



INSIDER'S GUIDE THE GAMBIA

By thinking a little about your holiday destination before you travel, and taking some simple steps when you are there, you can gain so much more from your holiday. You will also be making a positive contribution to the people and the places you visit.

THE GAMBIA

The Republic of The Gambia is a small developing country on the Atlantic coast of West Africa. The majority of visitors are British and travel to The Gambia for its winter sun and beaches, birdwatching and up-country excursions as well as the nightlife around the tourist resorts. The Gambians like to encourage us to venture beyond the hotels and beaches so that we can meet the local people and learn at first hand about the culture and customs of this poor but fascinating African country.

– BE PREPARED TO BE PESTERED

You will almost certainly be approached by young men offering to show you around. They can be annoying, but they mean you no harm. Most Gambians have to struggle to earn a living: unemployment is high and families are usually large. The average annual Gambian income is £200. With so many relatively affluent foreigners visiting the country, young unemployed men from rural areas migrate to the resorts to offer their services to tourists on the beaches and around the hotels. They will do anything to survive and will usually offer to be your guide, but may also offer other less desirable services. They are often referred to as “beach boys”, “professional friends” or “bumsters”. You will find that they are usually friendly, intelligent and knowledgeable. Since they are desperate to get work, they are often more persistent than you might feel comfortable with. If you don't want to use a guide or any other service being offered, be firm, consistent but polite in refusing. If necessary, ignore their attention altogether.

The Gambian Government and non-governmental organisations, such as The Gambia Tourism Concern, are doing valuable work with them, training them as official guides, or as vendors of a community magazine called “Mango News”, modelled on the UK's “Big Issue”.

– CONTRIBUTE TO THE LOCAL ECONOMY BY USING LICENSED LOCAL GUIDES, AGENTS AND OPERATORS FOR YOUR EXCURSIONS AND ACTIVITIES

In 2000 Gambian small traders and business owners formed ASSET (the Association of Small-Scale Enterprises in Tourism) offering tourism services with a distinct Gambian flavour. They include craft market vendors, tourist taxi drivers, ground tour operators, guest house and restaurant owners and the juice-pressers and fruit-sellers you see on the beaches.

You can find out more about the services they offer by reading the local English-language newspapers including “The Observer”, “The Point”, “Foroyaa”, “The Tourist” and “Mango News” which offer useful information you might not find in your holiday brochure.

– BE SENSITIVE TO THE CULTURE OF THE GAMBIA.

Although 90% of the Gambian population is Muslim, they are more relaxed than some other Muslim countries about tourists' behaviour and dress. However it is important to dress so as not to cause offence: observe what local people are wearing and cover your legs and chest in public places. Before stripping off on the beach, ask yourself whether local people will welcome you for baring all. You may attract unwanted attention. What may be tolerated on the beach can cause offence elsewhere – certainly in holy places. What local men may tolerate might be offensive to local women. Strict Muslims don't drink alcohol, although they are tolerant towards visitors' drinking if they are moderate. Kissing in public is completely unacceptable. Always shake hands and eat with the right hand: using the left is considered very offensive.

– DON'T BE AFRAID TO VISIT PEOPLE'S HOMES

As a visitor, Gambians will be pleased to meet you and will often offer to show you where they live. There is no ulterior motive, other than to show hospitality. If you are invited to a “compound” where families live and you want to take a gift, cosmetics for women or fruit or toys for the children would be appropriate.

– DON'T GIVE SWEETS AND PENS TO CHILDREN

Education is not compulsory in The Gambia. The Government provides teachers and infrastructure but parents have to buy books, uniforms and pay for food and extra-curricular activities, which many families find difficult. There are often not enough places in grammar schools for the number of applicants. This is why you will see many children in the streets, trying to supplement their family's income, often begging from tourists. In fact, begging in The Gambia's Muslim culture (apart from giving to disabled people) is taboo. Most parents would be horrified to know about their children's activity. It would embarrass them intensely. Unfortunately, visitors have encouraged this habit by indiscriminately distributing pens and sweets in the streets, albeit with good and charitable intentions. You can help to reverse this habit.



– HOW TO GIVE RESPONSIBLY

Making donations to schools and hospitals has a greater and longer effect than giving to unknown individuals. Schools are always very grateful for pens, pencils, paper, exercise books, sports equipment – all will be put to good use. Some tour operators have their own charity projects you can donate to. There is no social security system and people with disabilities have very little support. If you want to help, donate to a registered charity.

– ENJOY HAGGLING BUT DON'T DRIVE TOO HARD A BARGAIN

The culture of selling is quite different in The Gambia from the UK. The vendors on the beach and in the markets will approach you to convince you that their product is the best to buy and the only one you could possibly want. Don't be shy about refusing but be firm, consistent and polite. When you do want to buy something, enjoy the fun of haggling but don't drive too hard a bargain. Haggling is more about social exchange than getting the lowest possible price. Think about how much you would have to pay at home. You can also barter some of your possessions.

– THE COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF A CHILD UNDER THE AGE OF 18 IS AN INTERNATIONAL CRIME. REPORT ANY SUSPICIOUS INCIDENTS

As an unfortunate side effect of tourism and poverty, visitors or foreign residents increasingly expose many children in developing countries to sexual abuse. Local people in the Gambia report that some guests even use child sponsorship as a smokescreen for sex tourism. Britons can be prosecuted both abroad and in the UK for sexually abusing a child. If you need to report a suspicious incident, either contact a local Tourism Security Officer in the Tourism Development Area or talk to your resort rep in confidence. You can also call Crime Stoppers in confidence when you return to the UK on 0800 555 111.

– BE AS SPARING AS POSSIBLE WITH WATER AND ELECTRICITY

The peak tourist season (November-May) is also the dry season. 100,000 tourists visit the Gambia every year, competing with a population of more than 1 million for the country's scarce resources of water and electricity. Simple actions like taking a shower instead of a bath, re-using towels to save hotel laundry, and turning off lights and air-conditioning when you leave your room can make an enormous difference. Ask your hotel about their energy-saving policies.

– TRAVEL TO THE GAMBIA WITH AS LITTLE PACKAGING AS POSSIBLE.

Recycling facilities have become familiar in the UK but they are, as yet, rare in developing countries. And The Gambia's refuse disposal systems are not geared up to cope with huge amounts of waste paper, plastic and polystyrene. You can help avoid a rubbish mountain in your holiday resort by removing unnecessary packaging from anything you plan to take **before** you leave home.

– DO NOT BUY SOUVENIRS MADE FROM WILD ANIMALS: IT IS ILLEGAL

Although The Gambia is mainly known for its beaches, one of its richest natural resources is its wildlife, especially birds. Some of the rarest bird species in Africa can be spotted in The Gambia. It is illegal – and punishable by fine or imprisonment – to possess wild animal products such as skins, turtle shells or antelope horns. You can report any violation in confidence by contacting the Department of Parks and Wildlife Management on 375 888. Without a government license it is also an offence to hunt, kill or injure any wild animal or bird.

– KEEP DAMAGE TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT TO A MINIMUM

If you go on an up-country excursion, stick to footpaths and marked paths. Do not remove any animal or vegetable matter. Be careful with matches and cigarettes, for fear of causing a bush fire. Respect private property which, unlike at home, may not be fenced off.

FOR MORE INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

The Bradt Travel Guide (2001) By Craig Emms and Linda Barnett.
Published by Bradt Travel Guides Ltd, UK and the Globe Pequot Press Inc. USA.

The GoodTourist in The Gambia, published by TheGoodTourist, Sweden, available in book shops in the UK and Ireland, distributed by Vine House Distribution and from www.dengodeturisten.se.

Michael Tomkinson's Gambia, available in paperback and Hardback with pull-out sections on hotels and lodges.

A Field Guide to the Birds of The Gambia and Senegal by Clive Barlow, Tim Wachter & Tony Disley, published by Pica Press, England

Gambia Tourism Authority:
<http://www.visitthegambia.gm>

ASSET (Association of Small-Scale Enterprises in Tourism)
www.asset-gambia.com

Makasutu Wildlife Trust
Email: drumohq@qanet.gm Tel: (220) 782633
A charity which aims to help protect the wildlife and wild habitats of The Gambia

Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism
www.thecode.org

www.makeholidaysgreener.org.uk