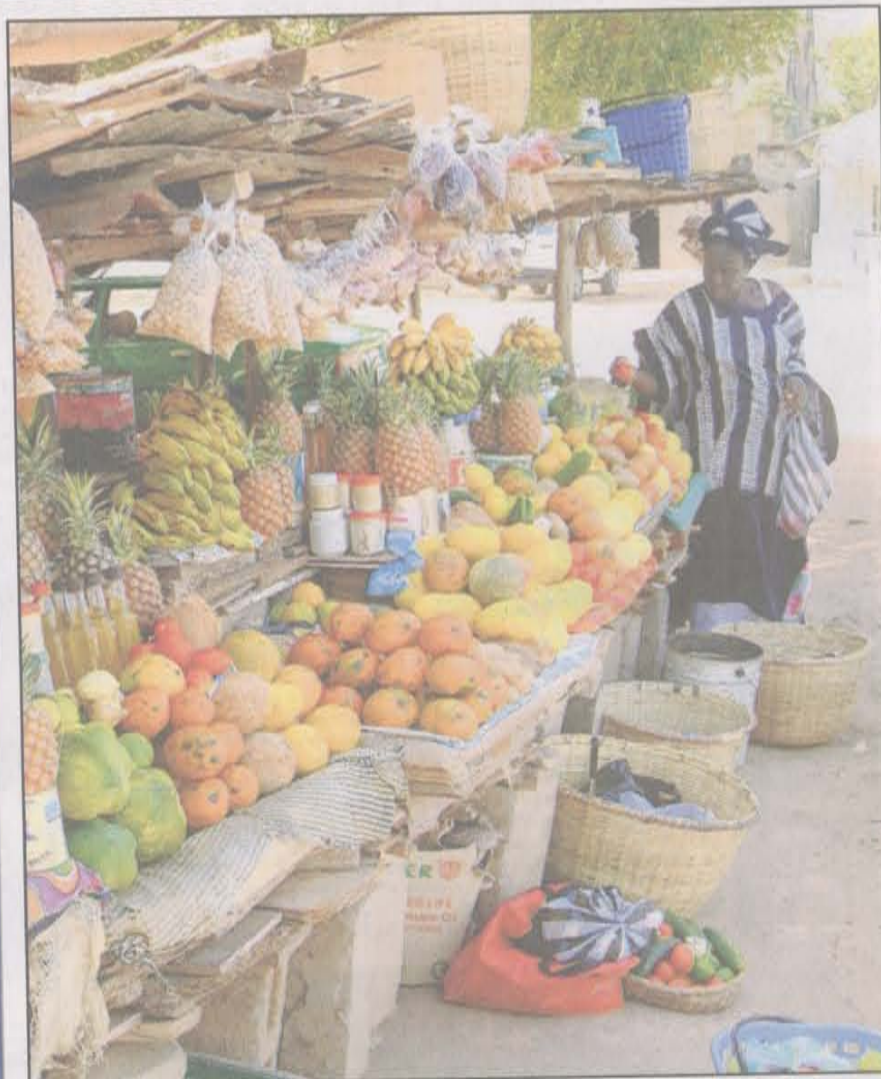
Travellers to Gambia need vaccinations against yellow fever and malaria. Check with your GP. Recommended read: *The Gambia*, by Bradt Travel Guides (£13.99) - visit website at www.bradtguides.com

Sunshine safari: The Mandina Lodges at Makasutu. Below: A fruit stall at the roadside. Above: Women collect water from a well. Pictures: Glenn Edwards

Monday
8.30am: This was definitely the busiest day... we set off early for Coconut Residence, a small luxury boutique hotel for breakfast. Coconut Residence has a very intimate feel; the décor is chic, stylish and very elegant. We ate a Continental breakfast, fruit salad and drank a never-ending supply of freshly squeezed mixed fruit juice.
11am: We departed for an off-the-beaten-track adventure in an army truck - driving through various areas, including Serekunda (Gambia's biggest town).
I'd recommend walking through Serekunda to gain an insight into the "real Gambia" and to really experience the rich culture and vi-

brancy. Back in the army truck, armed with books, pens, pencils and school books; we were off again, this time to Sifoe Senior secondary school.
The pupils and teachers seemed genuinely enthusiastic at our arrival as it was the first time a group of European tourists had visited their school unannounced. Unlike British schools, there is limited access to secondary education.
After a wonderful afternoon with some fantastic children and teachers, we set off for a very late lunch in the south of the country, away from the tourist areas.
More seafood, chicken, salads and beer were on the menu.
On the way back to the hotel we

drove through Tanji fishing village just as the fisherman returned with the day's catch and in time for sunset.
7pm: Back to the Sheraton to unwind before hitting the clubs with some friends.
Tuesday
11am: Skipped breakfast in a favour of Serekunda market in a desperate bid to get some last-minute crafts, arts, jewellery, fabrics, spices and groundnuts.
1.30pm: All packed and very sad to be leaving the Smiling Coast, we head for Banjul Airport to check-in for our Gatwick bound plane.
10.30pm: Arrive back in England. Very cold.



Sailing: Cruise on the River Nile

MOTOR sports travel specialist, Grandstand Motor Sports, has a range of holidays based on 2008's events. Watch the Daytona 500, on Sunday, February 17, in Florida; or be at the first race of Formula 1 Grand Prix 2008 season, on March 16, in Australia. Details: 0845 375 0300, www.grandstandmotorsports.co.uk

SKI in Italian Dolomites, at Val di Fassa. Prices from £299pp (save £120pp), from January 5. Includes flights from Gatwick, Bristol or Manchester to Verona, transfers and seven nights' half-board in three-star Hotel Sas Morin in Pozza di Fassa. Details: 0871 231 2256; or see website at www.crystalski.co.uk

CLASSIC Nile Cruise, departing January 14 or 21, from £399pp (saving of £140pp), leaving from Gatwick, with Monarch Plus, the seven-night five-star cruise includes flights, full board and transfers. Excursions can also

be booked. Details: 0800 988 5843; or see website at www.theclassictraveller.co.uk

SKI trip to Kirchdorf in Austria costs from £359pp (save £150), from January 5. Includes flights from Gatwick to Salzburg (flights also from Birmingham), transfers, seven nights' half-board in Mountain High Sports Pension, lift pass, ski equipment, tuition. Details: 0870 606 1470; www.thomsonski.co.uk

STAY at the four-star Atlante Garden Hotel in Rome, near the Vatican City. Rooms are decorated with marble fittings and mirrors. From £84 per room per night. Details: www.hotels.co.uk