

The Mandina Lodges offer a stunning location in the Makasutu forest.



The Gambia is a perfect destination for people looking to unwind at a resort while embracing the vast culture the country has to offer, reports RORY MCKEOWN.

winter  
warmer

I'm not going to lie – the view from my hotel room balcony was spectacular. An unspoiled pure white beach was embraced by a breathtaking sea backdrop that carried on for miles and miles.

I sat back in my recliner, under a hot sun, thinking to myself 'this is the life'. I know what you're thinking. I was lapping it up in the Maldives or the Caribbean. But no, I was in the West African nation of The Gambia.

More importantly, I was in a country that is just a six-hour flight away. It was that fact that just amazed me throughout my time in the place nicknamed 'the smiling coast'. Holidaymakers or adventurers can hop on a plane for a relatively short amount of time to step out into a country that offers so much.

The variety of hotels on offer to tourists is nothing short of spectacular. From boutique-style dwellings to breathtaking five-star complexes, The Gambia caters for all.

My accommodation was the Kombo Beach Hotel, a popular mid-range hotel situated in the Kotu resort and overlooking the stunning Kotu beach. It's an ideal spot for families thanks to its pool and the various activities on offer, such as tennis, table tennis, table football and beach volleyball, plus dazzling traditional entertainment every evening.

For those looking for something a bit different or something special, The Gambia has plenty of hotels to fit most criteria. One of the stand-outs is the Mandina lodges in the picturesque Makasutu cultural forest. It's not a hotel as such, but a sprawling forest haven that's ideal for couples or those seeking that perfect honeymoon destination. Staying in the lodges will give you a unique taste of The Gambia. Featuring eight lodges, the Mandina Lodges offers the chance to embrace nature.

The lodges embody three different styles, with most overlooking the breathtaking Mandina Bolong tributary. It's 100 per cent eco-friendly and was awarded the best overseas eco-development project by the British Guild of Travel Writers.

For those more adventurous, the huge Makasutu cultural forest is on your doorstep. With different trails and paths to wander, holidaymakers can get up close and personal with the colony of crafty baboons or take a boat trip across the vast tributary that links up to the River Gambia. You can also fall asleep under the clear, starlit night sky and shower in a well-covered outdoor cubicle.

A guide gave us the chance to experience the real Gambia during our visit. A 30-minute ride in our four-wheel drive brought us to the village of Kubuneh. The group was welcomed with smiles and waves and young Gambian children pleaded for our empty bottles of water.

The village was entirely welcoming to a group of British tourists and proud to show off their heritage. It had been transformed by a local street art project founded by Brit Lawrence Williams. The Wide Open Walls project allowed international artists to design and paint large murals on homes and buildings within the village.

Holidaymakers wanting to experience luxury on their travels can look no further than the superlative Coco Ocean Resort and Spa in Bijilo. Popular with the rich and famous, it offers restaurants specialising in Moroccan, Thai, Japanese and international cuisine, infinity pools, stunning views of the ocean, and a pampering haven consisting of a spa and 14 treatment rooms.

Perhaps the stand out destination for me was the Ngala Lodge, an intimate boutique hotel situated between the Bakau and Fajara resorts. With 10 unique open suites, Ngala has a spectacular penthouse, complete with a huge, eye-catching tiger mural, and manor suites, which have their own private garden.

It's impossible to get bored in The Gambia. There is so much going on, either in the tourist resorts or in the heart of the country.

Those wanting to get out and explore will be pleased to know most locations are within a tolerable taxi or coach ride away.

I urge anyone interested in experiencing this wonderful country to pay a visit to one of the schools. School visits can be organised through your travel agent or tour guide, and is certain to provide one of the most emotional and fulfilling parts to your holiday.

#### TRAVEL FACTS:

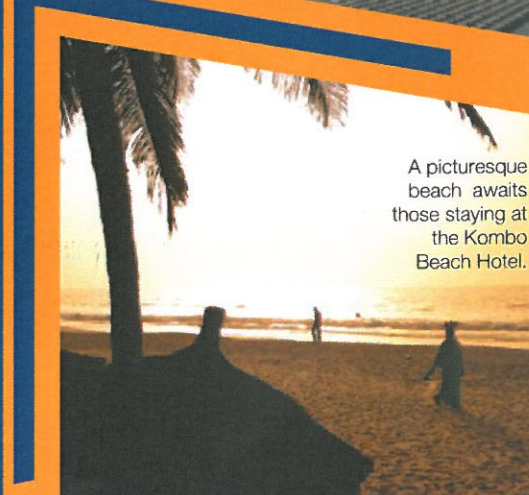
Rory McKeown travelled with Fareham-based The Gambia Experience (0845 3302087), a trade name of Serenity Holidays. It is the UK's only specialist and biggest tour operator to The Gambia, operating year round from Gatwick. A seven-night stay at the Kombo Beach Hotel is £499 per person. Those wanting to experience the Mandina Lodges should go through The Gambia Experience. Holidays are from £1,199 per person for seven nights.

Holidays at Coco Ocean start at £1,099 per person for seven nights and the Ngala Lodge is priced from £999 per person over the same period.

Special offers are available at [gambia.co.uk/specialoffers](http://gambia.co.uk/specialoffers) and more information on excursions at [gambia.co.uk/excursions](http://gambia.co.uk/excursions)



Coco Ocean is perhaps The Gambia's most luxurious hotel.



A picturesque beach awaits those staying at the Kombo Beach Hotel.