

# Smile – it's The Gambia

*The Gambia's reputation for friendly people, excellent beaches and diverse wildlife is well-deserved, as Nick Elvin discovers*

EVERYONE will smile at you, but don't panic, they're not mad." This is what our resort guide told us, after we flew in, about how the friendliness of locals can come as a shock to first-time British visitors. Now as we drive through the city of Brikama I can see what he meant: people we pass smile and wave at us; grinning children sprint from back yards and shout "hello".

This is The Gambia, the so-called Smiling Coast in the far west of Africa, where the seemingly endless brown and gold of the Sahara finally gives way to tropical green. The smallest country on the African mainland, this thin sliver of land stretches for 200 miles along both banks of the Gambia River, with just enough Atlantic shoreline to cram in the kind of beaches sun-starved northern



Porters bring in the catch on wheelbarrows at Tanji fishing village  
ALL PHOTOS: NICK ELVIN

Europeans dream of escaping to in midwinter.

Today my tour group is heading away from The Gambia's coastal tourist area to its less developed interior. Our converted army truck feels more like a mobile grandstand, its open sides allowing us to take in roadside scenes of people buying their daily groceries,

or gathering in groups under trees to listen to stories, news and public information. The call to prayer emanates from mosques in side alleys.

Turning off one of the country's few metalled roads, we follow a dirt track through the elephant grass, passing baobab, mango and cashew trees, and massive termite mounds. The truck regularly smashes against the surrounding foliage, showering us with assorted twigs, leaves and insects. The scent of wild mint wafts across the African bush, carried on a 31-Celsius breeze.

Our destination is the Makasutu Culture Forest, a 1,000-acre conservation area located by a tidal creek off the Gambia River. Here we take a boat trip through the mangrove forests. Our guide, Mucki, from West African Tours, is a mine of information about the flora and fauna here, and he



Above: A school in The Gambia. Below: A painting of an elephant created as part of Wide Open Walls

points out many bird species including the world's largest heron, the Goliath, while we also spot green monkeys stalking the muddy shoreline. Back on dry land, a group of baboons rushes round us looking for food scraps.

If it's wildlife you want, The Gambia has plenty. The country boasts hippos, bottlenose dolphins, hyenas, chimpanzees, monitor lizards and crocodiles. Perhaps the most common sight for us is the magnificent hooded vulture.

The founder and owner of Makasutu, Lawrence Williams, has been instrumental in bringing art to some of the area's villages, through a project called Wide Open Walls. At Kubuneh we discover that houses are used as canvases, and local and international street artists have graffitied walls with elephants, frogs, colonial soldiers, children and other subjects. Strangely, they don't seem out of place.

Our base in The Gambia is Kombo Beach, a mid-range family hotel in the



Take a trip on the river in the Makasutu forest

resort of Kotu. It comes alive at night with drumming and dance performances by the pool. With its cooling Atlantic breeze, this is a pleasant spot for a cocktail. Kotu has a number of bars and restaurants, plus an excellent

beach, while a few miles down the coast is the larger resort of Kololi, which offers much more nightlife.

South of the main resort area is the promisingly-named Paradise Beach. Apart from some persistent yet good natured souvenir hawkers, it's a deserved title; there's little in the way of development here. We cross the fine, golden sand and dive into the warm, refreshing Atlantic, before tucking into a lunch of Jollof rice, fish and vegetables in a nearby restaurant.

The truck takes us several miles along the beach to the fishing village of Tanji, where porters are bringing the catch ashore from long, narrow boats, balancing on their heads large tubs of tuna, mackerel, herring and barracuda. There are

hundreds of people here, buying and selling, pulling boats up onto the sand, mending nets and smoking fish. The vibrant colours of the boats and the women's dresses, the sound of seagulls and raised voices, and the strong odour of fish create an unforgettable feast for the senses.

Despite the frenetic activity all around, there's still the same

friendly, welcoming atmosphere here that I've experienced throughout the trip, and it's little wonder that The Gambia attracts many repeat visitors every year. They don't call it the Smiling Coast for nothing.

**The Gambia Experience offers seven nights at Kombo Beach Hotel from £499 per person on a bed and breakfast basis. Price includes return flights from Gatwick, airport taxes, tourism levy and airport transfers. Telephone: 0845 330 2087, web: [www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk)**



Mandina Lodges  
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