

Ngala Lodge Beach Cabana

uncovering gambia

Gambia is a country full of surprises. Tony Kane escapes to this little paradise in West Africa

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 and 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 while watching the wildlife on the banks. We stopped for a swim in the warm waters. Not a trace of a crocodile - I was told!

Education is a priority. There are still many areas where there are no schools within walking distance. I was anxious to see the school on our itinerary, Bojang Nursery. Our guide, Mucki, the founder of the school, realised the urgent necessity for a school this far out in the bush where the illiteracy is very high. We were greeted by the women of the village who made music while they waited for us. Mucki announced that we were the first public visitors to the school.

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!' Mucki announced. I introduced myself as being from Wimbledon. 'You know, the famous tennis?' Blank looks. Of course, without

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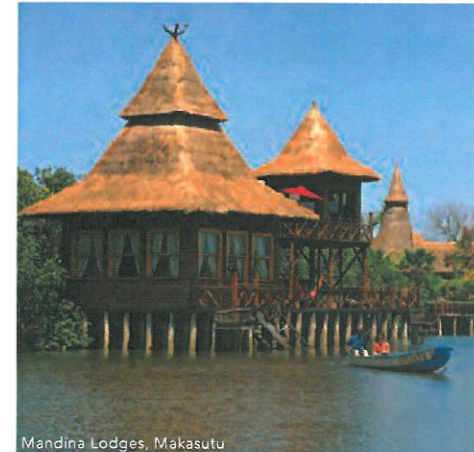


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radio or TV there is little chance that they could be aware of such distractions. We donated pens and notebooks and departed to experience a nearby 'middle class' small farm, where we were made welcome despite there being no warning of our visit. Middle 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 a menu that was indistinguishable from many international restaurants. 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 exploited local food with a mixture of European cuisine: 'We can't use imported lettuce at five pounds a head,' he commented.

My trip was beautifully organised by The Gambia



Mandina Lodges, Makasutu

Experience. The clue is in the title; if you choose to take part in the various trips and excursions you are able to get under the surface of the country and get a feel of the life and aspirations of the people, who are always welcoming. A trip to The Gambia leaves a mark that goes deep and I am pleased that I took the decision to leave my comfort zone in south west London and experience African shores and the Gambian people. ■

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

Other:

- www.gambia.co.uk
- www.schooldevelopmentfund.org

