

Sunny Senegal

Direct flights have put the West African country on the map for winter sunshine, finds Yolanda Zappaterra

Idlilic beaches, World Heritage Sites, bird sanctuaries and big-game reserves all bask in tropical sunshine during the winter months in lesser-visited Senegal, at a smidgeon of long-haul destination prices.

Following a successful first season, Tui has announced plans to start its direct flights even earlier next winter, on October 7, 2024.

On a dull grey morning, it takes me less than six hours to swap chilly London for tropical Senegal – with no time difference.

And while recent political protests have hit the headlines, at the time of going to press the FCDO has not advised against travel. For tourism, it's "business as usual", according to Tui.

BEACH LIFE
The Blaise Diagne international airport is just a 40-minute hop

away from the lively resort area of Saly, the tourist heart of the idyllic Petite Côte, a large section of the country's coastline. Saly is a town of two halves: Saly Portudal is home to all-inclusive resorts, while Saly Niakhiakhil exudes a more local vibe via smaller hotels.

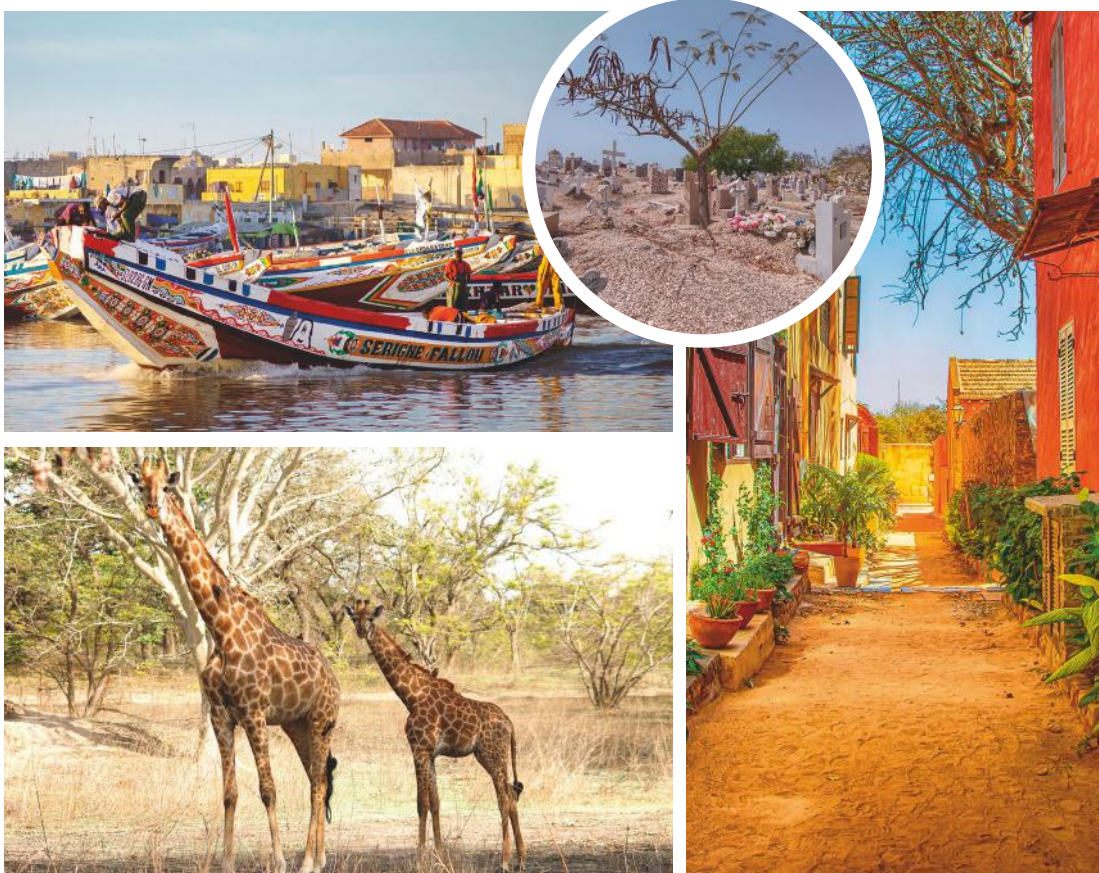
A little north, Lagune de La Somone is even more laid-back, its shores fringed with winsome beach shacks. And to the south, the mesmerising shell island cemetery of Fadiouth, where Muslim and Christian graves lie harmoniously together, is a unique place to visit.

WILDLIFE TO REMEMBER
In the mangroves of La Somone's delta, clients can see some of Senegal's 694 species of birds, including jewel-like rollers, parrots, little bee-eaters and plenty of majestic water birds. ➤

Beach in Saly Portudal
PICTURE: Shutterstock/Lex Thoenen

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | SENEGAL



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fishing boats in Saint Louis; cemetery on shell island Fadiouth; street on Gorée Island; giraffes in Fathala Wildlife Reserve PICTURES: Shutterstock/Vladimir Zhoga, Wynian

Nearby, the Bandia Reserve offers a slew of bigger animals to spot, including giraffes, monkeys and giant tortoises. It's just one of the many wildlife parks and bird sanctuaries to be found in Senegal, including the Unesco-listed Djoudj National Bird Sanctuary. And at the southernmost Fathala Wildlife Reserve, clients can join game drives to explore the 6,000 hectares of land where rhino, zebras, Derby elands and warthogs roam. There are also mangrove boat excursions, and bush and birdwatching walks.

CITY LIGHTS

Dakar is a cosmopolitan city that makes a great beginning or end to a Senegal adventure. We loved exploring sights like the Mosque of Divinity and the African Renaissance Monument, and were mesmerised by the stunning craftsmanship at the Théodore Monod African Art Museum.

By day three, a short excursion out of town to see the bright pink waters of Lake Retba and relaxing by the hotel pool feel well-earned. Nights are spent enjoying live music – this is the home of two of Senegal's (and Africa's) most famous musicians, Youssou N'Dour and Baaba Maal – and delicious local Senegalese dishes such as the fish and rice dish *thieboudienne* or *mafé*, a nut-based stew.

HERITAGE AND HISTORY

Two of Senegal's Unesco World Heritage Sites reward in very different ways. The former capital of Saint Louis still retains impressive architecture from centuries of Portuguese, French and English colonialism, making a horse-drawn caleche ride around it and its neighbouring fishing village delightful.

But the car-free island of Gorée is a truly compelling site. One of Africa's first Unesco World Heritage Sites, it's a tiny, sleepy place and it's hard to imagine its one-time role as the centre of a 400-year-long slave trade in which an estimated 12 million people were forced across the Atlantic from the continent. A visit to its focal spot, the House of Slaves, to honour those souls is something that will stay with you long after you've left this multi-faceted country. **TW**

BOOK IT

The Gambia Experience offers seven nights' all-inclusive at the five-star Royal Horizon Baobab in Saly from £1,449, based on two sharing a standard room, including flights and transfers, with a November 27 departure. A three-night add-on at Fathala Wildlife Reserve is available from £555 based on two sharing a deluxe tented lodge on a B&B basis. gambia.co.uk

ASK THE expert



Karen Durham,
product manager,
The Gambia Experience

"Senegal attracts visitors with its wonderful sandy beaches where you can enjoy watersports galore, and is also a fantastic destination for migratory birds, with vast nature reserves to explore.

Unlike other winter-sun destinations, it offers a taste of African culture and French-influenced cuisine (along with local dishes), and wildlife experiences where big game can be witnessed in its natural habitat. The Gambia Experience flies directly into

Dakar to visit the Senegal resorts of Saly and La Somone, with an array of excursions and activities. Alternatively, clients can fly into Banjul, The Gambia, from where it's simple to travel across the River Gambia to Senegal by ferry for a holiday set around the Sine-Saloum Delta.

Customers can expect a fantastic beach holiday in the tourist areas, with plenty to see and do. The accommodation provides all-inclusive as well as more traditional B&B and half-board options, and the hotel restaurants are of a good standard if people don't want to venture outside the hotel too much. If there was any trouble we would not run excursions into Dakar, and we will keep monitoring the situation."