

Luxurious setting that will put a smile

Kevin Walker takes a gamble on a holiday in the Gambia that pays off with the sights, smells and smiles of Africa, which makes his first trip such a memorable experience



Market day in The Gambia.

ANYONE sailing along the 50 miles of Atlantic coastline that is Gambia could be forgiven for rechecking their compass and thinking they were severely off course after seeing the Moroccan inspired architecture of Coco Ocean Resort & Spa.

Always an avid fan of the Caribbean, I had reset my compass and headed for the Gambia arriving at Coco Ocean Resort, which rose from nothing and incongruously sits proud on the West African shores.

Built in true Moorish style by the Moroccan owner, Farid, with the utmost attention to detail, it is now regarded the most luxurious hotel in the Gambia.

All set within five acres of lush jasmine-scented gardens which face the thundering Atlantic Ocean, it's a resort that never feels crowded and has been the discreet choice of royalty, presidents and celebrities since it opened in 2008.

The peaceful spa set behind blue glass overlooks the ocean and the natural sound of crashing waves waft through the tranquil building along with the scent of relaxing aromatic oils.

Here you can experience spa treatments, which range from a simple foot massage to a traditional Hammam massage - which is the Moroccan version of a Turkish Bath - relaxing and cleansing your body with a vigorous body scrub using traditional black soap and of course, plenty of steam.

A typical day in the life of Coco Ocean could easily start with a cool swim in any of the resort's three fantastic blue shimmering infinity pools, followed by breakfast, served under giant green parasols that filter and protect guests from the early morning sun, on a large multi-level black and white tiled courtyard amid-soothing fountains,

Attentive waiters busily attend to tables covered in crisp white tablecloths, first greeting you with a large basket of assorted freshly baked pastries, and smile to match, followed by fruit juices and an incredible double-page breakfast menu which includes bite-sized banana pancakes dusted in chocolate to traditional Gambian dishes.

The most memorable of the



Reception at the Coco Ocean Resort.

waiters was Ousman, who remembered everyone's name and seemed to be constantly suppressing a fit of the giggles that quickly turned to uncontrollable delightful laughter as he took my order.

Get used to it, because everyone smiles in the Gambia. Catch someone's eye and it will bring a smile and an instinctive wave from young and old.

Tempting though it is, it would be a crime to stay within Coco Ocean resort and never step out to see life in the Gambia, as a trip to the local market later proved.

Leaving the air-conditioned comfort of our bus, driven by 'Mr B' another constant smile, I ventured into a throng of colourful traders, where vibrant colour and noise immediately attacked the senses.

Graceful women walk the dusty catwalk of the main street with impossible objects balanced centrally on their heads and tiny babies strapped to their backs.

'Burberry' flip-flops lie alongside exotic vegetables and pots and pans, everything is for sale here. However, don't look for a price tag; it's all about what you're prepared to pay. I discovered that rule one of haggling is - halve it, then for good measure take away your shoe size.

But be realistic, time is not a valuable commodity here and you could find yourself spending an hour trying to save a pound.

It's good fun and I found

by injecting humour into the equation it had a disarming effect on my opponent.

My trip to the market was the equivalent of jumping into Gambian culture feet-first. That done, the smiling Mr 'B' set a course for Makasutu Cultural Forest just 45 minutes away by road.

A 1,000-acre conservation area teeming with wildlife, run by Lawrence Williams the dedicated English owner who is passionate about his surroundings which started out as a dream of building of a small retreat for backpackers, was realized in 1992 following the purchase of just four acres of forest.

Since then thousands of trees have been planted and 70 wells have been dug for the benefit of the surrounding population and vegetation. Lawrence runs the Mandina Lodges that sit within Makasutu Cultural Forest where four floating lodges and one house on stilts straddle a sleepy tributary of the main River Gambia.

Reached by elevated walkways or a traditional dug out canoe, each lodge features a four-poster carved wooden bed adorned with crisp white cotton sheets. The eco-friendly bathroom has state of the art composting toilets and solar heated water.

In addition, there are three jungle lodges that are set back from the water, each of which has its own roof terrace with views across the mangroves and jungle.

There's no TV here - evening entertainment is good conversation and music around the huge campfire after traditional dinner prepared by the resident chef.

Lawrence is also a driving force for an exciting street-art project called Wide Open Walls, www.wideopenwalls.co.za, which has brought together acclaimed street artists from across the globe. They bring with them the application of creative street-art images decorating villages as part of the Ballabu Conservation Project, which raise funds through the publication of a book and sales of photographs of the original art. Book a week here and you may just run into British street-artist Banksy.

A catamaran journey to the north bank of the River Gambia

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ST TRAVEL FACTS

● Kevin Walker travelled to Gambia courtesy of The Gambia Experience.

For details of all the hotels mentioned contact the Gambia Experience who have been operating for almost 25 years and fly to The Gambia all-year-round.

● Their trusted Gambian reps, who unsurprisingly provide clients with a wealth of local information and insight into their country, will quickly become more like family friends.

● Prices for a seven night holiday

staying at the exclusive Coco Ocean Hotel start from £999 per person, based on two sharing a junior suite with air conditioning on bed & breakfast.

● Luxury boutique hotel, Ngala Lodge, costs from £899 per person, based on two sharing a standard suite with air conditioning on bed & breakfast.

These prices are inclusive of flights, hotel transfers and airport taxes. Room upgrades and Premium Class flight upgrades are also available Three night add-on stays for the ultimate

two-centre holiday can be arranged. A three night stay at the Mandina Lodges will cost from £199 per person on a half-board basis. Prices for a three night stay at Sitanunku Lodge will cost from £249 per person (half board).

Note the above properties are all exclusive through The Gambia Experience and are therefore not available through any other UK tour operator.

● Prices are based on selected departures from Gatwick in April. Visit www.gambia.co.uk or call 0845 330 4567 for details.

on your face

took me to Sitanunku Lodge. During the crossing our boat was teased by a group of inquisitive dolphins that swam under our hull and criss-crossed our bows breaking the waters with grace and speed just a few feet away until they got bored with our whoops of joy and headed off to open sea. A breathtaking sight that was all too quick for my camera.

Perched on high ground this resort offers recently completed hideaway lodges painted in earthy African colours.

There is a bar, restaurant and plunge pool just big enough to get to know the other guests quite well, plus, since my visit, a large fresh water pool has been added, both have fabulous views across the river which can be explored by canoe in the safe waters. A short walk takes you to the other side of this Cay and commands a spectacular sea view.

All rooms have electricity and modern bathroom facilities, at dusk the path leading down to the restaurant is illuminated by lanterns, the perfect, romantic getaway.

An alternative option is Ngala Lodge an intimate boutique-style hotel set high on cliffs overlooking the sea.

Situated in a former ambassador's residence near the British High Commission in

Bakau/Fakara, this hotel is popular with couples.

Lush tropical gardens provide privacy with paths that lead down to an intimate sheltered beach and decking area. There is also a swimming pool.

The Atlantic Suites are stunning, each has its own private jacuzzi on the balcony or terrace, all rooms face the ocean and air-conditioned with fans and mosquito nets.

A fabulous sunset is guaranteed every evening seen from the restaurant which sits under a multi-coloured awning similar to a circus big top.

For a completely urban Gambian experience a stay at the boutique Omakan hotel in Sukata is a must, set within a friendly village community four kilometres from the coast, the Belgian owner will cater for all your needs.

He has immersed himself into African culture and the hotel is full of genuine African art which is all for sale. Hammocks and loungers surround the swimming pool set in lush gardens.

On my last day during breakfast, I finally discovered the source of Ousman's suppressed laughter. He had discovered what I paid for my 'Burberry' flip-flops.

The sights, smells and humour of Africa are what make the Gambia such a memorable experience.



Floating rooms at Mandia Lodge.

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