

# African paradise

Beach bliss just a few hours from the UK – the Gambia is a must-visit



The moment I stepped out of the airport and was met by a blast of warm air and the huge grin of our minibus driver, I knew I'd arrived in the Gambia – they don't call it Africa's smiling coast for nothing. Leaving the hustle and bustle of the airport and the dusty streets of the capital, Banjul, we soon arrived at what can only be described as an oasis of cool, calm paradise at the Coco Ocean Resort and Spa. It sits right on the Atlantic coast with stunning views of the ocean, right next to the Bijilo Forest Park Nature Reserve.

The tropical gardens are full of papaya, banana and coconut trees, as well as the majestic baobab tree, with its thick trunk and hanging fruit. Many of the fruits and vegetables grown in the grounds are served in the hotel's three restaurants, which provide a selection of fusion dishes and traditional local food such as barracuda fish, mangoes, star fruit and peanuts. The restaurants overlook the ocean so you can watch the sun go down in some of the most amazing sunsets that I've ever seen.

While the white sand beaches, sunshine and tropical plants suggest a far-flung country such as Thailand or the Caribbean, the Gambia is less than six hours away from the UK. The official language is English so communication is easy, and with no time difference, it makes for a quick and easy break to get away from it all. What's more, the Gambian dry season is during the winter,

making it a perfect winter escape from the UK's dreary weather.

All of the hotel's architecture has a Moorish influence, with high domed ceilings and cool tiled floors, and this theme continues in the spa, where I was treated to an invigorating traditional Moroccan hammam, the only one in the country. This involved me sitting in a hot steam room while a therapist rubbed and scrubbed me until my skin was soft and glowing. Other treatments included body massages using natural soaps and scrubs, facials, and a thalassotherapy pool, sauna and plunge pool.

On the next day I went on a day-long boat trip up the slow and winding River Gambia, which bisects the country. The country is renowned for its incredible collection of wildlife – I witnessed great white herons launching from the riverbanks – and bird-watching tours are extremely popular here with good reason. I visited a traditional Gambian village, where local women shuck river oysters to sell in the nearby markets. The country is one of Africa's smallest, but it has a rich history. Further down river is Fort James Island. This was a strategic defence outpost for slave traders during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Gambia was one of the main sources for the Atlantic slave trade.

On my final day, I had a relaxing facial to cleanse and tone my skin, and then settled down for a foot massage, while propped up on a lounge that looked

**Paradise found, from top: a typical palm-fringed Gambian beach; writer Hannah chills in the spa; her luxurious room at the Coco Ocean**

out to the ocean, sipping refreshing herbal tea – absolute bliss. When it was time to leave, I got to the airport in just over 30 minutes and was back in the UK by the evening. That's the beauty of the Gambia. Its size and distance means you can get sun, beaches and spa in half the time it takes to get to other luxury spa destinations. The Coco Ocean Resort was so welcoming and friendly, with everything you could need at your fingertips. It's no surprise that, much like the local people, the whole experience left me with a big smile on my face.

## Destination details

● Seven nights bed and breakfast at Coco Ocean Resort & Spa with The Gambia Experience start from £975 per person, including return flights from Gatwick, taxes and transfers. Phone 0845

330 4567 or visit [www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk) for more information.

● Plan day trips with a copy of *The Gambia* (Bradt, £13.99) by Craig Emms, Linda Barnett and Richard Human.