

Tessa Webber shook herself free of the freezing temperatures in England and found plenty to warm the heart in The Gambia

NATURAL CHARM

Mandina
Lodges

DOES the sun always make you smile? I have to admit that on those rare blue-sky days in Britain I do feel the desire to smile more freely and have concluded this is the phenomena behind the huge smiles which follow you everywhere in The Gambia.

The people on the street smile as you pass, the youngsters run from their homes to wave and smile in greeting, in fact, everyone you meet has a wide smile of welcome.

Yet, as someone surrounded by the trappings of the western world, be it televisions, i-phones and computers, not to mention the more basic amenities of electricity and running water, it would appear they have little to smile about.

In many homes there are no luxuries and life is a daily struggle to earn money for food and clothes. Yet the smiles are genuine, the warmth is undeniable and the impact of sharing it, unforgettable. These people are proud of their country, their heritage and their achievements and having spent time among them you come away with a real understanding of just how content you can be among people rather than possessions.

For this voyage of discovery we travelled with The Gambia Experience and stayed at The Kombo Beach Hotel, which is an easy 30-minute transfer from Banjul airport. Perfectly positioned on the beach, set in lush green grounds and an easy drive from the nearby town of Koli it is a laid-back hotel great for families, couples and groups offering superb evening entertainment, a variety of dining options and a fantastic breakfast spread. In fact, so comprehensive is the hotel that visitors could simply remain inside the grounds and make use of its many facilities.

But we wanted to see as much as possible and enjoyed trips to the impressive Makasutu Forest, where we took a river trip in a dugout canoe and got up close to the Forest's baboon population.

Through The Gambia Experience, you can stay in the Forest at the water's edge in one of its unique Mandina Lodges, which offer you the chance to really get away from it all beside the river for a few days.

Other accommodation for visitors flying with The Gambia Experience includes the five-star Coco Beach Hotel and Spa, which will appeal to those who like their luxury.

But it was the delightful boutique hotel Ngala Lodge which took my fancy and would be a

perfect bolthole for a couple looking for somewhere rather special. It has a simple elegance, a serenity and style that would suit most tastes and, forget the fish, it is the chef who is the catch of the day. From his perfect prawns to his sumptuous steak, every morsel he made was savoured.

Our days were filled with exciting excursions thanks to West Africa Tours, which can all be booked through your hotel reps.

The Four Wheel Drive experience was brilliant – and bumpy, giving you a real insight into the lives and villages of The Gambia.

The journey, much of which was on dirt tracks, took us to Makasutu Forest which is a unique development created by British National Lawrence Williams, who landed in The Gambia more than 20 years ago and never left.

A Lazy Day Cruise excursion came next and after a busy day sightseeing, climbing aboard a spacious Pirogue and drifting down river was a relaxing delight and hugely enjoyable.

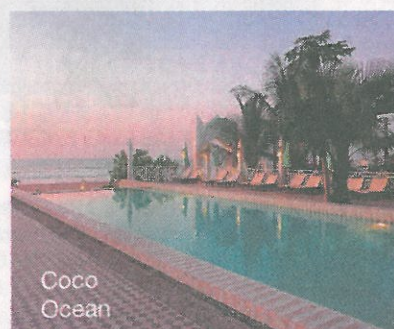
It was the visit the following day, however, which has left a permanent mark and this was to the Mansa-Colley Bojang Nursery School in Jallanbang. Here the youngsters, kitted out in uniforms thanks to sponsorship from a school in Portsmouth, work to improve their minds with the dedication and knowledge that this will eventually lead to improving their lives and their country.

Their love of learning and enjoyment of education could teach some British youngsters a valuable lesson in life about ambition and working to build a better life.

Yes, there is hardship on every street but this is no place to feel pity. The waves of greeting and the wide smiles of welcome make you feel like you have just lit up their lives while tiny acts like waving to the children or handing a youngster a bottle of water can light up your own. Leaving the school, where every child came outside to wave us off, we headed for the coast where sandy beaches, good food and a dip in the sea were the order of the day.

As we kicked back and felt the warm sand beneath our toes we had to pinch ourselves to believe we were here – a world away from the hats, coats and scarves in Blighty.

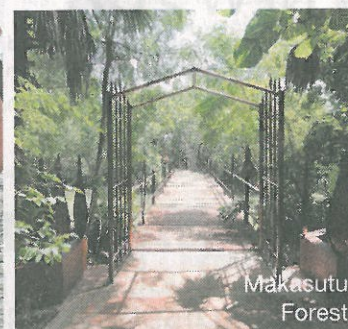
Yet with a flight time of only six hours and no time difference, it could not be easier to escape for some winter sun and a welcome which will warm even the coldest heart.



Coco
Ocean



Tessa lends
a hand



Makasutu
Forest

FACTFILE

THE GAMBIA EXPERIENCE

This is a trade name of Serenity Holidays and the UK's only specialist and biggest tour operator to the destination, operating year round from Gatwick Tel: 0845 330 2087 Web: gambia.co.uk

KOMBO BEACH HOTEL gambia.co.uk/kombo offers holidays from £499 per person for seven nights staying in a standard air conditioned room on bed and breakfast.

MANDINA LODGES AT MAKASUTU gambia.co.uk/mandina are exclusive to UK visitors through The Gambia Experience. Holidays from £1,199 per person for seven nights staying in a jungle lodge on half board. Prices for a three-night add-on are from £399 per person on half board which includes a transfer from a coastal hotel.

COCO OCEAN gambia.co.uk/CocoOcean is exclusive to The Gambia Experience with holidays from £1,099 per person for seven nights staying in a junior suite on bed and breakfast. Ngala Lodge gambia.co.uk/Ngala is also exclusive to The Gambia Experience with holidays from £999 per person for seven nights and does not accept children under 16. All prices include flights (departing from Gatwick) with inflight meals, airport taxes, tourism levy and airport transfers.

OFFERS: Offers available are listed in price order: gambia.co.uk/specialoffers

EXCURSIONS: We enjoyed the Four Wheel Drive and Lazy Day Cruise excursions on our visit with West Africa Tours and bookable through your holiday rep.

WIDE OPEN WALLS To find out more about Lawrence Williams' Wide Open Walls Project (WOW), click on link gambia.co.uk/wideopenwalls

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