



# YOUR **EXPERIENCE** magazine

THE GAMBIA, SENEGAL & THE ISLANDS OF CAPE VERDE

WINTER 2014

**A WEEKEND  
IN THE GAMBIA**  
without the kids

**ADOPTING A  
HATCHLING**  
in Cape Verde

**EARN £100 VOUCHER**  
for your experiences

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Earn £100 for your travel experiences

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# contributors



**Katrine Carstens**  
Danish writer, Katrine is a freelance journalist and blogger particularly interested in sustainable and responsible tourism. She travelled to The Gambia for the first time in April.



**Polly Evans**  
has worked in our marketing department for 20 years. In November she spent a long weekend at Ngala Lodge, The Gambia to celebrate her 40th birthday.



**Nick Elvin**  
is a London-based copywriter and journalist who writes about destinations throughout the world, and made his first visit to The Gambia in late 2012.



**Paul Kenny**  
is our Commercial Manager, he's worked for the company for 10 years and in this edition writes about returning to Cape Verde and adopting a turtle hatchling.

*front cover and this page:  
Flora and Fauna and  
Kotu Creek, The Gambia  
by Tony Steele on flickr*



# What's new?

## Book winter 2014-15 now at this year's prices

Next winter's holidays to The Gambia are now on sale and if you book by the end of January 2014 you can secure your 2014-15 holiday at this year's prices or less. We've discounted many of our 2 & 3 grade hotels by £50pp meaning holidays start from just £499pp. Plus we'll pass on any savings or offers announced at our brochure launch in June. However, if the prices increase, we won't pass on the increase. It's a win, win situation.

## Charity flight giveaway

In October 2013 we donated £10,000 worth of flight seats (excluding taxes) to charitable projects operating in The Gambia. This is in addition to the £25,000 worth of flights and £25,000 of funds given to projects during the previous winter season to celebrate our 25th anniversary. We continue to support charitable projects, if you would like to find out more about what we do and how you can get involved, visit [Gambia.co.uk/ST](http://Gambia.co.uk/ST)

## Summer holidays

The Gambia is best known as a winter sun destination but we continue to fly all year round. In fact in May and June the weather is very similar to the winter and the beaches and resorts are quiet. This year we will fly each Friday from May to October from Gatwick – to find out more visit [Gambia.co.uk/Summer](http://Gambia.co.uk/Summer)



## Help raise funds for School Development Fund

If you're travelling and need to purchase malaria tablets you can help raise money for the School Development Fund by ordering online with Lloyds Pharmacy. Since April 2013 more than £360 has been raised by the service – adding towards our target of £5,000.

To find out more about the work done by the Fund and how you can help or order the tablets visit [SchoolDevelopmentFund.org](http://SchoolDevelopmentFund.org)

## New Salinas Sea in Cape Verde

Opened in October 2013, the Salinas Sea resort on Sal is a contemporary beachfront hotel which offers all-inclusive holidays. Situated just 400 metres from the centre of Santa Maria, this is a great choice for those who want the peace of mind of an all-inclusive holiday with the possibility of exploring the local area. To find out more visit [CapeVerde.co.uk/Salinas](http://CapeVerde.co.uk/Salinas)

## Cape Verde named one of 'Best Trips 2014'

National Geographic Traveler has included Cape Verde in its list of the best trips of 2014 and highlighted the Spinguera Eco Lodge as the place to stay. To find out more visit [CapeVerde.co.uk/Spinguera](http://CapeVerde.co.uk/Spinguera)

*Spinguera Eco Lodge*





# Magical and mellow with a message

by Katrine Carstens

Mandina Lodges

Before going to Gambia I knew little about this petite country in West Africa. When I learnt how far along the path to responsible tourism it has come I was surprised and a little embarrassed that I didn't know more. That was about to change though.

I stayed at two ethically run resorts on my trip: Mandina Lodges and Sandele Eco-Retreat. The interests of local communities and the environment are at the heart of both places, yet the feel and the way they are run is quite different. Mandina Lodges effortlessly combine off the beaten track with luxury – definitely no mean feat. Set in Makasutu, a 1700 acre protected area created by the owners, the resort rests on the banks of a tributary to the great River Gambia amongst mangroves

bursting with birdlife. Here the concepts of conservation and gorgeous accommodation compliment rather than exclude each other.

“It really feels like  
you have been plunged  
into paradise...”

Despite being only 30 minutes' drive from the airport, you soon feel like you're off on an adventure. My Indiana Jones mood grew as we turned off the main road, plunged into the forest and soon spotted a troop of baboons in the bush against the setting sun.

On arrival we were assigned our own personal guide, the funny and lively Lamin, so our itinerary was

entirely up to us. At first this felt a little overwhelming but once we got our heads around the options we appreciated the freedom this offered us. The high staff-to-visitor ratio means that you are completely looked after at all times and also guarantees good employment for local people: a win-win situation. The tea and coffee delivered to your lodge each morning is also a nice touch. Don't expect espresso though – out in the semi-wild instant coffee is what goes.

We stayed in a floating lodge with a quaint little jetty leading to a gazebo area where we could sit and watch the world glide by. We soon got used to the local women in their dugout canoes, paddling amongst the mangroves and harvesting oysters with



their machetes. This quickly became a soothing part of the surrounding soundscape.

The gentle undulation of the waves sent me straight to sleep every night (and into the occasional nap!) as our little house rose and fell with the tide. The al fresco bathroom felt exciting and unusual and had a very efficient composting toilet that shouldn't put off even those unaccustomed to non-flushing toilets. It really wasn't offensive at all and trust me, I've tried out my fair share of alternative toilets! The restaurant and pool area are set in stunning gardens with a symphony of birdsong to accompany the idyllic scene. It really feels like you have been plunged into paradise. Having a swim and relaxing on one of the

comfortable double sunbeds is pure bliss. Add to that sipping the local beer, Jul Brew, with its turquoise Kingfisher motif whilst surrounded by the real birds and it doesn't get much better.

Every afternoon the chef found us to discuss our choices for dinner – usually there were 2-3 options in each category of a three-course meal. A word of warning to your waistline: expect to expand. The food is simply too delicious to pass up and I certainly put on a pound or two. The ingredients are also locally sourced where possible to help the local economy and minimise food miles. Unless too tired after the day's activities, guests naturally gravitate towards the fire pit after dinner. Like most of the buildings and furniture at

Mandina, the cast-iron, throne-like chairs around the fire are made on-site and make you feel rather majestic as stories are enthusiastically swapped and events of the day compared. If you're going to Gambia, Mandina Lodges really are a must if you're interested in responsible tourism and conservation and want to experience it in luxury.

*Extract from one of a selection of Gambia features written by Katrine Carstens as published on her blog [SusDane.com](http://SusDane.com)*



*The penthouse's roof terrace*

# A wonderful child-free weekend

by Polly Evans

When my husband asked me how I would like to celebrate my 40th birthday, I replied (perhaps a little too quickly) "A weekend without the kids!"

Most of our friends thought we were mad going to The Gambia for a weekend, but when you explain the flight is only 6 hours, there's no time difference and the weather in November is around 30-degrees, a quick Friday to Tuesday visit starts to look like an appealing prospect. Especially when you say those magical words..."The children are staying with their grandparents".

I can't actually remember how many times I've been to The Gambia, I lost count after around 25, but the last time my husband and I were on holiday there was in 2008, before children. As it was a special occasion we decided to stay at one of the deluxe properties, Ngala Lodge which has a no child policy – perfect! I have visited Ngala Lodge many times before: eaten lunch with journalists

there; enjoyed dinner with many groups of travel agents; held a camera flash for our brochure photographer while he took endless photos of all the suites; but never actually stayed there. It turned out to be a great decision. Ngala is small but beautifully formed - the pool, gardens and beach decking are an exquisite oasis of relaxation. We were staying in the penthouse, a 3-storey suite with its own delightful roof terrace - a lovely place for an early evening drink before heading to the restaurant... my new favourite restaurant! Succulent steaks, fresh prawns, homemade pasta, sauces bursting with flavour - the chef Jonathon Groves has created a wonderful menu and I would highly recommend an evening here if you like excellent food and great service in a low-key, chilled environment.

The staff at Ngala are one of its prime assets, attentive and friendly but never intrusive, one of our fellow guests told me there was 60 of them, and he knew all their names!

“Ngala is small but beautifully formed.”

As well as being my 40th birthday, 2013 also marked 20 years of working for The Gambia Experience. The country has changed so much over the last 20 years, even within the last 5 years there are many more buildings where fields once were; the Kololi strip has filled up and now spills out onto the main highway in both directions. But some things stay the same - the warm welcome from the Gambian people, the battered old taxis, tourists catching the very last rays of sun at Banjul airport, the traffic lights not working again!

The weather was rather cloudy (very unlike the usual November weather) but it didn't spoil our break, we returned to the UK having caught up with old friends, feeling well fed, spoilt and relaxed to find two happy children and four exhausted grandparents. Actually, being 40 isn't so bad - friends have told me turning 41 is worse... maybe another weekend in The Gambia will help.





# The Smiling Coast lives up to its name

by Nick Elvin

Upon our arrival in The Gambia, we were “warned” that just about everyone there would smile at us. But, we were assured, this was not due to some national outbreak of madness, rather a genuine friendliness that has earned the country the nickname of the Smiling Coast.

As we drove through the city of Brikama on our first excursion, my group discovered that this was no exaggeration. People we passed smiled and waved at us; grinning children sprinted from back yards and shouted “hello”. As a first-time visitor to The Gambia, I found this attention something of a pleasant shock.

With its open sides, our converted army truck gave a grandstand view of daily life in this tiny West African nation. People were out buying their daily groceries, or gathered in groups under trees to listen to stories, news and public information. The call to prayer emanated from mosques in side alleys. Roadside signs advertised the latest mobile phone deals, and wished the President happy birthday. Watermelon stalls were piled high with green spheres, their sellers slouched under parasols in the 31-degree heat.

We were heading away from The Gambia’s coastal tourist area to its less developed interior. Turning off one

of the country’s few metalled roads, we followed a dirt track through the elephant grass, passing baobab, mango and cashew trees, and massive termite mounds. We had to duck each time our vehicle smashed against the surrounding foliage, then brush bits of twigs, leaves and insects from ourselves. The scent of wild mint wafted across the African bush.

Our destination was the Makasutu Culture Forest, a 1,000-acre conservation area located by a tidal creek off the Gambia River. The founder and owner of Makasutu, Lawrence Williams, has been instrumental in bringing art to some

of the area's villages, through a project called Wide Open Walls. At Kubuneh we saw how the houses are used as canvases, and local and international street artists have graffitied walls with elephants, frogs, colonial soldiers, children and other subjects. I felt like some future Indiana Jones, venturing through the bush to look for a lost Banksy.

Our base in The Gambia was Kombo Beach, a well-run, comfortable and friendly hotel in the resort of Kotu. It comes alive at night with drumming and dance performances by the pool. With a cooling Atlantic breeze and a view of the moonlight reflecting off the white surf, this is a pleasant spot for a cocktail. It's also convenient for the bars and restaurants of Kotu and the larger resort of Kololi.

But if you're keen to get away from the resorts and see something of local life, The Gambia's size makes it an ideal place for taking day trips, for example to see how the work of charities has changed lives there. One organisation is the School Development Fund, set up by The Gambia Experience. It's a poor country, with limited government investment in education, so money the charity raises goes towards building, equipping and maintaining schools.

We paid a visit to the Mansa-Colley Bojang Nursery School in Jallanbang, a basic but modern building with a tin roof and birds flying in and out of the windows. We took with us pens, pencils, books and crayons for the pupils who, dressed in their green and white uniforms, seemed to be

enjoying the morning's lessons. One class even sang us a song. Later, when we left, all of the school's pupils were outside eating lunch, but each rushed over to shake our hands and say goodbye.

Afterwards we headed to the coast, to the promisingly-named Paradise Beach. Apart from some persistent yet good natured souvenir sellers, it seemed a deserved title; there's little in the way of development there. We crossed the fine, golden sand and dived into the warm, refreshing Atlantic, before tucking into a delicious lunch of Jollof rice, fish and vegetables in a nearby restaurant.

The truck then took us several miles along the beach to the fishing village of Tanji, where porters were bringing the catch ashore from long, narrow boats, balancing on their heads large tubs of tuna, mackerel, herring and barracuda. There were hundreds of people there, buying and selling, pulling boats up onto the sand, mending nets and smoking fish.

The vibrant colours of the boats and women's dresses, the sound of seagulls and raised voices, the warm breeze, and the strong odour of fish created an unforgettable feast for the senses.

And when, for a brief moment, I imagined how cold and grey a November afternoon it would be back home, the Smiling Coast allowed me yet another satisfied grin.





*The Kairaba gardens*



*David sponsors Kanny who lives at the children's village*

# Our Gambian Experience by David Stranack

The flight from Gatwick to Banjul is almost like a trip in the Tardis – given the extreme differences between your point of departure and your point of arrival. Particularly in November when we made our last trip – we lifted off from a cold, dank England and six hours later walked off the plane in cloudless skies and blazing sunshine.

Of course Banjul airport is also different from Gatwick in many other ways. It's there you get your first taste of Gambian life and culture. It's noisy, hot, crowded and apparently fairly disorganised, but with a bit of luck you'll get through immigration control and customs without too much hassle, and head off for your hotel.

Tourism has only really developed in the country in the last 30 years, but today there is a good range of available places to stay. Bear in mind though that quality, or lack of it, at the cheaper end of the accommodation market can come as a bit of a shock to us cosseted Europeans.

It took us a trip or two to find and fall in love with The Kairaba Hotel at Kololi. The guest rooms are scattered about its spacious and beautifully maintained grounds which run down to the sea. It is one of the best managed hotels I've ever stayed in, and the staff are wonderful. Even the gardeners will stop as you pass to wish you good morning and ask you how you are. And so, of course,

it inevitably has a large number of returning guests. Some of the reunions of regular visitors with favourite members of staff who they may not have seen for a year are positively touching.

*“It is one of the best managed hotels I've ever stayed in, and the staff are wonderful.”*

Another advantage of The Kairaba is that the Kololi Strip lies just outside its main gate. The Strip is a rather ramshackled collection of shops, restaurants and bars that has grown up in recent years to cater for the



burgeoning tourist trade. It's where many European holiday-makers get their first taste of the real Gambia and for newcomers it can be a bit daunting. The local restaurant owners will greet you, with menu, out in the street and try to persuade you that their establishment is the only one worth visiting. A bit different from England, but great fun once you get used to it.

But for my wife and I The Gambia is now more than just another holiday destination. Over the years we have become involved with local life. We sponsor Kanny, a delightful 10 year old orphan who lives in a children's village, and also pay for Gaston, who

is 13, to attend school. We always visit them and their families when we are in the country, and always get a great welcome.

Our advice to people contemplating a first trip to the country is – be a bit adventurous. The Gambia is essentially safe, and by 'scratching beneath the surface' of the tourist world that is presented to you, you will discover an amazing piece of Africa which is populated by delightful and friendly people.

### Discover more about The Gambia

To find out more visit:

**Gambia.co.uk**

or telephone

**0845 330 4567**

Read more at

**TheGambiaBlog.co.uk**





“ I've travelled in Senegal a number of times and I love the vastness of it compared to The Gambia - there's so much open space whilst the coastal resorts are much more established. There's also some fascinating historic sites such as Gorée Island, natural beauty in the Saloum Delta, and fascinating bird and wildlife in the nature reserves, all of which can be incorporated into one of our private tours. ”

**Alison Collins, Senegal product manager**

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CAPE VERDE

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[Flickr.com/groups/thecapeverdeexperience](https://www.flickr.com/groups/thecapeverdeexperience)





Paul with Jacquie from  
Turtle SOS Cabo Verde



# Adopting a hatchling

by Paul Kenny

I have been travelling to Cape Verde since 2007 and seen how the islands have evolved in that relatively short space of time. While I had heard what Turtle SOS Cabo Verde had been doing over that time and their efforts to protect and conserve turtles within the islands, it was not until last year that I got to meet Jacquie and see for myself the fantastic work that her team do.

Turtle SOS Cabo Verde is a non-profit association that protects and conserves loggerhead turtles throughout the islands. Founded in 2008 to combat the very real danger of extinction on Sal due to the hunting of females for their meat, the charity has just completed a sixth successful season releasing 18,317 baby turtles that would otherwise have been lost.

This year they have also seen evidence of a second species of turtle on the islands, the green turtle. In August a ranger discovered an unusual track whilst out on a routine morning patrol on the east coast of Sal. The nest was too close to the high water and in danger of being flooded so it was moved to the Turtle SOS hatchery. The eggs were much larger than loggerhead turtle eggs and there were also many more than in an average loggerhead nest. After much anticipation the nest hatched on 13th October and the green turtle hatchlings were released – the team are now waiting to discover if it is a one-off or whether Sal will become a green turtle nesting site.

The hatchery on the south of Sal island, is an open air education centre

and manned by a team of extremely informative and enthusiastic volunteer rangers who give up their time for the cause. They undertake daily patrols and keep watch overnight for any nests hatching. Each day during the hatching season, which runs from August to December, a bus runs from the hotels around 4pm offering tourists the chance to see a nest excavation. It's the best value excursion you will find and a really humbling experience to be literally feet away from seeing the first moments of an endangered species that will spend the majority of its life at sea.

During my latest visit in October I was just as enthralled as my first visit seeing the baby turtles emerge from their nest. After adopting one of the hatchlings for my children, which I ▶

aptly named after them Codilewcole, Jacquie was kind enough to invite me to a hatchling release which tourists are also able to participate in for a small fee (and if enough turtles have hatched). Rangers and around 10 tourists wait until darkness and head to Ponta Preta, a less developed area on the west of the island. Discarding your footwear, you head to the shoreline where the only sound you can hear is the crashing waves. This is where the

“It's the best value excursion you will find and a really humbling experience”

turtles that have hatched that day get their first taste of the Atlantic Ocean that will become their home. One tiny turtle in each hand, you let them free with their little flippers flapping like those on a wind-up toy. It really is an experience to savour as they head off into the darkness.

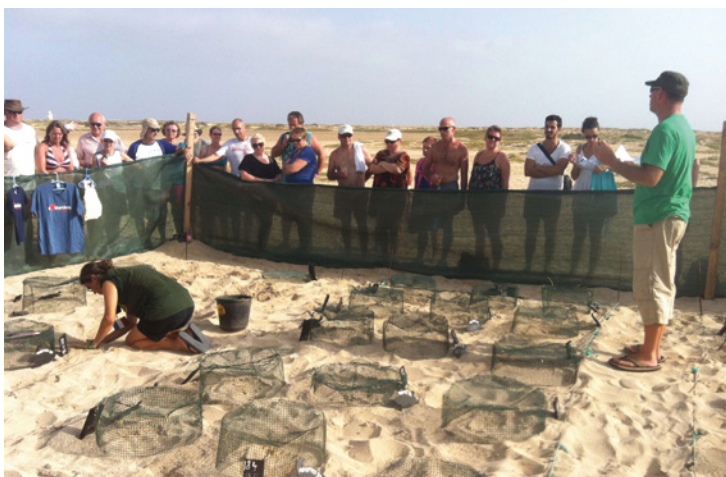
The extremely lucky ones that make it will return to that very same beach in Sal from where they were released in around 25 years. Maybe when I'm retired, myself and Codilewcole will be fortunate enough to meet again.



## Discover more about Cape Verde

To find out more or to order a brochure visit:

**CapeVerde.co.uk**  
or telephone **0845 330 2046**



# 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 [TheGambiaBlog.co.uk](http://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 around 500 words) to: Your Experience, Serenity Holidays, Atlantic House, 3600 Parkway, Solent Business Park, Fareham, Hampshire, PO15 7AN or email [Experience@SerenityHolidays.co.uk](mailto:Experience@SerenityHolidays.co.uk) If you have any photographs that you would like to share, please upload them to [flickr.com/groups](https://www.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.



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