

The Gambia

The tiny sliver of The Gambia is wedged into surrounding Senegal, and is either seen as a splinter in its side, or the tongue that makes it speak, depending on who you talk to. For most travellers, it's an easily negotiated country with a magnificent shoreline that invites visitors to laze and linger. But there's more to Africa's smallest country than sun and surf. Small fishing villages, nature reserves and historical slaving stations are all within easy reach of the clamorous resort zones on the Atlantic. Like a green belt around the coast, this area is dotted with inspired community projects, star-studded ecolodges and small wildlife parks that make this tiny nation a key player in responsible tourism.

Bird lovers might be tempted to book an annual holiday here (and many do). On a leisurely river cruise, you'll easily spot over 100 species, as your pirogue charts a leisurely course through mangrove-lined wetlands and lush gallery forests. Even if your ornithological skills don't go beyond identifying an inner-city pigeon, you'll be tempted to wield binoculars here, and can rely on an excellent network of trained guides to help you tell a pelican from a flamingo.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 11,300 sq km
- **Capital** Banjul
- **Country code** ☎ 220
- **Famous for** Being the smallest African country; the *kora*; birds and beaches
- **Languages** Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, English
- **Money** Dalasi (D); US\$1 = D26.48; €1 = D35.22
- **Population** 1.6 million
- **Visa** Not needed for nationals of Commonwealth countries, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States) or Scandinavian countries. One-month visas of around US\$45 for all others. To be purchased before travel.



HOW MUCH?

- **Soft drink** D20
- **Newspaper** D20
- **Sandwich** D70
- **French bread** D10
- **One hour's internet access** D30

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol/gas** D30
- **1L of bottled water** D30
- **Bottle of Julbrew** D25
- **Souvenir T-shirt** D200 to D500
- **Shwarma** D60

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Atlantic coast resorts** (p298) Fabulous food to indulge in before partying the night away.
- **Janjambureh** (Georgetown; p316) Upriver cruises past islands, small holiday camps and nature reserves.
- **Gambia River National Park** (p317) Chimps to chatter with and tropical islands.
- **Banjul** (p295) Bargain/negotiate in crammed Albert Market.
- **Kartong** (p310) The sun slides into the Atlantic in front of your exclusive ecolodge.
- **Makasutu Culture Forest** (p311) The whole country is squeezed into 10,000 hectares of abundant nature.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Over a long weekend, you can explore quite a large part of the Gambian coastal area. Spend a good amount of time in bars and on the beaches of the Atlantic coast (p298), tying in the occasional day trip to the surrounding areas. The busy market town of Serekunda (p298) is close by, and the pretty museum and bird reserve of Tanji (p308). Southwards of Tanji, the ecofriendly lodgings, empty beaches and community activities of Gunjur (p310) and Kartong (p310) invite you to linger.
- **One week** Start your trip as above, then head from Lamin to Makasutu Culture Forest (p311). Spend the night in Gambia's most exclusive hotel, then visit

Abuko Nature Reserve (p311), Gambia's smallest stretch of protected nature, and suck oysters at Lamin Lodge (p312), a creaking wooden restaurant nestled in the mangroves. The small and dusty capital, Banjul (p294), sits just 20 minutes from the coastal resorts, and tempts with a lively market and colonial architecture. Near the airport, you can taste fresh food at the community-supportive Gambia is Good Farm Yard (see the boxed text, p312). Get up early, catch the ferry to the north bank and visit Jufureh (p314) and beautiful Ginak Island (p313).

- **Two weeks** Ambitious travellers can visit almost the entire country in a couple of weeks. Having spent the first week in the proximity of the coastal resorts, treat yourself to a river trip up to Janjambureh (p316). Or follow the southern shore by road, stopping at Bintang Bolong (p314), then carrying on to Janjambureh, from where you can visit the chimp project at Gambia River National Park (p317) and check out the busy market of Basse Santa Su (p317).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Gambia's tourist season is almost entirely concentrated during the dry, cooler months from November to February, when daytime temperatures reach a maximum of around 24°C (75°F). This is also the best time to watch wildlife and birds. From mid-February to April, the average daytime maximums rise to 26°C (79°F).

The wet season starts around late June and lasts until late September. During this time, temperatures rise to around 30°C (86°F). The rains wash away some of the roads, rendering certain journeys upcountry impossible. Malaria is widespread and the stifling heat can become uncomfortable. On the other hand, everything is greener, and many places reduce their prices by up to 50% (unless they close completely).

HISTORY

Ancient stone circles, such as the famous Wassu group in eastern Gambia (a Unesco World Heritage Site), and burial mounds indicate that this part of West Africa has been inhabited for at least 1500 years.

By the 13th century, the area had been absorbed into the Empire of Mali, which