

Catch of the day



The Gambia's welcoming culture and bountiful birdlife make for a different kind of winter break, finds **Rhodri Andrews**

In one direction, a goliath heron swoops from its low-slung perch. In another, a pied kingfisher scans the water from an oyster-encrusted mangrove. Hooded vultures circle the evening sky. My eyes dart back and forth, unsure where the next slice of avian action will arise.

"If you think this is good, wait until morning," says my guide Lamin. "It's cooler, so you can spend more time on the river and there are more birds." This abundance of birdlife comes as no surprise – my base, Gambian eco-resort Mandina Lodges, is famous for it.

CALM AND CHAOS

It's a wild introduction to The Gambia, a finger-shaped west African country better known for its creamy-white beaches, but there's a kaleidoscope of colour here. I discovered this shortly after landing in capital Banjul, as I glided along the emerald-flanked Mandina Bolong – a tributary of the Gambia River

– on an evening pirogue trip, spotting jewel-bright birds left, right and centre.

The following morning, a guided walk took me through the thick jungle of Makasutu Culture Forest where Mandina Lodges is set, passing 2m-high termite mounds and a 200-strong troop of baboons. "Every tree you see here can be used for its fruit or for medicine. They all serve a purpose," said Lamin.

That was The Gambia's calm side, but then it was time to experience its energy with the Six Tours in One excursion, a rich and varied immersion into Gambian culture. The sights came thick and fast, first among the hotly traded goats of Brikama livestock market, before I refuelled on traditional bene pancakes (keeping one eye on the opportunist vervet monkeys) at riverside restaurant Lamin Lodge. Even travelling between places was revealing, passing everything from donkey-powered carts piled with timber to women carrying gravity-defying goods ➤

Bringing in the day's catch in Banjul

PICTURE: Shutterstock/MarchelC

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | THE GAMBIA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hosts of Yabouy Home Cooking; coastal life; kayaking in Tanji; Kotu Beach

PICTURES: The Gambia Experience; Piers Golden/Goldenphoto

on their heads. I spent lunchtime by the waves, dining on seafood on palm-speckled Sanyang (Paradise) Beach, alongside sunbathing cattle and fishermen bringing in catches of butterfish and mud spiny lobster.

The coast offered welcome relief from the morning's frenzy, but it wouldn't be for long. My guide Omar Sarr had promised to take me where I could really feel The Gambia's pulse: its markets.

FRESH TAKES

At Tanji Fish Market, we watched the commotion of boats delivering their haul straight to makeshift stalls. "You can't get fish fresher than this," said Omar.

He was right. I'd expected a pungent smell but the proximity of sea to stall meant the fish was so fresh it was barely noticeable; I spied everything from huge barracudas, red snappers and crabs to tuna the size of tea trays.

My senses heightened further in Serrakunda – The Gambia's largest market – as I wandered a tight labyrinth of stalls selling spices, clothing, vegetables, phone

accessories and more. "We like everything as fresh as it can be," explained Omar. "We have a seasonal fruit for every month. Once a fruit's season is over, we won't eat it again until the same time the following year."

LOCAL FLAVOURS

I was back in Tanji the next day with cooking class host Ida Cham Njai, manoeuvring through the warren of sellers to pick up ingredients including bitter green tomatoes, rice, okra and fire-red chillies. Back at Ida's home – which doubles as a base for her Yabouy cookery school – we were put to work peeling and slicing the rainbow of vegetables, ready to be cooked or pounded into a delicious paste.

"What we're doing today, Gambian women do every day, so you're in their shoes," explained Ida. "They only buy what they need for the day – nothing more."

Ida's all-female team skilfully combined the ingredients with great care, adding barracuda to the one-pot benachin rice dish and chicken to the yassa stew. Served

in a huge, paella-like dish, the vermilion-coloured benachin on one side and yassa on the other, it was not only a mouthwatering meeting of two Gambian staples but a literal taste of its culture.

With my stomach full, there were few better places to digest than at cliff-top Ngala Lodge, an adult-only retreat facing the Atlantic Ocean. I began to understand why so many visitors make a beeline for the coast – and stay there.

WINGED WONDERS

But in the small hours of the morning with the sky still dark, I set off for a kayaking adventure in Tanji Bird Reserve. The silence felt so far removed from the clamour of the nearby markets, with only the whistle of a brown-throated wattle-eye here, the gurgle of a white-breasted cormorant there.

The Gambia has long been a twitchers' haven, home to 600-plus species of bird – more than 300 of which have been spotted in Tanji. "I've been birdwatching for nearly a decade, and I never fail to get excited," said guide Musa. As if ➤

WHERE TO stay

Mandina Lodges

A Wi-Fi-free, nine-lodge retreat nestled in bird-rich Makasutu Culture Forest, Mandina Lodges counts Chris Packham among its regular guests. I stayed in one of its mahogany Floating Lodges. It's a must for nature lovers, with baboons scampering past the pool and fruit bats flitting around the thatched restaurant roof at night. Experiences include sunset pirogue cruises (at extra cost) and forest walks. From £85 per night, half board (minimum three-night stay). gambia.co.uk/mandina-lodges



Ngala Lodge

Overlooking the Atlantic, the 24 suites of adult-only Ngala Lodge in Fajara are woven into the resort's lush tropical gardens. It's an ideal base for a relaxing day by one of its two outdoor pools or as a serene place after a busy day of excursions. Numerous suite categories include the plush new Macondo Suites, and it boasts an excellent restaurant – I can recommend the domoda peanut stew, The Gambia's national dish. From £75 per person per night, bed and breakfast (minimum three-night stay).

ngalalodge.com



ASK THE experts



Charlotte Marsh, sales consultant, The Gambia Experience

"The Gambia is the best of all worlds. It's an English-speaking country and on the same time zone as the UK, so clients can hit the ground running. But The Gambia is all about variety – the beach, wildlife, culture and deliciously fresh fish. It's a very soulful country and the warm weather is matched by equally warm locals."



Ida Cham Njai, founder, Yabouy Home Cooking

"Visitors want experiences they can't have at home. That's why Gambian encounters such as a cooking class resonate with them. It's a very social experience and you have more in common with each other than you think. It's a special insight into our culture; I've had a lot of repeat visitors and they're now like family."



Omar Sarr, guide, Discovery Tours

"The Six Tours in One excursion means visitors can see The Gambia's authentic side in one day. They'll find that we're a very welcoming country. Whether it's a new face or someone we've known for a while, we'll always smile at them. There's a reason why we're known as the Smiling Coast."



Old meets new in Brikama

PICTURES: Rhodri Andrews

on cue, he squealed in delight as he spotted the vivid colours of a violet turaco on the bank.

Tanji's skyline changed with the rising sun – in turn, revealing more of its feathered residents. The soft morning light carried a magnetism that had me helplessly

spellbound. Of course, anyone could wake up early and catch a sublime ocean sunrise, but it wouldn't be accompanied by a river brushed with gold, soundtracked by a world of wild birds. That's when The Gambia really comes into its own. **TW**

BOOK IT

The Gambia Experience offers a seven-night Boutique & Unique trip, including four nights' half board at Mandina Lodges and three nights' bed and breakfast at Ngala Lodge, from £1,599 per person, based on two sharing. Includes flights from Gatwick and all ground transfers. gambia.co.uk



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