



‘You can enjoy a lazy day river trip watching the local fishermen, while you lie on deck catching some hot African rays’

fishermen and oyster ladies catch their goodies, while you lie on deck catching some hot African rays. Or if you feel a bit more active you can head off-the beaten track on a 4-wheel-drive excursion. This gives you an insight into the real Gambia, with the highlight being a visit to a local school.

Another excursion might just provide a thrilling encounter...with baboons! While strolling through the heart of Makasutu Cultural Forest, our local tour guide Mouki, declared “baboons are about today”. He wasn’t wrong. A few more steps into the forest and the rustling that was coming from the bushes and trees turned out to be a thrilling bunch of red-bottomed beauties. Excitable, energetic and playful; it really was a delight to see these distinctive creatures in this beautiful setting.

Makasutu is a tropical 1000-acre reserve encompassing five different eco-systems including gallery forest, savannah, mangroves, palm forest and wetland. And as you can imagine the wildlife is bountiful. Monitor Lizards, mongoose and monkeys are all here, but it is the incredible collection of birds for which The Gambia is most renowned, that impress.

As Mouki liked to proudly point out The Gambia has 569 species of bird, and for a country 20 times smaller than the UK that is a staggering number. TV Wildlife expert and presenter of Springwatch, Chris Packham, has been to The Gambia at least 15 times. It seems he just can’t get enough of the vibrant colours that flutter in The Gambian sky.

All the bird and baboon watching that you get through on Makasutu may just tire you out, so it’s lucky that the accommodation here is

SMILING IN THE GAMBIA

The Gambia. Know much about it? Located in the north-west of Africa, it is the smallest country on the continent. And it is a little gem. It’s ideal on so many levels for British travellers. Year round guaranteed sun at only six hours away; it also has the huge advantage of being in the same time zone as the UK, meaning you don’t lose any days to that pesky jet lag. Pristine white beaches perfect for lounging and lazing, delicious food (in particular the array of fresh fish and fruits) and then of course, there are the people.

Quite simply, Gambians are seemingly always happy. Often referred to as ‘The Smiling Coast of Africa’, Gambia is a country made wonderful by its people. As you drive or walk

along the roads you will receive unremitting waves from children and adults along the way. When saying hello or good morning, the greetings are sung and not spoken — further highlighting their joyful attitude to life.

My trip was arranged by The Gambia Experience, the only UK tour operator that specialises in holidays to The Gambia. If it’s a relaxed, hotel-based holiday you’re after then they have that covered, offering a wide choice of hotels from budget to deluxe, boutique or a floating lodge.

But, if you want to sample a true taste of what this lively country has to offer then they can offer a tempting array of trips and excursions with West Africa Tours. You can enjoy a lazy day river trip watching the local



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If the grey skies and frosty temperatures of home are getting you down, then The Smiling Coast of Africa might just be your perfect tonic

EXCLUSIVE TRAVEL

breathhtaking. Makasutu, meaning the Sacred Forest, was founded by two British men, the late James English and Lawrence Williams, who created this eco-tourism haven.

Their pride and joy are the selection of Mandina Lodges, there are only eight and each one has its own appeal. The accommodation is broken into three categories; the popular Floating Lodges which are located right on the The Gambia River (the river which runs throughout the entire country), the spacious Jungle Lodges which are set back from the water's edge and provide a luxurious escape amongst the baboons in the trees, and the spectacular, unique two storey Stilted Lodges. All of these lodges are built to a high standard using local materials to give an authentic rustic feel. No wonder that Mandina Lodges were featured in the book '1001 Escapes to Make Before You Die'. It's an idyllic location for a couple's retreat.

Whilst we're on the subject of hotels, The Gambia has some excellent choices. The most luxurious of which is perhaps Coco Ocean Resort and Spa. Located on an enviable stretch of unspoilt beach it epitomises elegance and perfection. All the rooms, suites and penthouses are of the highest quality and you can also be pampered at the luxury spa. It would provide a romantic, relaxed holiday retreat where the hardest choice you'd have to make is choosing a sun bed on the beach or by the pool.

Or perhaps the more boutique feel of Ngala Lodge appeals? It's a child-free property with quirky furnishings in each room and an unshakeable sense of style. The attractive gardens have private Jacuzzis which have a stunning view over the Atlantic Ocean. With the waves crashing and the sun fading- I challenge you to feel like you are not on a movie set. Ngala Lodge also provided the best meal of my trip with delightfully light fillets of Captain Fish and a lively cinnamon



ice cream being particular highlights.

Sun, smiles and sumptuous food, is pretty much the Gambian guarantee with any hotel you choose.

The Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world. It's very small (with only eight sets of traffic lights in the whole country) and its people have to work hard to survive, relying heavily on their main export of peanuts. That's the reality. But its people are now forging a very real, desirable place in the holiday market and tourism is growing here, which hopefully will be good for the people and their economy.

Perhaps, the one moment I will take away from this trip is when I was walking around the village of Kubuneh. I chatted to a lovely 26-year-old man who told me that he had never left this village in his entire life. But here he was speaking in such softly spoken English, freely and happily telling me about his education and hopes for his future career. Although, it's a clichéd traveller term, an experience like this can really give you perspective on your own life.



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

Ngala Lodge

www.gambia.co.uk/Ngala. Holidays from £999 per person for 7 nights staying in a standard air conditioned suite on bed & breakfast. The hotel's Atlantic Suite is an upgraded suite and comes with a private outdoor Jacuzzi. The supplement for this room type is £39 per person per night based on twin occupancy. Ngala Lodge does not accept children under 16 years old unless the whole property is taken for a group or family.

Kombo Beach Hotel

www.gambia.co.uk/kombo. Holidays from £499 per person for 7 nights staying in a standard air conditioned room on bed & breakfast. Price includes flights (from Gatwick).

Coco Ocean

www.gambia.co.uk CocoOcean. Holidays from £1099 per person for 7 nights staying in a junior suite on bed & breakfast. Price includes flights (departing from Gatwick).

Mandina Lodges at Makasutu

www.gambia.co.uk/mandina. Holidays from £1199 per person for 7 nights staying in a jungle lodge on half board, inclusive of flights (from Gatwick).

Excursions

All excursions are bookable locally through the company's hotel reps with West Africa Tours www.gambia.co.uk/excursions.