

WEEKEND - TRAVEL

Explore The Gambia for that winter sun

It may not be the most obvious destination for many holidaymakers, but The Gambia provides warmth in the winter months. RORY McKEOWN visited the West African nation.

Holidaymakers searching for that much-needed winter sun should take a good look at The Gambia.

The first thing that hits you when you step off the plane in Banjul, the West African nation's capital, is the heat. It's not an uncomfortable or stifling sensation, but a glowing warmth that gives you a broad smile.

It's a smile that is on the face of every Gambian you meet and sets the mood for the rest of your magical trip.

Holidaymakers or adventurers can hop on a plane for a relatively short amount of time to step into a country that offers so much.

I visited The Gambia in November and to escape the wind and rain of the UK for West Africa's glorious sunshine and perfect heat was almost too much to comprehend.

Most people wouldn't put The Gambia high up on their holiday destinations list, but it really is a country that caters for families, couples and those with an adventurous side.

I travelled with the Fareham-based tour firm The Gambia Experience – a branch of Serenity Holidays which specialises in holidays to The Gambia.

We were treated to an insight into the various hotels The Gambia has to offer.

My accommodation, the Kombo Beach hotel, is a popular mid-range hotel situated in the Kotu resort and overlooks the stunning Kotu beach. It's ideal for families, with outdoor activities and traditional entertainment.

For those with a desire to be at one with nature, the Mandina lodges in the picturesque Makasutu cultural forest is the place for you.



The Mandina Lodges in the Makasutu forest.

Its lodges are located in a sprawling forest haven that's perfect for couples or those seeking a honeymoon destination.

The Coco Ocean Resort and Spa in Bijilo is The Gambia's bit of luxury. Boasting a spa and treatment rooms, it offers restaurants specialising in cuisines of the world and stunning architecture.

Perhaps the standout for me was the Ngala Lodge, an intimate boutique hotel situated between the Bakau and Fajara resorts.

Boasting a special atmosphere, it's child-free and ideal for honeymooners.

The Gambia is not just about its thriving resorts.

Our group was able to explore the heart of The Gambia thanks to West African Tours and our tour guide Mucki. The excursions can be booked through The Gambia Experi-

ence's hotel reps.

I urge anyone to pay a visit to one of the local schools. It is guaranteed to be one of the most emotional experiences you are likely to encounter on your trip.

Mucki took us to the Mansa Colley Bjoang Nursery School, which has been built thanks to a hard working community, committed to giving its youngsters the prospects of a bright future.

We were greeted by the smiling children and teachers, who treated us to singing and dancing.

Their beaming smiles and inquisitive natures will stay with you long after your visit, and make sure you come equipped with much-needed pens, pencils and exercise books.

Those wanting to relax and unwind should check out the lazy day river trip across the

River Gambia in a Gambian-style river pirogue.

Other highlights included the visit to the huge Makasutu cultural forest and the 4x4 trip to the village of Kubuneh, which has been transformed by a cultural street art project.

TRAVEL FACTS

Rory McKeown was a guest of The Gambia Experience, a branch of the Fareham-based firm Serenity Holidays. He stayed at the Kombo Beach hotel, which is part of their mid-range collection. Holidays are from £499 per person for seven nights. Price includes flights from Gatwick, inflight meals and taxes. Excursions can be booked with West African Tours through The Gambia Experience's hotel reps. For more information, visit gambia.co.uk.

DEALS OF THE WEEK

UK/IRELAND PEMBROKESHIRE: Celtic Trails (01291 689 774) offers six nights' B&B from Feb 9 in quality guesthouses, farmhouses and inns, with maps, guidebook, local information and daily luggage transfers, for £440, to tackle walk along Pembrokeshire Coast Path.

SHORT BREAKS NORTH DEVON: Woolacombe Bay Holiday Parks (0843 208 0368) offers three-night half-term breaks from £99 per family from Feb 8 or 15 with accom in Bronze apartments and all-weather activities incl indoor pools, cinema, play areas, children's clubs and entertainment day and night, along with a surfing simulator, 10-pin bowling, pottery painting, pool, snooker and table tennis. Some at extra cost.

DUBAI: Netflights (0871 703 8000) offers five nights' B&B at three-star Golden Sands Apartments from £439, saving £150, incl return Emirates flights ex-Gatwick, Manchester, Newcastle and Birmingham through May/June. Ex-Glasgow from £479. Book by Feb 28.

SHORT-HAUL SUN SKIATHOS: Sovereign Luxury Travel (0844 415 1936) offers

seven nights' B&B at five-star Aegean Suites Hotel from £945, saving £375 per couple, incl return Monarch flights ex-Gatwick from May 10.

CORFU: Sovereign Luxury Travel (0844 415 1936) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at Marbella Beach Hotel from £3,706 (saving £322) for two adults and two children sharing deluxe family garden-view room, with return flights ex-Gatwick from Aug 8 (other UK deps available) and private transfers. Book by Mar 31.

LONG-HAUL TRAVEL EGYPT: On the Beach (0871 911 0202) offers seven nights' all-inclusive at five-star Titanic Beach Spa Hotel from £480, incl return flights ex-Gatwick Feb 22.

CUBA: Airtours (0844 871 6636) offers 14 nights' all-inclusive at four-star Playa Costa Verde Hotel in Playa Pesquero from £899, incl flights ex-Gatwick Mar 18.

THEMED HOLIDAYS WINE TOUR OF SOUTH AFRICA: Wine Voyages (020 8991 8212) offers tour from Mar 1 incl Cape Town and Cape Point for £1,395, with £300 single supp. Package incl wine tastings, stay on private game reserve, adventure activities, nine nights' B&B, some meals, game drives, private tour bus and wine guide. Flights extra.



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My favourite holiday...

It was the summer of '73, I was eight and it wasn't the most exotic location but my

mum took me to Ryde on the Isle of Wight. We stayed in a mansion with four poster beds. I

was convinced it was Buckingham Palace. We spent days on the beach and it was great.



Ashley Harley, News columnist and front of house assistant at the Kings Theatre, Southsea