

# Back to school

**Glen Mutel** heads into rural Gambia and gets a warm welcome from the locals and their children

**SURVEYING THE SCENE**, it's clear my number's up. From somewhere within a circle of women and children, drumming begins, followed by a sudden chorus of Gambian voices. As the clapping starts, the four eldest mothers scour our group for volunteers. There's no getting away from it: I'm going to have to dance.

Travelling is so often about having to face your fears, and in my experience, the best way to do this is to be given absolutely no choice in the matter. Normally, I'd sooner die than dance in front of a village full of strangers, but as a smiling young mother with a new-born slung around her back grabs my hand and drags me forward, the notion of pulling away and politely refusing suddenly seems unthinkable.

Within seconds I'm moving, arms outstretched, feet shifting jerkily as though grappling for balance on broken ground. I try not to look either too serious or too nonchalant, but none of it matters, as the crowd seem pleased with my effort. The important thing, it seems, is to give it a go.

Around us the rest of the village looks on, the men chatting together in small groups, while teenage boys in European football shirts sit by the village well, scrutinising us from a distance.

As the drumming dies down, our guide, Mucki, gathers us together and tells us it would be considered polite if we were to reciprocate the welcome with a performance of our own — perhaps just a simple song?

None of us were expecting this. I size up my group — the 12 of us really span the

ages and I doubt there's a song in existence we all know by heart. As my mind races for ideas, Mucki suggests *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. Before I've time to object, the entire group is stood in an awkward huddle, mouthing the words to a nursery rhyme.

It goes down well. The important thing, it seems, is to just give it a go.

## To the country

Two days later, we're sat in the back of our open-top truck, heading back into rural Gambia. Over the past 48 hours, things have been pleasantly sedate: I've lounged by the pool, taken a river cruise, sipped a cocktail or two and explored a few bars. But now it's time to get back into the countryside.

On the map, The Gambia is a long, thin, wiggly line, its shape dictated by the mighty River Gambia, which flows along its entire length. Its tiny strip of coast, home to both the capital, Banjul, and most of the main tourist resorts, is like the head of a freshly struck match, consuming around 50% of the country's electricity. But as you travel eastwards along the wiggly line, away from the Atlantic and deeper into Africa, the street lighting and infrastructure quickly disappear.

Most Gambians live on very little money in packed family compounds, with hitchhiking their main means of transport. Yet religious freedom and political stability have in some ways softened the blow of poverty, with crime rates extremely low and goodwill seemingly in abundance — particularly towards tourists, who are generally made to feel very welcome.

Nothing illustrates this better than the number of waves we receive as we pass through towns and villages — particularly from children, many of whom scamper after our truck.

Our destination is a school which has been set up by our guide, Mucki. Like most Gambian schoolchildren, the pupils here are reliant on sponsorship, with little assistance from the state. As we clamber down from the truck brandishing gifts of pens, pencils and pads, I glance towards the playground and see a group of local mothers in dazzling traditional outfits, sitting with docile babies in their arms, surrounded by a ring of shy-looking toddlers.

As smiles and waves are exchanged, one of the mothers starts pounding a drum. She begins to sing. Others soon join her. And before long, we're being encouraged to dance again.

When my turn comes around, I revisit the moves I'd hastily thrown together earlier in the trip — outstretched arms and jerky feet. The results are curious, to say the least, but this time it feels less embarrassing.

School visits are available to tourists through The Gambia Experience, the specialist operator responsible for my trip. As we head towards the classrooms, however, Mucki informs us this particular school is new to the arrangement and that some of the children we're about to meet have never laid eyes on white people before.

As we enter a junior classroom, a group of around 25 infants stare at us with bright wide eyes, each little face adorned ►

## OUT THERE



Clockwise: A 4WD tour;  
Fisherman casting; Local  
children; Boats in Tanji



## OUT THERE

with a tight expression of wariness. We're encouraged to move around the room, and as we do so 25 pairs of eyes watch our progress. A few of us try to break the ice by engaging those nearest with talk about their work. It's initially awkward, but after a while things start to loosen up, and before long we're treated to the first of many shy smiles and nervous giggles.

It's a different story in the neighbouring room, where the mischievous-looking older class seem far more at ease with their curiosity. Smiles and conversation are more forthcoming, and the whole class beam with pride when it's time for them to sing: "The snake is in the grass. Ssssss! Ssssss!"

When it's time to leave, the whole school assembles in the playground to pose for group photos. By now, the younger students have recovered from the shock of this strange visit and have joined the older children in their quest to shake the hands of each of their British guests. After photos, thanks and what seems like a thousand handshakes, we're back in the truck waving goodbye. Soon we're on the main road once more, heading back to the coast, passing through towns and markets and a never ending forest of outstretched waving hands.

### *In the crowd*

Before returning to our resort, we stop at Tanji, a fishing village on the Atlantic coast. Within seconds of dismounting, I find I'm being chaperoned by teenagers, each one keen to talk me through the finer points of the local industry.

There are people absolutely everywhere, and as we make our way down a passage between stalls and shacks towards the sea, I disappoint three boys in Chelsea shirts by declaring my allegiance to Liverpool.

We come to a series of long rectangular platforms, which turn out to be smoking ovens, each one covered with hundreds of small bonga fish. A small-framed teenager I've not seen before emerges from the crowd and quickly claims me for his own.

As we walk down to the beach, this serious looking young man dazzles me with his knowledge, identifying specimens, explaining how they're treated and cooked and even sketching out an overview of The Gambia's imports and exports.

The scene before us is chaotic. In the shallows of the sea, there are a series of colourful little wooden fishing boats, some local, others from as far as Senegal and Guinea Bissau. I watch as several villagers waded out into the sea and return carrying



Woman in Tanji.  
Right: Children at the Mansa  
Colley Bojang Nursery School.



large buckets of fish on their heads. We follow them towards a lively crowd of locals in the middle of the beach, and as we approach, Mucki appears out of nowhere saying: "They want one of you to try it". I'm nearest and, as it's been a day of firsts, I shout: "What do I do?" Before long, a wide blue bucket full of fish is being placed carefully on my head.

It weighs a ton. Holding it with both hands, I move slowly towards the crowd, taking great care to keep a controlled, dignified pose, hiding the strain. The scrum of bodies parts to reveal a large basket on the sand, and, with my neck seemingly seconds from snapping, I tip my head and deposit my cargo to sound of cheers.

As I straighten up, there's a sudden flurry of handshakes and high fives. I literally can't see anything for people. In every direction, there are colourfully dressed villagers of every age, their many voices

blending with the crashing waves and the chatter of the seabirds.

My young guide emerges from the crowd with a serious expression. "This way", he says. I follow him without thinking, eager to see what else The Gambia has in store.

● **Sample: The Gambia Experience** offers seven nights' B&B at the Kombo Beach Hotel from £599 per person. The price is based on a 1 March departure and includes flights, airport taxes and transfers.

T: 0845 330 2060. [www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk)

● **Contact:** The Gambia Tourism Authority.  
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