



Bird beginners

Its windswept beaches and picture book pretty cottages make the Danish island of Fanø a year-round destination. But when the chill in the air really makes it spectacular for migrating birds, as **EMILY DENNIS** found out.

We arrived at the port of Harwich about to embark on a three night mini cruise on DFDS Seaways Wonderful Bird Migration tour visiting the island of Fanø in Denmark.

Birds come to Fanø in their millions. It is here that ducks, geese and waders come on migration between the Arctic and West Africa, while others overwinter here. More than 10 million birds stop over. For many, it is the most important resting and wintering ground in Europe.

My partner and I had never been on a birdwatching holiday before and to say we were novices was something of an understatement. We had remembered a pair of binoculars, but you can imagine our faces when we met our fellow group members, some of whom were armed with powerful telescopes and sophisticated camera equipment. But we needn't have worried. Despite our lack of bird knowledge, we were immediately taken under the wing of our fellow tour members and knowledgeable guides Ian Rowlands and Dylan Walker of Planet Whale's tourism arm School of Whales.

Ian was keen to stress that the tour was suitable for everyone whether seasoned birdwatchers or complete novices like us. And over the three-night trip he and our friendly fellow birders went to great lengths to help us pick out all the

highlights, often lending us their telescopes and binoculars.

After boarding the Dana Sirena cruise ferry, which operates between Harwich and Esbjerg, we made our way to our Sirena Class 2 berth cabin, which was pleasantly spacious with a separate toilet and shower room.

We had dinner in the Seven Seas buffet restaurant and the food was really superb. DFDS Seaways is very proud of its cuisine and their chefs prepare all dishes fresh each day.

Next morning we made our way onto the deck to be greeted by a flurry of excitement from other members of the group. A short-eared owl had been spotted flying around the boat and everyone had seen it apart from us because we had been too busy enjoying our breakfast. We were worried this might set the tone for the whole trip – always just missing out on that glimpse of an exciting bird. But we need not have worried because the bird life on Fanø is spectacular.

Just a 10 minute ferry ride from Esbjerg this picturesque island has so much to offer. It is popular with holidaymakers from the mainland and the sand dunes are scattered with what the Danes call summer houses: cottages that they own as second homes, or rent for the summer.

Many of these fairytale-esque cottages crouch so deep between the grassy hillocks that you could think they were hobbit homes in some ethereal kingdom.

Our first stop is the quayside at Nordby, the main town on the island, where we see an osprey catching a fish.

It was here that we met our local guide Kim Fischer who has an encyclopedic knowledge of the local birdlife. Kim took us to his home where we all tried - some with more success than others - to catch a glimpse of a yellow-browed warbler roosting in a tree. Then we went for a walk to the coast where we saw large flocks of brent and barnacle geese which had travelled from Arctic Russia to winter in Denmark.

Fanø's beaches are like spun sugar, almost white, powdery to touch, and covered in beautiful shells. A walk along the shoreline brought the highlight as we saw three shore larks skimming across the waves.

We immensely enjoyed our trip and the expert guides and friendly company we would definitely go again.



Three the magic

If you are looking for some hot African sunshine where the welcome is as warm as the weather then how about considering three very different countries on and off the West Coast of Africa - Cape Verde, Senegal or The Gambia. **DEREK JAMES** reports.

Where to go for a winter holiday? You may be tired of the Canaries where the weather can be dodgy. You may think the Caribbean too expensive or the Far East too far.

And other, closer to home, winter resorts such as parts of Egypt and Tunisia report low bookings for obvious reasons.

But due south - roughly six hours flying time away - there are three fascinating countries with sweeping and stunning beaches waiting to be explored.

Each one has so much to offer. Each one is very different with its own rich history and culture. Each one will give you a good value holiday with a difference.

One was a former Portuguese colony, the other French and the third British.

Cape Verde

Let's start with the former Portuguese islands of Cape Verde. There was talk a few years of transforming these island just off the coast of West Africa into the next Canaries - thank goodness that hasn't happened.

This collection of ten islands each have their own appeal with varied landscapes, an eclectic cultural heritage and a variety of activities to suit all.

The islands are an ideal winter sun destination and a great place to escape the crowds.

The leading tour operator is The Cape Verde Experience and commercial manager Paul Kenny says the flight is relatively short and the weather remains consistent throughout the year

- between 24 and 29degC.

Beyond the beaches the islands offer great diversity in their landscapes and culture and if you are visiting it makes sense to opt for a twin-centre holiday or an island-hopping itinerary which can be tailor-made in any combination.

Bookings to Cape Verde are stronger this winter, mainly due to the increase in flights from the UK and an improvement to the infrastructure and accommodation - namely the opening of the Melia Tortuga Beach & Sea resort on sale and improvements to a number of other properties.

The islands all offer something different - from beautiful clean beaches to soaring mountain landscapes and lush green valleys - go and see for yourself.

Senegal

The French love their former colony Senegal but why should they have it to themselves. This is a great country to visit - offering so much.

The UK's destination specialist, The Senegal Experience, offers a wide range of accommodation, with a select choice of luxury hotels and properties.

The Gambia's larger French neighbour is a fantastic country to visit with its superb climate, great beaches and thriving culture plus, its three mighty rivers and wonderfully intricate coastal lagoons and waterways support a great wealth of wildlife including numerous bird species and mammals.

There's also opportunity for visitors to spot larger animals such as rhino, giraffe and zebra within its protected wildlife reserves.

Where to stay?

One place I can recommend is the 5* Lamantin Beach Hotel located in the beach resort of Saly, about 80kms south of bustling Dakar.

This impressive hotel re-opened just before Christmas following a major refurbishment and now offers guests a wider choice of rooms along with a new beach club providing a la carte dining overlooking the sea.

Get Packing

Emily Dennis travelled with DFDS (0871 5229976, dfds.co.uk) on the MS Dana Sirena which operates three or four times a week from Harwich to Esbjerg - the only ferry route from the UK to Scandinavia. Departs Harwich at 5.45pm (5.15pm on Sundays) arriving in Esbjerg 1pm the following day. The next available dates for the three night Wonderful Bird Migration are May 6 and October 7 and 14. Three nights cost from £129pp based on two sharing a standard cabin.



Travel Notes
with Derek James



● It is 35 years since Elvis Presley died at the age of just 42 but his memory and his music lives on. Tour operator Premier Holidays has launched a special package five-day package to Memphis which costs from £879pp. Visitors to his Graceland home can now enjoy the ultimate rock 'n' roll experience at the new Lisa Marie Presley - Elvis... Through His Daughter's Eyes - display. The exhibit, included in the Graceland VIP Tour features 200 Elvis items assembled by Lisa Marie and the Graceland archives team and looks at what life was like growing up with Elvis as a father. Guests can also explore Sun Studio - where Elvis, Johnnie Cash and BB King cut their first records. Beale Street is also a top tourist attraction, offering a great selection of bars, shops and restaurants to enjoy. The offer includes five nights at the Elvis Presley's Heartbreak Hotel, opposite Graceland, and return flights from London during March. To find out more visit www.premierholidays.co.uk or call 08444 937 524.

● Ryanair has announced a new route from Stansted to Warsaw Modlin from July 16. The airline now operates more than 110 routes from the airport. Prices to Warsaw will start from £26.99. More details and bookings on www.ryanair.com

● How about a holiday in Spain with a difference - Thomas Cook Sport is offering three night packages to the Spanish Grand Prix from £806pp which includes flights, accommodation and tickets. The deal includes three nights b&b at the 3* Soho Hotel in Barcelona, admission tickets, return flights along with transfers to the hotel and to the track. Not forgetting ear plugs! The flight leaves on May 11 - visit www.thomascooksport.com or call 0844 800 9900.

● Join Voyages of Discovery's mv Discovery for a 17-day Tales of India and Arabia cruise from £999pp. Leaving on March 19 the price includes return flights from London, transfers and full board on the voyage departing from Mumbai and calling at various ports in Oman, Jordan and Egypt. It works out at £59pp per day. For more information call 0844 822 0820 or visit www.voyagesofdiscovery.co.uk



● Norwich-based over 55s specialist Grand UK Holidays has a range of great offers on UK coach tours leaving over the coming weeks. Prices start from £99 for the "Heart of Wales Supersaver" which is a four-day coach touring holiday based in Llandrindod Wells, leaving on March 16. It includes half-board accommodation and two excursions. There are other good vales deals on holidays to Bournemouth, Blackpool (pictured) and the Lakes. Some are singles specials. The company offers 24 pick-up points across Norfolk. To check the latest on deals from Grand UK Holidays, see www.grandukholidays.com/new-offers or call Norwich (01603) 619933.

number for winter sun

With its own private beach and adjacent marina, the Lamantin provides a real "wow" factor.

The Gambia

One of the best value winter warmers is the former British colony The Gambia, the smallest country on the continent with one of the biggest hearts.

Board the plane to Banjul and the chances are you will be sitting next to "repeaters" - people who travel to this country every year because they love everything about it - the people, the culture, the way of life.

Some people go for the sun, others for the bird life, some for the fishing at sea or on the rivers and there are those involved in various charity projects.

Others have bought homes in the country. It is still the best value winter sunshine holiday around.

In recent years some excellent smaller, upmarket yet affordable "boutique" hotels have been built away from the coastal strips.

You tend to find many people tend to go back to the same place to stay because the staff have become friends. It is that kind of country.

And you never know who you will bump into - on my last visit in January I met Teresa Elmassy who runs a busy restaurant and bar

with her husband called Yasmina's the corner of the main road leading into the Senegambia "strip." In a previous life she was Teresa Slater, formerly of North Walsham and then Lawson Road in Norwich, who worked at Mann Egerton, Sedgwick's and the Co-op before heading off to work in Gambia.

And it was there that she met Roberto, fell in love, settled down to get married, raise a family and run a thriving business.

I'll tell you more about Teresa in the Evening News soon but if you are visiting the country then pop in and say hello.

So be warned. Visiting these countries can change your life. You may not want to come home.

Get Packing

● The Cape Verde Experience (0845 3302071, capeverde.co.uk) offers a wide variety of holidays with flight options to Sal and to Boa Vista from Gatwick.

The company is offering seven night packages at the 4* Hotel Morabeza on Sal (capeverde.co.uk/morabeza), a popular family-run hotel with good facilities on the edge of Santa Maria's white sandy beach from £899pp travelling in May.

● The Senegal Experience (0845 3388706, senegal.co.uk) is offering half board packages including flights and transfers from £1,199pp for holidays in March. This price is based on two sharing a garden room at the Lamantin Beach and return flights to Dakar via Brussels from Heathrow. Call for more details of holidays to Senegal, including twin centre options combining a stay in the Gambia, plus tailor made tours and Rivers of West Africa cruise and stay opportunities.

● The Gambia Experience (0845 3302087, gambia.co.uk) has a complete range of places to stay from basic 2* hotels offering a real taste of Africa to intimate 5* luxury hotspots and from family fun hotels to stunning river lodges.

If you want to travel in March here are two offers at beachfront hotels. A week at the 3* Kombo Beach costs from £399pp based on two sharing a standard air conditioned room on b&b. A week at the 4* Sheraton Gambia Hotel, all-inclusive, from £699 based on two sharing a standard Baobab room with air con. These budget prices include Gatwick flights with a reduced allowance of 15 kilo and does not include airport transfers. A supplement of £15pp applies for transfers and £25pp for an increased 5 kilo luggage allowance.

Travel Tip: Airport Comfort

It is the perfect, peaceful start to a holiday. Airports are busy, bustling places but there are quiet corners where you can relax - the exclusive airport lounges are not just for those travelling first class. You have probably noticed people popping in and out of them as you queue for an overpriced soggy roll and coffee. No.1 offers airport lounges at Stansted, Gatwick North and South and Heathrow Terminal 3 which are great places to visit where you can recharge your batteries before boarding. Pay the entrance fee - it is cheaper to

book in advance - and food and drink plus other facilities are all there for you. Spa services and showers at some do cost extra. There are two lounges at Stansted, one serving all international gates (except Ryanair) and the other serving Ryanair flights. They are open from 4am to 9pm and cost £15pp for up to three hours (children £750). The lounges are Gatwick North and South cost £20 (children £10) if booked in advance and the flagship lounge at Heathrow is £30 (children £15).

● For more details and to book up visit www.no1traveller.com or you just turn up when you get to the airport.

Travel Tip: Getting To The Airport

The easiest way to get to the airport - Stansted, Heathrow and Gatwick - from Norwich and other Norfolk towns is by National Express (08717 818181, nationalexpress.com) coach which travel 24 hours a day. They run an efficient and convenient service in and out of Norwich and the coaches stop at Thickthorn, Wymondham, Attleborough and Thetford throughout the night and day.