



GLOBAL TRAVELLER

by Roger St Pierre

Vegas gambling on a shopper's paradise



Las Vegas is reinventing itself as a shopper's paradise. The recent opening of the Crystals shopping and entertainment district on Las Vegas Boulevard has brought even more luxury labels to the Las Vegas strip.

The 500,000sq ft development, located at CityCenter, showcases an array of luxury brands including Prada, Christian Dior, Tom Ford, Ermenegildo Zegna, Lanvin, and Versace. Louis Vuitton has opened its largest North American store there and Tiffany & Co features an exclusive range of jewellery. Eva Longoria Parker's restaurant, Beso, offers fine dining to complement the finest shopping.

For a strictly fashion-focused experience, the Fashion Show mall encompasses nearly two million square-feet and is the largest shopping venue on the Las Vegas strip.

Go to visitlasvegas.com or call 020 7367 0979.

Looking for bears

Niche cruise operator Hurtigruten (0844 4487601, hurtigruten.co.uk) is offering free flights for anyone who wants to get up close and personal with polar bears this summer.

This means savings of up to £750 per person on a holiday to Spitsbergen's Svalbard archipelago, further north than Siberia, Alaska and most of Greenland.

Free flights from London Heathrow are available on selected departures of the Kingdom of the Polar Bear itinerary in June, July and August. Prices are from £3,785 per person.

Cruise in comfort

Enjoy some great Caribbean views from your balcony stateroom, courtesy of a free upgrade from inside to balcony on a cruise holiday – sailing from New York to the Caribbean onboard the elegant Carnival Miracle (0845 351 0556, carnivalcruise.co.uk).

There's no experience more iconic than sailing past the Statue of Liberty, from New York and now you can combine the Big Apple with the heavenly Caribbean, visiting tiny Grand Turk in the Turks & Caicos islands; exclusive Half Moon Cay, an unspoiled private island, and Nassau, in the Bahamas.

EXOTIC The Gambia

Slice of life in a narrow sliver of a country

Roger St Pierre samples local cuisine and tries his hand at making his own yassi

Like Norway and Chile, The Gambia is a long, narrow country. Unlike them, it runs east to west, not north to south, and three of the former British colony's four sides, including the two longest, are land boundaries with Senegal.

A 350-mile long by, at its broadest, 50-miles wide wedge that almost cuts its far bigger neighbour in half, this tiny nation of around one and a half million souls occupies both banks of the mighty River Gambia.

The country's fourth boundary, with the open sea, boasts some of the very finest beaches in all of Africa's long Atlantic coast – which, together with lots of sunshine and high affordability, is why The Gambia is being touted as one of the fastest rising hip new destinations.

It's still essentially a dirt-poor country but the tourism infrastructure has long been in place and is rapidly improving.

Hotels are intimate and bijou. My own, the all-suite Ngala Lodge, sits in luxuriant gardens on a low bluff above

a sweeping bay of glorious, firm golden sands, washed by rolling surf that lulled me to sleep each evening.

As for Ngala's food, wow! Dutch-born chef Marco is right on the button using the freshest of ingredients – with an emphasis on fish straight off the boats – all of it meticulously prepared, simply cooked and beautifully presented.

Wine and spirits come at UK prices or above but the locally brewed JulBrew lager – with its distinctive kingfisher logo – is so good that one of my fellow guests stuffed two six-packs into his luggage to take home.

The straggling oceanside tourist district offers a wide choice of international cuisine options at various price points, while, at the bottom end of the price range, you could go native and sample the local street foods, often of indeterminate origin but usually tasty and barbecued and served at one of the many kerbside chop shops.

It proved hard to drag myself away from the cooling sea-breezes that made the hotel's bougainvillea flower-bedecked poolside such a haven but the excursions offered by an ever-

“The locally brewed JulBrew lager is so good”



Markets are a confusion of colour and spectacle



Ida Cham-Njai offers lessons in traditional Gambian cuisine

attentive The Gambia Experience rep through West Africa Tours proved too intriguing to miss.

With 127 countries now under my belt, the opportunity to take the popular Circle of Life side-trip into Senegal and make it 128 seemed a bargain at £64.

First off we had to brave the dockside chaos and take the packed ferry from Banjul, the capital city, north across the broad estuary of the Gambia River.

Less than an hour later, we'd fought past wayward goats, horses and carts and milling throngs around the customs post, and crossed the border into Senegal.

We faced a bumpy ride along the nature reserve trails but it brought us close encounters of a rhino kind, with two massive examples of that species, accompanied by a family of inquisitive wart hogs, trotting towards us. The beasts settled down not five feet from the truck, posing like over-sized catwalk veterans and eventually had to be shooed away.

We didn't get to see any of the promised giraffes in the wild but a succession of antelope, deer, buffalo and a massive colony of monkeys kept the camera shutters clicking.

Having got close to nature in Senegal, I got close to local culture back in The Gambia by taking the much-vaunted Ida's Home Cooking Lesson.

I had the full attention of a delightful lady who prepares traditional local foods with loving care

FACTFILE

Roger St Pierre travelled with Serenity Holidays (reservations: 0845 330 4567, Gambia.co.uk), which runs The Gambia Experience and The Senegal Experience programmes as well as packages to Corsica and Sardinia.

Including flights with Monarch, Friday flight and single room supplement and optional carbon offset fee, the four-night half-board luxury package came to £935.

and is keen to demonstrate how easy it is to take a taste of Gambia back home by learning some of her skills.

Ida drove me to the amazing fish and vegetable market right on the beach at the fishing village of Tangy to buy the ingredients for our yassi, an unctuous stew brimming with fish, vegetables and lime, served over rice and eaten with the hand.

Watch out for Ida Cham-Njai's forthcoming cookbook or, better yet, try her Yabou cooking lessons (gambiahomecooking.com).

The Gambia is safe, stable and relatively crime free. You'll be pestered by street vendors and by kids asking for small change but, unlike in some Third World countries, they don't grab at you and the sparkling eyes, ready smiles and eagerness to converse make up for it all. What's more, everyone in The Gambia speaks English.