

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 sandy 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 more than 100 species, as your *pirogue* charts an unhurried 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** 11,295 sq km
- **ATMs** At banks in Banjul, on the Atlantic Coast, in Serekunda and at the airport
- **Borders** Senegal
- **Budget** US\$40 to US\$80
- **Capital** Banjul
- **Languages** English, Mandinka, Wolof, Pulaar (Fula)
- **Money** Dalasi; US\$1 = D26; €1 = D37
- **Population** 1.7 million
- **Seasons** Dry (November to May), wet (June to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 220; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC
- **Visa** One-month visas cost US\$45 (purchase before travel) but are not needed for citizens of the British Commonwealth, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Scandinavian or Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States) countries



HOW MUCH?

- **Soft drink** US\$0.75
- **Newspaper** US\$0.75
- **Sandwich** US\$3
- **French bread** US\$0.30
- **1hr internet** US\$1

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol** US\$1
- **1L of bottled water** US\$1
- **Bottle of JulBrew** US\$0.75
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$7 to US\$10
- **Shwarma** US\$2.20

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Atlantic Coast resorts** (p324) Indulge in fabulous food, then party the night away.
- **Abuko Nature Reserve** (p330) Look out for rare birds and giant crocodiles in one of Africa's smallest nature reserves.
- **Gambia River National Park** (p332) Chat with chimps and cruise past tropical islands.
- **Kartong** (p330) Watch the sun slide into the Atlantic from your exclusive ecolodge.
- **Makasutu Culture Forest** (p330) Tour the whole country, squeezed into 1000 hectares of abundant nature.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Most tourists travel to the Gambia during the dry and relatively cool months from November to February (daytime maximums around 24°C). This is also the best time to watch wildlife and birds.

The rainy season starts around late June and lasts until late September, when 30°C feels even hotter due to humidity. Many hotels and restaurants close during the wet months.

ITINERARIES

- **One Week** Spend a good amount of time at the beaches of the Atlantic Coast (p324), and tie in the occasional day trip to the busy market of Serekunda (p329), sleepy Banjul (p321), the pretty museum of Tanji (p330), Makasutu Culture Forest (p330) and Abuko Nature Reserve (p330).

- **Two Weeks** Follow the one-week itinerary, then go on a *Roots* tour to Jufureh (p331) and travel upriver to Baobolong Wetland Reserve (p331), Gambia River National Park (p332), Janjangbureh (p331) and Basse Santa Su (p332).

HISTORY

The Empires of Ghana (5th to 11th centuries) and Mali (13th to 15th centuries) extended their influence over the region that is now the Gambia. By 1456 the first Portuguese navigators landed on James Island, turning the place into a strategic trading point.

Built in 1651 by Baltic Germans, the James Island fort was claimed by the British in 1661 but changed hands several times. It was an important collection point for slaves until the abolition of slavery in 1807. New forts were built at Barra and Bathurst (now Banjul), to enforce compliance with the Abolition Act.

The British continued to extend their influence further upstream until the 1820s, when the territory was declared a British protectorate ruled from Sierra Leone. In 1886 Gambia became a Crown colony.

Gambia became self-governing in 1963, although it took two more years until real independence was achieved. Gambia became the Gambia, Bathurst became Banjul, and David Jawara, leader of the People's Progressive Party, became Prime Minister Dawda Jawara and converted to Islam, while the queen remained head of state.

High groundnut prices and the advent of package tourism led to something of a boom in the 1960s. Jawara consolidated his power, and became president when the Gambia became a fully fledged republic in 1970. The economic slump of the 1980s provoked social unrest. Two coups were hatched – but thwarted with Senegalese assistance. This co-operation led to the 1982 confederation of the two countries under the name of Senegambia, but the union collapsed by 1989. Meanwhile, corruption increased, economic decline continued and popular discontent rose. In July 1994, Jawara was overthrown in a reportedly bloodless coup led by Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh. After a brief flirtation with military dictatorship, the 30-year-old Jammeh bowed to international pressure, inaugurated a second republic, turned civilian and won the 1996 election comfortably.