



# experiencing the gambia



Tony Kane visits an art retreat at a floating paradise in the Gambian jungle

I was trawling through my emails on a cold autumn day when I opened up a message inviting me to go to The Gambia for four days. 'Is it worth it?' I asked myself. 'All those injections, malaria pills - leaving my comfort zone? I took a quick glance out of the window at the weather and within half a minute I'd decided it was.

Getting off the plane is always exciting in a foreign country; being greeted by a quick blast of hot African air is a perfect antidote to rainy England. Kombo Beach Hotel is a beautiful holiday venue. It sits on the sands with the Atlantic a mere stone's throw away. My room had the most wonderful view overlooking the sea and the swimming pool and sunbathing area. If your idea of a good holiday is to laze around in the sun sipping the odd cocktail then this is the place for you. However, many people have different ideas for a break and this is where specialist tour operator The Gambia Experience comes in, because the emphasis really is on experience. The next day we climbed on to a formidable looking truck and headed out to Makasutu Cultural Forest where we met Lawrence Williams. Lawrence originally hailed from Kingston and is now a resident of Gambia. He has designed this charming African project over the years with a number of luxurious lodges that seem to float on the water. The interiors are romantic with four poster beds and dreamy curtains which seem perfect for a honeymoon.

Lawrence has a very special project in a neighbouring village for which he has been

almost the sole sponsor up until now. Wide Open Walls is a street art project. He invites international artists to work with locals to produce open air murals around an African theme. He has great plans to develop the project with ideas such as special colouring books and a film that describes the process. Anyone who goes to the village can only be infected with the enthusiasm and sheer joy of life shown. He aims to use the project to create necessary funds for the area.

Gambia is centred round the Gambia river and its tributaries. On Sunday we boarded a boat for a lazy cruise down the river. Our boat, which was a bit like the African Queen, chugged along peacefully while we enjoyed Gambian food and wine and the wildlife on the banks. We only stopped for a swim in the warm waters. Not a trace of a crocodile - or so I was told!

Education here is a priority in The Gambia where there are still many areas where there are no schools within walking distance, and our tour took in a Bojang Nursery. The children greeted us



gravely and we took pictures while we looked at their work, nearly causing chaos when we showed them a glimpse of the pictures. The toilets had been provided by the Admiral Lord Nelson School and Lord Williams School in GB. 'The best toilets in Gambia!' our guide announced proudly. I introduced myself as being from Wimbledon. 'You know, the famous tennis?' Blank looks. Of course, without radio or TV there is little chance that they could be aware of such distractions. We donated pens and notebooks and departed to experience a nearby 'middle class' small farm, where we were made welcome despite there being no warning of our visit. Middle class means that the house is built out of bricks.

We ate in a number of hotels and restaurants which produced food that varied from ethnic to European. My favourite was Ngala Lodge. Each room was individually designed round paintings and art work. Our host, MD Jenny Fenton, was a refugee from the Foreign Office and loved her new role in the hotel. The chef produced a menu that fused local food with a mixture of European cuisines. As with everything else in The Gambia, it was fascinating, unique, challenging and a real 'experience'.

Tony's trip was organised by The Gambia Experience. [www.schooldevelopmentfund.org](http://www.schooldevelopmentfund.org), [www.gambia.co.uk](http://www.gambia.co.uk)

**Hotels:** Kombo Beach Hotel in the resort of Katu • Coco Ocean Resort & Spa - The Gambia's most luxurious hotel in the resort of Bijilo • Ngala Lodge - located between the resorts of Bakau and Fajara