

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 from the clamorous resort zones at the coast, and Gambia's vibrant culture is always there to be taken in by open-eyed visitors. Traditional wrestling matches regularly take place in Serekunda's arenas and the striking performances of griots can be experienced during weddings, baptisms or public concerts.

Bird lovers will easily be seduced by this compact country. On a tour upriver, the cries of over 300 species will follow you as your pirogue charts a leisurely course through mangrove-lined wetlands. 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 = D50; €1 = D34
- **Population** 1.6 million
- **Visa** Not needed for nationals of Commonwealth countries, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Ecowas or Scandinavian countries. One-month visas of around US\$45 for all others. Best purchased before travel – can be difficult to obtain at the border.



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Atlantic Coast resorts** (p303) Watch the sun slide into the Atlantic from a hammock on the beach.
- **Georgetown** (p320) Tour upriver, past islands, tiny *campements* and nature reserves.
- **Abuko Nature Reserve** (p315) Spot birds, monkeys and crocodiles in Gambia's tiniest national park.
- **Banjul** (p306) Negotiate a bargain in crammed Albert Market.
- **Gunjur & Kartong** (p313) Taste tranquil village life in tiny fishing communities.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Over a long weekend, you can explore quite a good part of the Gambian coastal area. Spend a good amount of time at the beaches of the **Atlantic Coast** (p303), and tie in the occasional day trip to the surrounding areas. The busy market of **Serekunda** (p303) is close by, and the pretty museum and bird reserve of **Tanji** (p313), as well as the small fishing villages of **Gunjur** (p313) and **Kartong** (p314), which are only a short distance further along the coast. **Abuko Nature Reserve** (p315), Gambia's smallest stretch of protected nature, is only a short drive away from the Atlantic Coast. A trip here can also be combined with a meal at **Lamin Lodge** (p315), a creaking wooden restaurant nestled in the mangroves.
- **One Week** Start your trip as above, then head from Lamin to the culture forest of **Makasutu** (p316). If you're lucky, you might be able to spend the night in Gambia's most exclusive hotel. The small and dusty capital **Banjul** (p298) sits just 30 minutes from the coastal resorts, and tempts with a lively market and great colonial architecture. Take the ferry to the north bank, for a visit to **Jufureh** (p317) and the beautiful **Ginak Island** (p317).
- **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 **Georgetown** (p320). If that's beyond budget, you can follow the southern shore by road, stopping at **Bintang Bolong** (p319), then carrying on to **Georgetown** (p320), from

where you can take pirogue excursions to **Gambia River National Park** (p321) and visit **Basse Santa Su** (p321).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

By far the most popular time for tourists to visit The Gambia is the period from November to February, when conditions are dry and relatively cool, with average day time maximum temperatures around 24°C (75°F). This is also the best time to watch wildlife and birds. From mid-February to April, the average day time 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). It's the time most tourists avoid. The rains wash away some of the roads, rendering certain journeys upcountry impossible. Malaria is widespread and the stifling and humid heat can become uncomfortable. But there's a positive side to this, too. Everything is greener, independent travellers will enjoy the absence of large tourist groups, and many places reduce their prices by up to 50%.

October and November are fairly dry, though very hot – if you can take the temperatures, this is a great time to come. You can still enjoy the sight of lush greens, swelling rivers and large waterfalls, while staying dry yourself. The beaches aren't packed yet, and you're bound to find a hotel room.

HOW MUCH?

- **Soft drink** D15
- **Newspaper** D10
- **Sandwich** D50
- **French bread** D8
- **1 hour Internet** D30

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L of petrol/gas** D30
- **1L of bottled water** D30
- **Bottle of Julbrew** D20
- **Souvenir T-shirt** D200-500
- **Shwarma** D50

THE GAMBIA

The Gambia's official name always includes 'The', but this is often omitted in everyday situations. In this book we have usually omitted 'The' for reasons of clarity and to ensure a smooth-flowing text.

HISTORY

Ancient stone circles, such as the famous Wassu group in Eastern Gambia, and burial mounds indicate that this part of West Africa has been inhabited by ancient civilisations for at least 1500 years.

By the 13th century, the area had been absorbed into the Empire of Mali, which stretched between present-day Senegal and Niger. Mali's influence began to wane in the mid-15th century, when it was eclipsed by the more powerful Empire of Songhai. The gradual disintegration of the Empire of Mali caused a significant migratory movement of the Malinké towards the valley of the Gambia River. They brought Islam with them, and became known as the Mandinka – a Malinké branch with distinctive culture.

The first Europeans to reach Gambia were Portuguese explorers in 1455. By 1650, they had been eclipsed by the British, who established Fort James on an island 25km upstream from the mouth of the Gambia River. Twenty years later, the French built a rival fort at nearby Albreda, and during the 17th and 18th centuries, the French and British vied for control of the region's trade.

While the Europeans traded tobacco and gunpowder for ivory and gold, it was the purchase of slaves for shipment that most upset the traditional balance. Encouraged by European traders, local chiefs invaded neighbouring tribes and took captives, selling them to the Europeans. In 1783, Britain gained all rights to trade on the Gambia River, and Fort James became one of West Africa's most infamous slave shipment points.

The Colonial Period

When the British abolished slavery in 1807, Royal Navy ships began capturing slave ships of other nations, and Fort James was converted from a dungeon into a haven. As part of this crusade, in 1816, the British built a fort on Banjul Island, and established a settlement that was named Bathurst.

The Gambia River protectorate was administered from Sierra Leone until 1888, when Gambia became a full colony. For the next 75 years though, Gambia was almost forgotten, and administration was limited to a few British district commissioners and the local chiefs they appointed. Britain actually tried to trade Gambia for other colonial territories, but no one was interested.

In the 1950's, Gambia's groundnut plantations were improved as a way of increasing export earnings, and other agricultural schemes were implemented. But there was little else in the way of services; by the early 1960's, Gambia had fewer than 50 primary schools and only a handful of doctors.

Throwing off the British Yoke

In 1960, when other West African nations had already gained independence, Dawda Jawara founded the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The political landscape was hardly developed apart from that, and, given the colony's small size, Britain doubted that an independent Gambia could be economically self-sustaining.

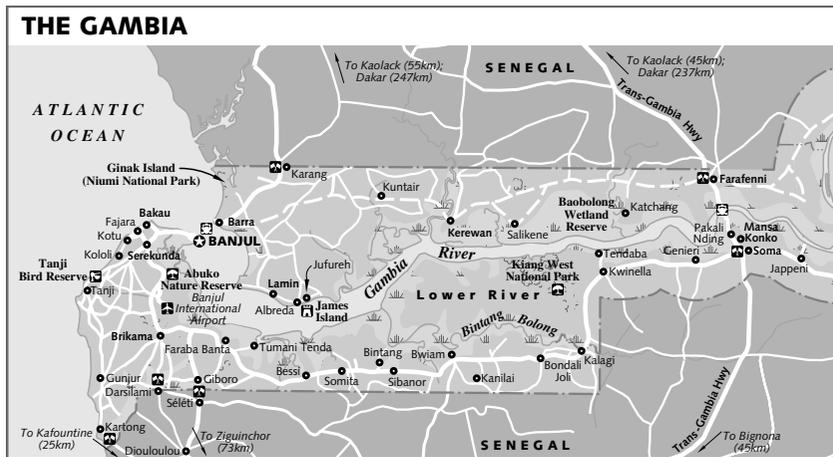
Still, Gambia became independent in 1965. Jawara became prime minister, and Britain's Queen Elizabeth II remained titular head of state. Bathurst, now renamed Banjul, became the country's capital.

A viable future still seemed unlikely, but during the next 10 years, the world price for groundnuts increased and Gambia became a popular tourist destination, both factors which boosted the local economy.

In 1970, Gambia became a fully independent republic, with Jawara as president. Opposition parties were tolerated, though not encouraged, and the Jawara government was accused of neglect and mismanagement.

The first signs of discontent came in 1980, when disaffected soldiers staged a coup. In accordance with a mutual defence pact, the Senegalese army helped oust the rebels and, acknowledging his debt, Jawara announced that the armies of Gambia and Senegal would be integrated. In 1982, the Senegambian Confederation came into effect. Although political unity seemed a good idea, relations were never completely relaxed and, by 1989, the confederation was dissolved.

Meanwhile, groundnut prices began to fall and restructuring by the International



Monetary Fund (IMF) resulted in reduced agricultural subsidies and even more dissatisfaction in rural areas. Despite this, and in the face of frequent allegations of incompetence and corruption, Jawara remained popular throughout the 1980s.

The 1990s

In April 1992 President Jawara and the PPP were re-elected for a sixth term. To the outside world, Jawara appeared to remain popular. It came as a surprise, therefore, when he was overthrown on 22 July 1994 by young military officers in a reportedly bloodless coup. The coup leader, 29-year-old Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, announced a new government, to be headed by the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC). Jammeh initially promised that the AFPRC would be back in the barracks within a few months, but when this promise went unfulfilled, aid donors and the World Bank threatened to cut their support, and Gambia's tourist industry was badly affected.

In early 1995, Jammeh pragmatically switched tack and announced that elections would be held the following year. In March 1995, the British Foreign Office advised tourists that Gambia was safe again, and tourism picked up.

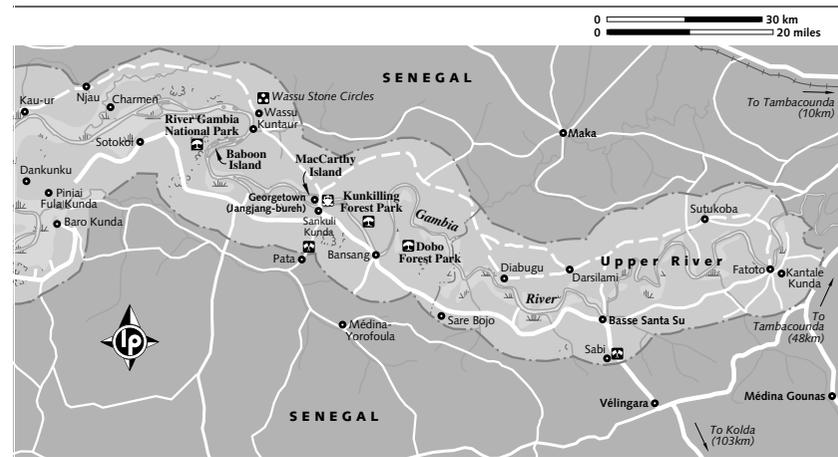
The 1996 elections were won by the APRC (now neatly renamed the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction), and Jammeh was made president, completing his smooth transition from

minor army officer to head of state in just over two years.

To consolidate this support, Jammeh announced a series of ambitious schemes to rebuild the country's infrastructure and economy. A new airport was constructed, a national television station opened and new clinics and schools were promised for the upcountry provinces. Despite a series of human rights abuses that included the shooting of several protesting students in 2001, many people came to regard Jammeh as a force for good, and in October 2001, voted him into a second five-year term.

Gambia Today

At the time of writing, the country was again preparing for elections, this time against a rather sinister background. The assassination of prominent journalist Deyda Heydara in 2004, which came only days after he had expressed his opposition to a controversial media law, reinforced feelings of oppression. In March 2006, international observers were once again alerted to the political situation in The Gambia when several high ranking military officers were arrested on claims of an attempted coup d'état – one of several such claims Jammeh has made during his time in power. Only a few months before the presidential polls, this was widely interpreted as a way of 'cleansing' the government of rivals, and seems indicative of the way elections might be handled.



THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Holiday brochures like to describe Gambia as the 'Smiling Coast', a welcoming 'gateway to Africa', where local culture is easily accessible. Wiping the gloss off those descriptions, some of the smile still remains, though real hospitality is easier found upcountry, away from the coastal resorts where mass tourism has somewhat distorted social relations and the respectful interaction otherwise typical of the country.

Years of authoritarian rule and the increasing repression exerted by Gambia's government have also resulted in a certain climate of distrust. Conversations are often conducted with care, and few people will express their views on governmental politics openly – you never know who might be listening. Short-term travellers might not readily notice this, seeing that the government is keen to present a gleaming holiday image to the tourist community, whose dollars are vital to the local economy. Yet being aware of the troubles that plague the population will help you to understand silences in conversation or the avoidance of topics, and gradually grant you an insight into the real Gambia, the one that lies beyond the polished smiles and tourist hustling.

Daily Life

FAMILY LIFE

In Gambia, as anywhere else in Africa, the extended family plays an important role

in a person's life. The network of relatives widens even more in polygamous families, which still account for the majority of marriages in Gambia. Even relatively poor men sometimes marry a couple of wives, and with an average childbirth rate of around five, this means that a 'small' household can quickly number up to 10 offspring.

Unmarried children, particularly women, stay at their parents' home until they are married, which is when men found their own household, and women join that of their husband. After a divorce, women usually join the home of their parents. Single-women or single-mother households are virtually unheard of, with the exception of a growing number of households whose heads of family have left the country for Europe, sending money home to support their wives, children and parents at home.

EDUCATION

Despite some measures taken by the government, Gambia still suffers fairly low literacy rates. 40% of boys are estimated to be able to read and write, and for girls this drops by another 15% to 20%. In theory, primary education is available to all children. In reality, it's family income, rather than academic performance, that determines which children go to school and how far up the ladder they progress. While numbers are still fairly equal in the early years of primary school, many girls don't even complete their primary exams, and

even fewer carry on to the secondary level. If there's not enough money to send every child to school, boys will usually be the first to benefit, while the girls keep helping out in the household. At secondary or university level, girls often drop out if they are getting married and or having children.

Population

With around 115 people per sq km, Gambia has one of the highest population densities in Africa. The strongest concentration of people is around the urbanised zones at the Atlantic coast, the area many people migrate to from the upcountry towns to try and make a living from the tourist industry. 45% of Gambia's population are under 14 years old.

The main ethnic groups are the Mandinka (comprising around 42%), the Wolof (about 16%) and the Fula (around 18%). Smaller groups include the Serer and Jola. With the exception of the Jola, these ethnic groups are structured in a hierarchical fashion that has its origins in West Africa's pre-colonial empires. The freeborn (rulers and traders) are traditionally at the top of society, followed by professional occupational groups, including griots and blacksmiths, and formerly, slaves. These structures still determine much of social life, though other aspects, such as economic success and education are also relevant.

RELIGION

Islam is the dominant religion – about 90% of Gambia's population is Muslim. The Wolof, Fula and Mandinka people are almost exclusively Muslim, while the Christian faith is most widespread among the Jola and to a lesser extent the Serer. Traditional religious forms (sometimes called animism) are most commonly practiced in the predominantly Christian areas. Elements of traditional religious practice have found their way both into Islam and Christianity.

ARTS Architecture

Banjul has several grand homes once occupied by the colonial elite, as well as unpretentious Krio-style homes, some still occupied by the descendants of freed-slave families who moved to Banjul from Sierra

Leone in the early 1800s. Not far from Banjul you can see the remains of Fort James (James Island) and Fort Bullen (Barra); British colonial fortifications. For contemporary architecture, visit Arch 22 and Banjul Airport, both designed by Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby.

Literature

Gambia doesn't exactly have a thriving literature scene – the fact that the works of Gambia's best-known novelist, William Conton, date from the 1960s is indicative of this. The 1960s classic *The African* is his most famous work. Authors such as Ebou Dibba (*Chaff on the Wind*; 1986) and Tijan Salleh (*Kora Land*; 1989) are leading writers of the new generation.

Music

Gambia is a major centre of the *kora*, an icon of African music throughout the world whose history is deeply connected to The Gambia. This tiny country became a veritable centre of *kora* playing, when Malinké groups settled in the region after the gradual collapse of the mighty Empire of Mali. For its small size, Gambia proudly boasts a wide variety of styles, notably the dry patterns of the eastern regions around Bansang and Basse Santa Su, and the softer Casamance style more common in the west of the country. Famous *kora* players include Amadou Bansang Jobarteh, Jali Nyama Suso, Dembo Konte and Malamini Jobarteh.

In the 1960s, Gambia was hugely influential in the development of modern West African music. Groups like the Afro-funky Super Eagles and singer Labah Sosse had a huge impact in Gambia, Senegal and beyond. Today, Gambia's music scene is mainly dominated by Senegalese artists and Jamaican reggae. Renowned local musicians include the *kora*-playing brothers Pa Bobo and Tata Dindin Jobarteh, singer Jelibah Kuyateh and reggae artists such as the Dancehall Masters and Rebellion the Recaller.

Painting & Sculpture

Banjul's national museum has a few good examples of traditional statues and carved masks on display. Also fascinating is the art of batik making, which contemporary artists such Baboucar Fall and Toimbo Laurens push into new creative directions.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Gambia's shape and position epitomise the absurdity of the colonial carve-up of Africa. About 300km long, but averaging only 35km wide, Gambia is entirely surrounded by Senegal, with the small exception of an 80km coastline. With only 11,295 sq km, it is the smallest country in Africa (half the size of Wales, or less than twice that of Delaware) and its territory is entirely dominated by the Gambia River.

Gambia is so flat that the Gambia River loses less than 10m in elevation over 450km between the far eastern border and Banjul, the capital, at the river's mouth.

Wildlife

ANIMALS

Gambia doesn't tempt tourists with huge mammals, though warthogs, various antelope species, monkeys, hippos and crocodiles can sometimes be seen in the national parks. But while it can't show off with mighty elephants or rhinos, Gambia beats most other destinations when it comes to birds. More than 560 species have been recorded, including many migratory species that use the coast as a flight path between Europe and the tropics. Of particular interest to ornithologists are Egyptian plovers, swallow-tailed and red-throated bee-eaters, Abyssinian rollers, painted snipes and Pel's fishing owls. Good sites for bird-watching include all the protected areas listed under national parks, but also much humbler areas, such as hotel gardens in Kololi, Gunjur and Kartong, sewage ponds in Kotu and mud flats in Banjul. Upcountry, Georgetown and Basse Santa Su are particularly rewarding.

PLANTS

Vegetation is largely determined by the land's proximity to the coast and the Gambia River, which is lined with mangroves in the saline areas and dense gallery forest further upstream. Away from the river, Gambia's position in the southern Sahel means that natural vegetation consists mostly of dry grassland and open savanna woodland.

National Parks

The Gambia has six national parks and reserves, covering 3.7% of the national land area. All, except the River Gambia National

Park (p321; also known as Baboon Island) are open to the public. Abuko Nature Reserve (p315) is a tract of gallery forest, while Kiang West National Park (p319) protects several habitats including mangroves, mud flats and dry woodland. Baobolong Wetland Reserve is north of the Gambia River, and Niimi National Park (p317) and Tanji River Bird Reserve (p313) are coastal, with dunes, lagoons, dry woodland and coastal scrub.

Several forest parks have been established to provide renewable timber stocks. Bijilo Forest Park (p306) is well-known, primarily as a nature reserve and bird-watching spot. Kunkiling and Dobo Forest Park upcountry are administered by the Central Division Forestry Project in Georgetown, and are interesting examples of community-involved protection schemes.

Environmental Issues

The main environmental issues faced by Gambia are overfishing, deforestation and coastal erosion. Caused mainly by illegal sand mining, erosion became so bad that the wide sandy beaches of the Atlantic coast literally started disappearing. A US\$20 million beach rejuvenation project, using Dutch technology to trap sand near the shore as it was washed in on the tide, brought some temporary relief. Yet sand mining continued apace, and only a few years after the beaches had been 'sprayed back on', they are once again diminishing at a rapid rate.

Away from the coast, deforestation is the biggest problem. Woodlands are cleared to match a growing demand for farmland, but trees are also felled to make firewood and charcoal, much of which is used to smoke fish (caught through overfishing). On a larger scale, forests are cleared to make room for cash crops, notably groundnuts. The Central Division Forestry Project (CDFP) tries to address the problem through educational projects that directly involve the local population in the protection efforts eg as tourist guides.

FOOD & DRINK Staples & Specialities

National dishes include *domodah*, rice with a thick, meaty groundnut sauce and *benechin*, rice cooked in tomato sauce and decorated

with carefully arranged chunks of fried fish, carrots, cassava and other vegetables.

Gambia has a rich array of locally produced juices. The most famous of those are the hibiscus drink *bissap*, ginger beer and *bouyi*, a thick, sweet juice made from the fruits of the baobab. For breakfast, the sweet herbal tea *kinkiliba* is often served. Or, for a real caffeine punch, try a glass of *ataaya*, served with the free offer of an afternoon's socialising. A local alcoholic drink is the thick and sour palm wine.

Where to Eat & Drink

Gambia's Atlantic Coast is blessed with an excellent restaurant scene. You'll find anything here, from refined local to international cuisine. If you're on a budget, you'll probably search for tiny local eateries, called chop shops. Most of those only have one dish available at any time, so you just ask what they've got, rather than to see the menu. They rarely open all day, but only serve food during lunch and dinner – and when the pots are empty at night, the place simply shuts, or serves beers only. Choose your chop shop carefully – some are of rather dubious hygienic quality.

Vegetarians & Vegans

Vegetarian food is hard to find in restaurants, and what's worse, there's little understanding why someone who can afford it won't eat meat – vegetables are for the poor. This means that when you order a dish without meat, you'll still often notice a suspicious chicken or fish flavour, just no 'bits'. Prepare for a rather limited variety of food choices during your stay.

Habits & Customs

Meals are traditionally eaten squatting on the floor, grouped around a large platter of rice and sauce. People eat the traditional rice dishes with a spoon or the hand. If you try the hand version, make sure you use your right only – the left is the hand you wipe your bum with and is strictly out at meal times.

It's usually polite to finish eating while there's still food in the bowl to show you have had enough. The shocked comments of 'you haven't eaten anything, dig in' are more an acceptance of you finishing, rather than actual invitations to eat more.

BANJUL

pop 35,000

It's hard to imagine a more unlikely, more consistently ignored capital city than the sleepy seaport Banjul. Yet despite the shadow of neglect that haunts its sand-blown streets, Banjul is truly worth a visit. Its colourful markets and hectic harbour show urban Africa at its busy best, while the old museum and fading colonial structures are imbued with a sense of history that Gambia's plush seaside resorts lack.

HISTORY

The island settlement Banjul was founded in 1816 by Captain Alexander Grant, and was first named Bathurst, after Henry Bathurst, the secretary of the British Colonial Office. It was established as an operational base from which to impede illegal human traffic, after the British Slave Trade Act of 1807 prohibited the slave trade (at least on paper).

When Gambia achieved independence in 1965, Bathurst was granted city status, became the capital of the young nation, and was soon after renamed Banjul (the Mandinka word for 'bamboo' and the island's original, local name).

ORIENTATION

The July 22 Square is the centre of town. From here, several main streets run south, including Russell St, which leads past the bustling Albert Market into Liberation St. West of the October 17 Roundabout is the old part of Banjul – a maze of narrow streets and ramshackle houses rarely visited by tourists.

July 22 Dr runs west from July 22 Square, becoming the main road out of Banjul. On the edge of the city, it goes under the vast structure of Arch 22 and turns into a dual carriageway, which, after about 3km, crosses Oyster Creek on Denton Bridge to reach the mainland proper.

INFORMATION Internet Access

Reliable Internet services include the following:

Gamtel Internet Café (July 22 Dr; per hr D30; ☎ 8am-midnight)
Quantumnet (Nelson Mandela St; per hr D30; ☎ 9am-10pm)



STREET NAME CHANGES

Most of Banjul's streets were renamed in the late '90s, and now carry the names of Gambia's heroes of independence rather than those of colonial personalities. However, local residents, including taxi drivers, tend to continue using the old names, and you'll usually get a more reliable answer asking for directions to the old names of places. The Banjul map displays the new names. Please refer to the list below for the corresponding old name.

Old name	New name	Old name	New name
Bund Rd	Kankujeri Rd	Hope St	Jallow Jallow St
Clarkson St	Rene Blain St	Independence Dr	July 22 Dr
Cotton St	Cherno Adamah Bah St	Liberation St	Wellington St
		MacCarthy Sq	July 22 Sq
Dobson St	Ma Cumba Jallow St	Marina Pde	Muammar al Gadhafi Ave
Grant St	Rev William Cole St	Orange St	Tafsir Ebou Samba St
Hagan St	Daniel Goddard St	Picton St	Davidson Carrol St
Hill St	Imam Lamin Bah St	Wellington St	Liberation St

Medical Services

Banjul Pharmacy (☎ 4227470; ☏ 9am-8.30pm)

Across the road from the hospital.

Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital (☎ 4228223; July 22 Dr) Gambia's main hospital has an A&E Department, but facilities aren't great.

Money

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 4222081; Ecowas Ave) and **IBC Bank** (☎ 4428145; Liberation St) both have ATMs that accept Visa cards and change travellers cheques. They open from 8am to 1.30pm Monday to Thursday, and from 8am to 11am Friday.

Post

Main post office (Russell St; ☏ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) Near Albert Market.

Visa Extensions

Immigration Office (☎ 4228611; OAU Blvd; ☏ 8am-4pm) Visa extensions cost D250.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Violent crime is rare in Banjul, but there are pickpockets. Their favourite hunting ground is the Barra ferry; be vigilant around the terminal and Albert Market as well. Don't enter the area behind the State House (marked as Strictly Out of Bounds on the map), or you risk difficulties with the military and police.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Banjul feels more like a very large village than a national capital, and this sleepy atmosphere has a quaint kind of charm. The

city's attraction lies not in grand sights, but in intimate details, and these are best taken in on a casual stroll around town.

Albert Market

Since its creation in the mid-19th century, **Albert Market** (Russell St), an area of frenzied buying, bartering and bargaining, has been Banjul's hub of activity. From shimmering fabrics and false plaits, fresh fruits and dried fish to tourist-tempting souvenirs at the **Craft Market**, you can find almost anything here and then some.

Arch 22

Designed by Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby, the **arch** (July 22 Dr; admission D35; ☏ 9am-11pm) is a 35m-high gateway built to celebrate the military coup of 22 July 1994. Its publicly accessible balcony grants excellent views over the city and coast. There's also a cosy café, souvenir shop and a small museum that enlightens visitors about the coup d'état.

Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital

Gambia's main health facility, the **Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital** (☎ 4226152; www.rvth.dosh.gm; July 22 Dr) not only offers emergency treatment, but also tours around its complex of late 19th century and modern buildings. A hospital visit might not sound like a seductive holiday idea, but the daily two-hour tours (free, though donations are welcome) are surprisingly interesting. They offer excellent explanations of its research projects

into malaria and hepatitis, and worthwhile, though painful, insight into the dire situation medical services face in The Gambia.

St Joseph's Adult Education and Skills Centre

Tucked away in an ancient Portuguese building, this **centre** (☎ 4228836; stjskills@qanet.com; Ecowas Ave; ☏ 9am-2pm Mon-Thu, 9am-12pm Fri) has provided training to disadvantaged women for the last 20 years. Visitors can take a free tour of sewing and tie-dye classes, and purchase their beautiful craftwork at reasonable prices in the on-site boutique.

Old Town

Heading west from the Ferry Port, towards the wide Ma Cumba Jallow St and beyond, you reach the 'old town' – a chaotic assembly of decrepit colonial buildings and Krio-style clapboard houses (steep-roofed structures with wrought-iron balconies and corrugated roofs). It's no coincidence they resemble the inner-city architecture of Freetown in Sierra Leone, as many of them still belong to families who came to Banjul from there, some as early as the 1820s.

National Museum

The **museum** (July 22 Dr; admission D25; ☏ 8am-4pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri & Sat) has some dog-eared and dated exhibits that are worth a look. Explanations are generally good, and there's a dusty but fascinating display of photos, maps and historical papers.

July 22 Square

The **square** (MacCarthy Sq), a recently greened colonial creation, was once the site of cricket matches, and is now mainly used for governmental pomp and public celebrations. Look out for the **War Memorial** and the (now dried up) **fountain** to commemorate the coronation of King George VI of Britain in 1937.

Tanbi Wetland Complex

The stretch of mangrove either side of Kankujeri Rd is known as the **Tanbi Wetland Complex**, and is a popular and easily accessible bird-watching area.

SLEEPING

Not many tourists stay in Banjul, preferring the beach and comforts of the Atlantic coast instead. However, if you want a more

African environment, you're likely to find it here.

Ferry Guesthouse (Ami's Guesthouse; ☎ 4222028; 28 Liberation St; s/d/tr D350/500/610; ☏) This simple guesthouse above a busy shop is not glamorous, but your best budget bet. It has a great balcony for watching the busy trading stalls and ferry terminal. Single room prices double if you want air-con.

Carlton Hotel (☎ 4228670; fax 4227214; 25 July 22 Dr; s/d D500/550, with air-con D800/850; ☏) This is a little more upmarket, with luxuries like running water and indoor toilets. A good-value option.

Atlantic Hotel (☎ 4228601; atlantic@corinthia.com; www.corinthiahotels.com; Muammar al Gadhafi Ave; s/d D3007/3937; ☏) This vast, plush resort hotel has numerous bars, restaurants and plenty of leisure facilities including a nightclub, massage centre and a garden created by ornithologist Clive Barlow to please the bird-watchers.

Palm Grove Hotel (☎ 4201620; www.gambia-palmgrovehotel.co.uk; s/d incl breakfast D1150/1840; ☏) About 3km from Banjul towards Serekunda, this hotel is smaller, more personal and better value than the Atlantic. It has a decent swimming beach and all the usual activities you'd expect from a resort.

EATING & DRINKING

Banjul is hardly a culinary haven, offering little beyond fast-food joints. Around the north end of Liberation St and Albert Market, you'll find several cheap chop shops and streets stalls where plates of rice and sauce start at about D25.

Ali Baba Snack Bar (☎ 4224055; Nelson Mandela St; snacks from D50, meals D150-200; ☏ 9am-5pm) More than just a kebab shop, this place is an institution with a deserved reputation for its shwarmas and felafel.

Michel's (☎ 4223108; 29 July 22 Dr; meals D150-250; ☏ 8am-11pm) This is about the only restaurant in town that can be called classy. From the breakfast menu all the way to after-dinner drinks, it offers excellent choices at decent rates.

Mandela Alles Klar Fast Food (Ecowas Ave; snacks from D30) The name is as great as the food is greasy. Sometimes nothing but a burger grilled in old fat will do, right?

King of Shwarma Café (☎ 4229799; Nelson Mandela St; meals D150-250; ☏ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This friendly place serves excellent Lebanese

food, and what's even better, large glasses of freshly pressed juice.

Bacchius Beach Bar (☎ 4227948; meals D150-300) Next to the Palm Grove Hotel, this busy little beach bar is a great place to sip a drink and dig into a platter of grilled fish.

SHOPPING

In Banjul, the best place to go shopping is Albert Market (p300). If you enter via the main entrance, you will pass stalls selling clothes, shoes, household and electrical wares and just about everything else you can imagine. Keep going and you'll reach the myriad colours and flavours of the fruit and vegetable market. Beyond here you'll find stalls catering mainly for tourists, usually called the Craft Market.

Near the main entrance, you'll also find **Kerewan Sound** (Russell St), Gambia's best place to buy CDs and cassettes, and one of the very few boutiques that sell recordings by Gambian artists.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For details of international flights to Banjul, see p326. Airline offices in and around Banjul include the following:

Air Guinée (☎ 4223296; www.mirinet.com/airguinee; 72 OAU Blvd)

Air Sénégal International (☎ 4472095; www.air-senegal-international.com; Ecowas Ave)

SN Brussels Airlines (☎ 4496301/2; www.flysnc.com; 97 Kairaba Ave, Fajara)

West Coast Airways (☎ 4201954; 7 Nelson Mandela St)

Boat

Ferries (☎ 4228205; Liberation St; passengers D10, cars D150-200) travel between Banjul and Barra, on the northern bank of the river. They are supposed to run every one to two hours from 7am until 7pm and take one hour, though delays are frequent and one ferry is often out of action.

The ferries take vehicles, but car space is limited, and you might have to wait for a couple of hours (if it's any consolation – trucks can sometimes be there for days). You buy your ticket before going through to the waiting area; keep it until getting off, as it'll be checked on the other side. If you're coming from the north side by car, you need to purchase your ticket at the office near the border (just after the junction where

the northbank road to Farafenni turns off), about 3km from Barra.

If the wait for the ferry is too long, you can also jump onto one of the large pirogues that do the same journey (D50 for a seat on a public pirogue or around D600 if you hire the whole boat). Be warned though – they can be dangerously overloaded. Fares rise sharply after dark (as does the risk).

Bush Taxi

Minibuses and Mercedes buses to Brikama and upcountry towns, and to places in southern Senegal, all go from the Serekunda garage. For details, see p312.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

A green tourist taxi from Banjul International Airport to Banjul, Serekunda, Kairaba Ave or the Atlantic coast resorts (Bakau, Fajara, Kotu and Kololi) costs around D300 to D400, depending on your destination. Fixed rates are usually printed on a board at the taxi rank, so bargaining is not required. With yellow taxis, the price you pay depends entirely on your haggling skills; expect to pay D150 to D200 to Banjul. There is no airport bus.

Minibus & Shared Taxi

Minibuses run between Banjul, Serekunda and the other coastal towns, while shared taxis run between Serekunda, Fajara and Bakau.

From Banjul, minibuses to Bakau leave from the stand opposite the Shell station on July 22 Dr. Minibuses to Serekunda and Brikama leave from a roadside corner opposite July 22 Sq. See p312 for more information.

Private Taxi

In a taxi to yourself (known as a 'town trip'), a short ride across Banjul city centre will cost about D50, after bargaining. From Banjul it costs about D150 to D200 to Bakau, Serekunda, Fajara, Kotu or Kololi.

Hiring a taxi for the day starts at D1000, and will be more if you venture beyond Banjul and the coastal resorts. For a tour out of the city, most drivers charge by the destination – the worse the roads they'll have to drive on, the steeper the price.

The best place to find a taxi at night is at the Atlantic Hotel.

ATLANTIC COAST RESORTS & SEREKUNDA

The 10km stretch of coast from Bakau and Fajara to Kotu and Kololi is the beating heart of Gambia's tourist industry. The bustling area has all the makings of a thriving holiday zone: rows of hotels and guest-houses, a wide selection of restaurants, a vibrant nightlife and packed beaches.

While it's perfectly possible to pass your days here, spread-eagled on white sand, you can also get a feel for African culture without having to venture too far from the strand. Bakau has retained the strongest local character of the four places. The 'old town', a lively concentration of clapboard, corrugated iron and colourful market stalls, begins only a few steps away from the gleaming hotel fronts. Kololi, by contrast, known to most Gambians as 'Senegambia' after the hotel of the same name, is Gambia's greatest monument to tourism. Hotels, bars, clubs, tour agencies, casinos, banks and, naturally, hustlers, operate on a crammed space stretching barely beyond a couple of streets. Don't go looking for the 'real Africa' here – that lies a short drive eastwards in Serekunda. This hot and heaving town is bursting at the seams with traffic and people. A stroll around its market (in reality the town is one big market) is highly recommended for a taste of unrelenting, in-your-face urban West Africa.

ORIENTATION

The main road from Gambia's upcountry towns goes past Banjul International Airport and reaches Serekunda, where it divides: straight ahead is the dual carriageway for about 14km to Banjul; and to the left is Kairaba Ave, which leads to Bakau, Fajara, Kotu and Kololi.

In Bakau and Fajara, the main drag is Atlantic Rd, which runs parallel to the coast, linking Kairaba Ave and Old Cape Rd. Just south of Atlantic Rd, and running parallel to it, is Garba Jahumpa Rd (formerly, and still better known as New Town Rd). Badala Park Way branches off Kairaba Ave at the Fajara end and leads to the hotel/beach areas of Kotu and Kololi. It crosses Kairaba Ave at the country's only set of traffic lights.

INFORMATION Bookshops

Timbooktoo (☎ 4494345; cnr Kairaba Ave & Garba Jahumpa Rd, Fajara; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Thu, 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Fri, 10am-8pm Sat) An excellent shop with a good range of fiction, non-fiction, mainstream fiction, maps and local and international papers.

Cultural Centres

Alliance Franco-Gambienne (☎ 4375418; www.alliancefrance.gm; Kairaba Ave, Serekunda; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) At the southern end of Kairaba Ave, it runs French and Wolof courses, and has regular concerts, films, shows and exhibitions. There's a good, cheap restaurant at the back.

Internet Access

Getting online isn't a problem at this well organised part of the coast. Many of the large hotels have Internet cafés, and Kairaba Ave is well served. The following usually have good connections:

Gamtel Kololi (☎ 4377878; Senegambia Strip; ☎ 9am-11pm); Serekunda (Westfield Junction; ☎ 8am-11pm)
Quantumnet (☎ 4494514; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Next to Timbooktoo bookshop.

Medical Services

Medical Research Council (MRC; ☎ 4495446; Fajara) If you have a potentially serious illness, head for this British-run clinic, off Atlantic Rd.

Stop Steps Pharmacy (☎ 4371344; Serekunda; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) One of the best-stocked pharmacy chains around, with branches all along the coast.

Westfield Clinic (☎ 4398448) Another option, at Westfield Junction in Serekunda.

Money

The main banks, Standard Chartered, Trust Bank and IBC have branches all across the resort zone. Banks open in the morning from 8.30am or 9am to noon or 2pm, in the afternoon from 4pm to 6pm, and for a few hours on Saturday morning. There are also a few exchange bureaux scattered around the busy tourist miles, some part of supermarkets, but you're unlikely to get a better rate.

Police have seriously cracked down on Gambia's once flourishing black market, and though you can usually find someone to change some cash after hours, it's too risky to be worthwhile. Chances of fraud are high, and the rates aren't better than the official ones.

ATMs have finally reached Gambia and the banks listed below all have withdrawal facilities. Even though they might claim to accept the whole range of cards, only VISA tends to work. Unless things have changed, you'll also find that withdrawal limits are very tight, usually not exceeding D2000.

IBC Bank (☎ 4377878; Sukuta Rd, Serekunda) Next to the Shell Petrol Station.

Standard Chartered Bank Bakau (☎ 4495046); Serekunda (☎ 4396102; Kairaba Ave)

Trust Bank Bakau (☎ 4495486); Kololi (☎ 4465303; Badala Park Way, near 'Senegambia'); Serekunda (☎ 4398042; Westfield Junction)

The Gambia Experience Office next to the Senegambia Hotel gives cash advances on Mastercards for a fee.

Post

Main post office (just off Kairaba Ave) It's about halfway between Fajara and Serekunda.

Telephone

There are Gamtel offices in Bakau, Kololi and Serekunda, and private *télécentres* (phone offices) are everywhere, particularly in Serekunda and just off Kairaba Ave in Fajara.

Tourist information

Tropical Tour & Souvenirs (☎ 4460536; tropicaltour@gamtel.gm; Kairaba Hotel) A great place for information materials, maps, books and insightful advice.

Travel Agencies

Efficient agencies include the following:

Afri-Swiss Travels (☎ 4371762; Fajara) A long-standing operator with good reports. Also does ticketing.

Gambia River Experience (☎ 4494360; www.gambiariver.com; Fajara) Has excellent river tours.

Gambia Tours (☎ 4462601/2; www.gambiatours.gm; off Coastal Rd) A large, independent operator.

Olympic Travel (☎ 4497204; Garba Jahumpa Rd)

A good place for booking tickets, tours, and all general enquiries.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Petty thefts and muggings occur occasionally, particularly on the path around Fajara golf course and the beaches. Single women should avoid being alone on beaches, particularly after dark.

One of the major annoyances in this area is the unwanted attention of 'bum-

sters' or 'beach boys', who loiter in the tourist areas, almost forcing their services as guides onto travellers. The lack of any welfare system and high unemployment means that many young men see hustling tourists and offering sexual services as their only chance of making money. Still, their persistence can be annoying indeed, particularly to women. Be firm but polite in declining any unwanted offers, and for safety, rely on the services of the official tourist guides (OTGs) based outside Kairaba Hotel.

SIGHTS

Kachikaly Crocodile Pool

In the heart of Bakau village, the **Kachikaly Crocodile Pool** (admission D25; ☎ 9am-6pm) is a popular tourist attraction. For locals, it's a sacred site, and they traditionally come here to pray, as the crocodiles represent the power of fertility. For tourists, the pool is a great place to see crocodiles up-close, without having your leg chewed off. The large, lethargic 'Charley' can even be patted. At the entrance to the pool, there's also a collection of musical instruments and various other artefacts on display.

Botanic Gardens

Also in Bakau, the **gardens** (☎ 7774482; adult/child D50/free; ☎ 8am-4pm) are worth a look. They were established in 1924, during colonial times, and are a peaceful place that offers some shade in calm surroundings, and good bird-spotting chances.

Bijilo Forest Park

The **park** (admission D30; ☎ 8am-6pm) is a small wildlife reserve on the coast, just a short walk from Kololi. It's a beautiful place to visit, either on your own, or on a guided walk (4.5km, one to two hours). A well-maintained series of trails of different lengths leads through the lush vegetation, and you'll easily see monkeys and numerous birds (mainly on the coast side). The dunes near the beach are covered in grass and low bush, with tall palms just behind. Further back, away from the dunes, the trees are large, dense and covered in creepers. Many trees are labelled, and you can buy a small booklet (D30) that tells you a little about their natural history and traditional uses.

ACTIVITIES

Fishing

The **Sportsfishing Centre** (☎ 7765765) at Denton Bridge is the place to organise your fishing tours. The two following companies are based there.

Gambia Fishing (☎ 7721228; www.gambiafishing.com) Specialises in lure and anchored bottom fishing. They're very friendly and able to accommodate both experienced anglers and those new to the game.

Greenies Gamefishing (☎ 9907073; greenies@gambiafishing.freemove.co.uk) Malcolm 'Greenie' Green specialises in blue water fishing.

Golf

Fajara Golf Club (☎ 4495456) is the country's main golf course. The club also has a pool and courts for tennis, squash and badminton. Temporary membership is available by the day. Enquire about rates.

Swimming

Most beaches in this area are relatively safe for swimming, though currents can sometimes be strong. Always check conditions locally before plunging in – people do drown every year in the zone. The entire coastline suffers badly from erosion, and the sand strands that lure tourists here are gradually disappearing. The best beaches are in Fajara and Kotu.

If the Atlantic doesn't appeal, all the major hotels have swimming pools. If you're not a guest, you might have to pay, or buy your swim with a sandwich and a soft drink.

Watersports

Some of the large hotels, notably Ocean Bay, Atlantic and Combo Beach, offer various water sports to guests. Most of their activities are run by the **Watersports Centre** (☎ 7765765) at Denton Bridge, so you might as well go straight to them to organise your jet-skiing, parasailing, windsurfing or catamaran trips.

COURSES

Drumming and dancing courses are popular. The Safari Gardens Hotel has classes in **African Dance** (per person D50; ☎ 6pm to 7pm Tue) and **African Drumming** (per person D150; ☎ 5.30pm to 6.30pm Wed). Half or all day batik courses (D400) can be arranged on request.

Batafon Arts (☎ in UK 01273 605791, in Gambia 4392517; www.batafonarts.co.uk; Kairaba Ave, Serekunda)

offers excellent African percussion and dance tuition, from one-off lessons to drumming holidays.

SLEEPING

You'll find everything from plush resorts to grotty dives on the Atlantic coast. Competition is so intense that if you're here out of the peak season you'll almost always be able to negotiate a better deal, even at the top places.

The list here is not exhaustive, but gives a good cross-section of options, especially for independent travellers. All rooms have bathrooms unless otherwise specified.

Budget

BAKAU

Jabo Guesthouse (☎ 4494906, 7777082; 9 Old Cape Rd; d D500) This down-to-earth place has surprisingly large, clean rooms, some with self-catering facilities.

Bakau Lodge (☎ /fax 4496103; d from D650; 📺) This small place with spotless, two-room bungalows set around a swimming pool comes as a real surprise, right in the heart of the Bakau 'hood. Excellent value.

Romana Hotel (☎ 4495127; afransromanahotel@yahoo.co.uk; Atlantic Rd; r D350) Rooms are basic, but if you close the door and sit in the pretty garden space, you'll probably make your peace with this place.

FAJARA

Kanifeng YMCA (☎ 4392647; www.ymca.gm; Kanifeng; B&B D175) The huge building has just about passable rooms for the budget-bound. Ask for the self-contained ones on the top floor.

KOTU

Teranga Suites (☎ 4461961; off Kololi Rd; s/d/ste D500/750/1000; 📺) This jewel of a guesthouse has airy rooms and large, self-catering suites with bright, wooden décor and that rarity of really comfortable mattresses. Perfect for families (cots can be arranged).

SEREKUNDA

Sukuta Camping (☎ 9917786; www.campingsukuta.de in German; camping per person D100, per vehicle D14, s/d D235/340, d with bathroom D465) This well-organised camping site in Sukuta (south-west of Serekunda) also offers comfortable rooms. The friendly owners Joe and Claudia are experienced overland travellers, and

have thought of everything a desert-driver might need, including long-term parking, repair shops and car sales advice.

Praia Motel (☎ 4394887; Mame Jout St; r D300; 🏠) A few minutes' walk off Sayer Jobe Ave, these simple but clean rooms in a very local part of Serekunda are worth your consideration. Amiable manager, Mr Ceeseay, is full of advice and serves cheap beer, too.

Midrange

Several of the hotels in this range are small, owner-managed, and more used to dealing with individual travellers than the larger, top-end establishments. All rooms have their own bathroom and most hotels accept credit cards.

BAKAU

Cape Point Hotel (☎ 4495005; Cape Point; d D1000; 🏠 🍷) At the east end of Atlantic Rd, this family-run place is set in attractive gardens, and is pleasantly low-key compared to the mighty tourist palaces next door.

Roc Height's Lodge (☎ 4495428; www.rocheightslodge.com; Samba Breku Road; s/d D1000/1500) Places this nice are a rare treat anywhere. This three-storey villa sits in a quiet garden, and has stylish rooms and apartments with fully equipped kitchen.

Effu's Villa (☎ 4494699; d/apt D600/650) Lovely Effu has turned a few rooms in her compound into quite impressive self-catering lodgings. Rooms are spacious, clean, and even have hot water. Run by a woman and in a hassle-free zone, this is perfect for lone female travellers. Find your way to Tina's Grill (below the Swedish Embassy) and ask for directions, it's five minutes from there.

FAJARA

Safari Garden Hotel (☎ 4495887; www.gamspirit.com; s/d incl breakfast D950/1600; 🏠 🍷) This peaceful, popular place in the heart of Fajara has pleasingly decorated rooms that make you look forward to spending the night here – should you be able to tear yourself away from the animated conversations to be had in Flavour's restaurant, the hotel's centre piece. Management is friendly and exceptionally well-informed.

Leybato (☎ 4497186; www.leybato.abc.gm; Fajara Beach; d D800-900, with kitchen D1200) This calm and cosy guesthouse overlooks the ocean from one of the best locations anywhere on the

coast. Rooms are variable, the kitchen-types tend to be better, but you're unlikely to find better beachfront value.

Fajara Guesthouse (☎ 4496122; fax 4494365; r with breakfast D650-950; 🏠) This cosy place exudes family vibes, with its leafy courtyard and welcoming lounge. Rooms are basic but clean, and some are big enough to house couples with children.

Francisco's Hotel (☎/fax 4495332; Atlantic Rd; s/d D650/850; 🏠 🍷) The leafy restaurant enjoys a good reputation, and has plenty more character than the rather ordinary rooms, but the value is about right.

KOTU

Mannjai Lodge (☎ 4463414; manlodge@gamtel.gm; Mannjai Kunda; s/d/apt incl breakfast from D500/750/1000; 🏠 🍷) This pretty-in-pink place has large rooms and self-catering apartments grouped around a lively bar and a dodgy pool.

KOLOLI

Balmoral Apartments (☎ 4461079; www.balmoral-apartments.com; Kololi Rd; s/d D925/1680; 🏠 🍷) East off Badala Park Way, these slick self-catering apartments are excellent value.

Holiday Beach Club Hotel (☎ 4460418; www.holidaybeachclubgambia.com; Senegambia; s/d 1500/2000; 🏠 🍷) Slightly removed from the busiest hectare of the Senegambia tourist mile, this place has comfortable bungalows set in a lush tropical garden.

Sarge's Hotel (Tafbel; ☎ 4460510; www.sargeshotel.gm; s/d incl breakfast D1260/1750; 🏠 🍷) This well-equipped hotel is something of a classic on the Gambian scene. It sits right in the heart of Kololi, so don't expect much sleep at night.

Top End

If some of these seem unreachable in price, try negotiating. During the low season, many of these places are willing to offer sizeable reductions in rates. Most of these places deal mainly with tour groups and accept credit cards.

BAKAU

Ocean Bay Hotel & Resort (☎ 4494265; www.oceanbayhotel.com; Cape Point; s/d D3105/3425; 🏠 🍷 🏠) Just like its sister, the Kairaba Hotel, this is government-owned, plush luxury hotel. A sparkling palace with all the amenities you'd expect, including an on-site clinic,

baby sitting and car rental, though service doesn't live up to the 5 stars.

FAJARA

Ngalalodge (☎ 4494045; www.ngalalodge.com; 64 Atlantic Rd; ste D3750; 🏠 🍷 🏠) This stylish red-clay structure houses lovingly decorated rooms; think African materials and sculptures teased into modern designs. During high season, it's usually booked up by Gambia Experience clients.

KOTU

Bakotu Hotel (☎ 4465555; fax 4465959; Kotu Beach; s/d D1250/1500; 🏠 🍷) Compared to its resort neighbours, this is pleasantly understated, and has comfy terrace apartments in a pleasant garden.

Kombo Beach Hotel (☎ 4465466; www.kombo-beachhotel.gm; Kotu Beach; s/d from D1530/2040; 🏠 🍷 🏠) A favourite with young Europeans on group tours, facilities here include a nightclub and one of the most renowned (and most expensive) restaurants around. The upstairs rooms are particularly nice.

KOLOLI

Coconut Residence (☎ 4463377; info@coconutresidence.com; Badala Park Way; ste from D5500; 🏠 🍷) There isn't a nicer hotel in the country than this classy five-star palace. It's one of the few top hotels where luxury hasn't been traded for soul. All amenities and services come wrapped in sophisticated chic, and character flavours the air of the lush tropical gardens and carefully designed rooms.

Kairaba Hotel (☎ 4462940; www.kairabahotel.com; Senegambia; s/d D4352/5235; 🏠 🍷 🏠) This government-owned hotel is the kind of vast, labyrinthine, anything-can-be-arranged place you might be tempted not to leave during your whole holiday. The right address for a holiday break wrapped in cotton wool.

Senegambia Hotel (☎ 4462717; www.senegambiahotel.com; Senegambia; s/d D2205/2695; 🏠 🍷 🏠) Next to the Kairaba, the Senegambia Hotel looks a little pale, but in less glamorous surroundings, this would be considered the top of tops.

EATING

Mass tourism has made the area around the Atlantic coast resorts one of the best areas to dine in West Africa. There is no

shortage of places to eat, though many restaurants offer a similar menu, composed of a handful of dishes from all four corners of the globe. Between the culinary grey, you can find some real gems to tickle your tastebuds.

Bakau

Atlantic Bar and Restaurant (☎ 4494083; Atlantic Rd; dishes from D60; 🍷 10am-2pm) This local-style place run by a couple of enterprising youngsters was just starting out when we visited. Gambian meals and snacks were as decent as they were cheap, and the kitchen spotless.

Sunshine Bar (☎ 9931800; dishes D75-150; 🍷 until 8pm) This simple, relaxed bar right on the beach often gets lively with a young bikini-clad crowd.

Chapman's (☎ 4495252; Atlantic Road, Bakau Beach; meals around D150-250; 🍷 11am-10pm Thu-Tue) People call this 'the place where everyone seems to go'. It's usually packed with a mixed crowd, the menu is varied and drinks flow.

Ocean Clipper (☎ 4494265; Ocean Bay Hotel, Cape Point; 🍷 6pm-midnight) Part of the Ocean Bay Hotel complex, this lush place serves Mediterranean and Asian food with a dose of exclusivity.

For self-catering options, try **St Mary's Food & Wine** (Cape Point) or any of the other small supermarkets in the heart of Bakau.

Fajara

Butcher's Shop (☎ 4495069; www.thebutchersshopgambia.com; 130 Kairaba Ave; dishes D169-285; 🍷 8am-11pm) This Moroccan place has gradually morphed from one of the best butchers in the area into one of the best butchers with one of the best restaurants attached. Everything here – from the rich local juices to flavour-dripping three-course dinners – comes with personal attention from owner and star-chef Driss, and is rounded off to full, tasty perfection. They also do a mean Sunday brunch (D200) from 10am to 4pm.

Mama's Restaurant (cnr Atlantic Rd & Kairaba Ave; dishes around D100; 🍷 11am-10pm Tue-Sun) One of the most established places serving Gambian and international food, this vibrant place is as much renowned for its delicious buffet dinners as for the raw charm of Mama the manager.

Yok (☎ 4495131; African Living Arts Centre; 🍷 12:30pm-midnight) Getting to this restaurant

puts you in the mood for fairytale flavours; you get here via a winding wooden staircase, a leafy, glass-roofed gallery, and then a walk through an impressively-stacked antique and arts shop. This striking Oriental restaurant serves excellent meals fusing Singaporean, Thai and Chinese cuisine to the gentle flow of waterfalls and the rustling of palm trees. Oh, and the best cocktails on the coast.

Clay Oven (☎ 4496600; dishes D175-195; ☎ 7-11pm) For Indian food, this place is one of the best in the whole of West Africa. No exaggeration. And with its scrubbed white walls, leafy garden and personalised service, the surroundings are right, too.

Eddie's Bar & Restaurant (dishes D60-100; ☎ 8am-2am) This tiny local restaurant can look a little desolate during the day, but it serves excellent *afra* (grill food) and other Gambian dishes.

Ritz (☎ 4496754; meals from D150-250; ☎ 8am-midnight) The standard European fare of this small place doesn't quite live up to the restaurant's aspirational name, nor to its prices.

Francisco's Restaurant (☎ 4495332; cnr Atlantic Rd & Kairaba Ave; grills D150-300; ☎ lunch & dinner) There are few places where mixed seafood platters and grills taste better than in the tranquil setting of Francisco's garden.

Weezo's (☎ 4496918; 132 Kairaba Ave; mains D250-350; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 7pm-3am) This classy place serves a range of excellent food, snacks and tapas all day and cocktails in a trendy setting in the evenings. It was taking a slight downhill slope when we visited – check if it's recovered.

Le Palais du Chocolat (☎ 4395397; 19 Kairaba Ave; cakes around D30; ☎ lunch & dinner) It's all in the name – a chocolate palace this is indeed, the perfect place for an indulgent breakfast.

La Paillote (☎ 4375418; www.alliancefrance.gm; dishes from D25; ☎ noon-4pm) The choice at the restaurant of the Alliance Franco-Gambien is between the African dish of a mind-boggling D25 and the European three-course-meal at D90. Both are usually delicious – you'd have to try very hard to find better value anywhere.

Come Inn (☎ 4391464; meals D100-200; ☎ 10am-2am) For a hearty meal, a good draught beer and a solid dose of local gossip, there's no better place than this German-style beer garden. It's popular with overlanders and

pretty much anyone else who likes big portions at decent rates.

For supermarkets, head for Kairaba Ave where there's plenty of choice. Kairaba Supermarket is usually well stocked, while **Harry's Supermarket** (☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) has the best hours. **St Mary's Food & Wine** (☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1.30pm Sun) has a branch here.

Kotu

Sailor's Beach Bar (☎ 4464078; meals D100-200; ☎ 9am-midnight) This is one of the best beach bars along the coast. The food tastes great, from cheesy pizza to grilled barracuda, and drinks can be sipped while lounging on sunbeds.

La Rive Gauche (☎ 4465466; dishes from D250) So what if it's a hotel restaurant! The Kombo Beach Hotel's own eatery enjoys a reputation for good food that reaches far across the Atlantic resorts. You pay for it, though.

Kololi

There are plenty of generic tourist restaurants in Kololi; following is a selection of the more interesting ones.

PALMA RIMA AREA

Solomon's Beach Bar (☎ 4460716; meals D100-200; ☎ 10am-midnight) At the northern end of Kololi beach, this cute round house with a light reggae feel is famous for its grill food and youthful atmosphere.

Luigi's Italian Restaurant (☎ 4460280; luigis@gambianet.gm; Palma Rima Rd; dishes D200-300) Luigi knows his job – the pasta is al dente and the pizzas crisp. Above the shiny restaurant are also a couple of excellent self-catering apartments and an Internet café.

Crystals Ice Cream Parlour & Gallery (☎ 774567; Palma Rima Rd; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sun) A tranquil patio and colourful gallery invite you to linger over delicious ice creams, homemade from local ingredients and seasonal fruit. A highpoint on the coast's snacking agenda.

SENEGAMBIA STRIP

Ali Baba's (☎ 4461030; Senegambia strip; meals around D200; ☎ 11am-2am) Everyone knows Ali Baba's, so it's as much a commendable restaurant as a useful meeting point. There's occasionally live music.

Peppers Tropical Restaurant (☎ 4464792; Senegambia Strip, meals around D150-250; ☎ 24hr) In the heart of the Senegambia strip, you'll find

the best Caribbean food, and excellent Gambian dishes here. On Fridays and Saturdays, there's a live salsa band.

Al Basha (☎ 4463300; Senegambia Strip; meals from D300; ☎ 11am-2am) At the time we visited, this was an ice-cool Lebanese place with suit'n'tie attitude and occasional belly dancing shows, but management was about to change. Check it out.

Kora (☎ 462727; dishes D200-375; ☎ lunch & dinner) This plush place does a tasty range of meals from around the world. Their enormous mixed platters for four people (per person D500) seem to contain some of everything on the menu.

Serekunda

There are several cheap eateries around the market and taxi station entrance, and several others scattered through the streets of Serekunda.

Youth Monument Bar & Restaurant (Westfield Junction; meals around D100; ☎ lunch & dinner) This local favourite is impressively named and as much loved for cheap food and drinks as for matches on screen.

Safe Way Afra King (dishes CFA50-150; ☎ 5pm-midnight) Shoestringers have descended onto this greasy joint for years for *afra*, sandwiches, *fufu* (a dish made from pounded cassava, similar to polenta) and other African dishes.

Aisa Marie Cinema (Serekunda Market) You can sip a beer and buy a snack in a great people-watching zone, while waiting for your B-movie to start.

Maroun's (Westfield Junction; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1.30pm Sun) For the basics, such as local and imported food and toiletries, go to this local supermarket.

DRINKING

All the major hotels have bars and most restaurants turn the lights down and the music up at night. In Bakau, **Chapman's** (☎ 4495252; Atlantic Road; ☎ 11am-10pm Thu-Tue) is the best beer option, while **Churchill's** (Palma Rima Rd; ☎ 11am-1am) is an English-style pub near Kololi beach. At **Weezo's** (Atlantic Rd) in Fajara, the cocktails taste sweeter with every passing hour, and the **Come Inn** (☎ 4391464; Kairaba Ave; ☎ 10am-2am) is a proper, German-style beer house.

The bars in Serekunda are more local in character. Lana's Bar, near Serekunda

market, is a small all-day affair on a corner of Sukuta Rd.

Around the tourist areas of Kotu and Kololi, you will find several upmarket bars, including **Aquarius** (☎ 4460247; Senegambia; ☎ 10am-3am) and **Paparazzi** (Senegambia; ☎ 10pm-3am), a chic wine bar. Both turn up the dance beats after 10pm.

ENTERTAINMENT

Live Music

The vast **Teranga Beach Club** (☎ 9982669; abdul.kabir@hotmail.com; Palma Rima Rd; ☎ 10am-2am), run by a renowned Gambian musician, holds occasional jazz afternoons, large-scale concerts by visiting artists, and full-moon beach parties (D100) with seafood buffet and acoustic music.

Jazziz (☎ 4462175; ☎ 10pm-late) A young and colourful salsa place that gets swinging on Fridays and Saturdays. The music is live and the atmosphere unbeatable.

Several of the nightclubs listed below also feature occasional live bands on weekends.

Nightclubs

You don't have to search too hard to find a heaving dance floor on the Atlantic Coast, whether it's a rootsy, rowdy shack or a slick temple of dance you're after. Just like Gambia's restaurants, the nightclubs present punters with a global mix that tries to cater to everyone – a mixture of hip-hop, R&B, *mbalax* (percussion-driven, Senegalese dance music), reggae and a whole lot more. Clubs usually open their doors around 9pm, but don't even think about arriving before 11pm.

At the time of writing, the **Lama Lama** (☎ 4494747) was Bakau's club of choice for the dance floor creatures that determine whether a place is in or out. The hugely popular **Tropicana Night Club** (off Badala Park Way), still known to locals as Spy Bar, gets hot and sweaty late at night, as does the techno-heavy **Waaw Nightclub** (☎ 4460668; Senegambia). Next door to Waaw, **Totties Nightclub** (Senegambia) is a club with a chic dance floor, while the open-air **Jokko** (Westfield Junction) in Serekunda is a raucous local affair that makes a convincing claim of being the most entertaining club of all. **Destiny** (off Badala Park Way, Kololi) was sparkling new at the time of research, and drawing glittering crowds on weekends.

Spectator Sports

The Gambia's main stadium is Independence Stadium in Bakau – the site for major football and traditional wrestling matches. The more exciting place to watch wrestling, however, is the **Arena Babou Fatty** (off Sukuta Rd), a couple of hundred metres south of Sukuta Road in Serekunda. Matches take place in the late afternoon, usually on Sunday, though it's notoriously difficult to hear about them beforehand. Your best chance is during the months of November and December – ask a taxi driver or Serekunda barmen, or check local radio and posters for events.

SHOPPING

Bakau Market sells fruit and vegetables, and has an adjacent crafts section stuffed to the rims with carvings, traditional cloth and other souvenirs. Opposite the market, next to the church, you'll find the beautiful African Heritage Centre, a great little boutique with a range of original stock (as well as a good restaurant and a few pretty guest rooms down the back). Another excellent option is **Tropical Tour & Souvenirs** (☎ 4460536; tropicaltour@gamtel.gm), a hassle-free place with a good range of information materials, books, maps, arts and fashion. While there, ask them about their Tropical Gardens project. It had just taken off at the time we visited, and is likely to grow into an impressive business. The **Village Gallery & Restaurant** (☎ 4463646; ☎ 10am-midnight) sells original works by renowned and upcoming local artists. It also has a small café where a busy chef tries hard to match the exquisiteness of his food to that of the works on display.

Serekunda is the place to hunt for good-quality batiks. Musu Kebba Drammeh's **batik factory** (☎ 4392258) is hidden deep in the back streets of Serekunda, and tracking down the small workshop is almost as much fun as watching the batiks being made (most taxi drivers and locals can give you directions). **Salam Batik** (Amadou Jallow ☎ 4395103, Sheikh Tijan Secka ☎ 982 0125; salam_batik_mp_art@yahoo.co.uk; London Corner, Serekunda) is the place to get your personalised clothes dyed and tailored.

African Living Art Centre (☎ 4495131; Garba Jahumpa Rd, Fajara) is something of an institution – a place to rummage for quality artworks, antiques and original souvenirs, as well as home to Gambia's best European hairdressers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bush taxis depart from the garages of Serekunda, the main transport hub for the whole country. Serekunda to Soma is D60, and to Farafenni it's D75. If you're heading for the south coast you can get bush taxis to Brufut (D12), Tanji (D15) and Sangyang (D18). A bush taxi to Gunjur is D30, whether via Brikama or directly along the coastal road. Direct bush taxis to the south of the river leave from the Tipapa Garage in Serekunda or from Senegambia, and vehicles for Brikama leave from Westfield Junction. Bush taxis (mainly Peugeot) go from Serekunda to Kafountine and Ziguinchor in southern Senegal via the border at Séléti.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

A green tourist taxi from Banjul international airport to Serekunda is D300, and to any Atlantic coast resort is D400. Yellow taxis cost about D150, or even less, depending upon your powers of negotiation.

Car & Motorcycle

Car hire starts around D800, exclusive of mileage and 15% sales tax, and goes up to around D2000 for 4WDs. Drivers must be 23 years or over, refundable deposits are required (around D25,000) and discounted rates are available for seven days or more. Some of the most reliable car hire companies include the following:

AB Rent-a-Car (☎ 4460926; abrentacar@gamtel.gm; Hotel Kololi, Senegambia) Has had consistently good reviews for years.

Cars4Rent (☎ 7782848; cars4rentgambia@hotmail.com; Elton Badala Oasis, Kotu) A smaller, but equally recommended operation.

Hertz (hertz@gamtel.gm); Airport (☎ /fax 4473156); Boketh Total Station (☎ 4390041) Slightly more expensive. 4WDs can only be hired with a driver.

Shared Taxi

Shared taxis around the Atlantic resorts cost D5, to Banjul D6. From Bakau, at the junction of Saitmatty and Atlantic Rds, you can get shared taxis and minibuses to Banjul city centre or Serekunda. In Serekunda, shared taxis to Bakau go from outside the Gamtel office on the south end of Kairaba Ave. For Fajara, it's usually necessary to be dropped at the Garba Jahumpa Rd junction on Kairaba Ave. Shared taxis and minibuses

to Kololi leave from the northwest corner of Serekunda market and go to the Kololi taxi park.

Private Taxi

Green 'tourist taxis' usually wait outside the larger hotels. In some of the dense tourist areas, such as the Senegambia strip, they are the only taxis that have permission to enter. Fares are fixed, usually more than twice the rate charged by yellow taxis. For a tourist taxi from Fajara to Banjul, you'll pay around D350 by tourist taxi, D150 in a yellow cab.

Yellow taxis generally don't have fixed rates, except the 'town trip', any trip between Bakau, Fajara, Kololi and Kotu, which is usually charged at D25. Hiring a taxi for a day around the Atlantic resorts and Banjul should cost around D1000 to D1500.

WESTERN GAMBIA

Heading inland or southward from the bustling resort zones, the big-business side of tourism gives way to a slightly more intimate experience of Gambian nature and culture. Small fishing villages, still fairly sheltered from mass tourism, line the southern strip of white-sand coast, inviting visitors to experience local life. On the northbank, the villages Jufureh and Albreda tempt with a fictionalised slice of history.

SOUTH COAST & INLAND

Tanji & Around

Moving on southwards from Serekunda and Kololi, a smooth tarmac road takes you past the villages of the South Coast, right to the Senegalese border at the river Hallahein, some 50km further south. Tanji is a major attraction, thanks to the charming **Tanji Village Museum** (☎ 9926618; tanje@dds.nl; adult/child D100/25; ☎ 9am-5pm) and the **Tanji River Bird Reserve** (☎ 9919219; admission D31.50, guided walks D200 ☎ 8am-6pm), an area of dunes, lagoons, dry woodland and coastal scrub. The wide range of habitats here attracts an excellent selection of birds, including indigenous species and European migrants; more than 300 species have been recorded. Although waders and waterbirds are the most prolific, there are also 34 raptor species. The nearby

Bijol Island is an important breeding site of the Caspian tern and the grey-headed gull. Outside breeding season, the wildlife department organises occasional boat tours (D500) here. Don't visit this bird sanctuary with other guides – it's illegal for anyone but the wildlife department to take tourists there. A trip to Tanji could be combined with a visit to the rapidly urbanising fishing village **Brufut** – the Tanji reserve office is a 2km walk from Brufut beach.

In Brufut, a couple of multi-star lodgings were being built at the time of research, and Tanji Village, 3km south of the reserve office, has some good accommodation options. The most attractive is the **Paradise Inn Lodge** (☎ 8800209; www.paradiseinn.garden.com; r per person incl breakfast D660), which is stunningly located amidst mangroves and forest, and runs excellent birding excursions and music courses. A little further south in Tujering, the rooty **Bendula Lodge** (☎ 7717481; www.bendula.com; s/d D510/680) has accommodation in simple, pretty huts placed between a lush tropical forest and a long stretch of white beach. They offer drumming or dancing courses and excursions to herbalists and artisans.

Further south is the white band of Sangyang Beach, with a scattering of crowded beach bars and a couple of hotels, including **Sanyang Nature Camp** (☎ 9902408; per person incl breakfast D400), a secluded but slightly neglected place. A better option is **Kobokoto Lodge** (☎ 9984838; www.salla.se/kk; r per person D250) where rooms are simple but attractive.

Gunjur & Gunjur Beach

One of Gambia's largest fishing centres, bustling Gunjur beach tempts with the impressive sight of pirogues rolling in, unloading their glistening catch on the shore. You can watch the busy scene from a number of informal workers' beach bars. There's a surprising choice of places to stay, including the excellent **Footsteps Eco Lodge** (☎ 7706830; www.natureswaygambia.com; camping D250, d D1750) – an attractive place complete with compost toilets, solar power, a freshwater pool and an extensive garden that grows organic food and attracts over 100 bird species. In the village, the **African Lodge** (☎ 4486143; fax 4486026; per person incl breakfast D400) is a peaceful, friendly hotel with a local feel. Five kilometres further south, **Balaba Nature Camp**



(☎ 9919012; huts per person from D550) is a laid-back, environmentally friendly camp, sat amid dense savanna woodland, that offers drumming and dancing courses and bird-watching excursions.

Kartong

Picturesque Kartong is gradually turning into one of Gambia's most attractive spots for tourism, due to its stunning location near the Allaheh River, a growing range of quality accommodation choices and the inspiring local tourist organisation **KART** (Kartong Association for Responsible Tourism; ☎ 4495887; www.safarigarden.com). Their range of initiatives includes the rootsy **Kartong Festival** (☎ 8900411, 7730535; www.kartongfestival.com).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Kartong is a great place for pirogue and bird-watching tours – ask at the **Riverside Café** (☎ 9957694), a low-key place next to the Italian Restaurant. They arrange one-hour tours for D500. Or, if you prefer snakes to birds, stop by the **Reptile Farm** (admission D100), which has some small cages with snakes and lizards. If you like your reptiles in the wild, ask your hotel or **KART** for tours to the sacred **crocodile pool** of Mama Bambo Folonko.

A real Kartong gem is the **Lemon Fish Art Gallery** (☎ 4394586; www.lemonfish.gm), an excellent contemporary art gallery with a couple of pretty rooms for rent, and a boutique where you can purchase quality batiks, paintings and sculptures at fixed prices.

SLEEPING & EATING

The prettiest place to stay is **Boboi Beach Lodge** (☎ 7776736; www.gambia-adventure.com; camping per person D150, tree house D250, d incl breakfast D600), which sits amid palm trees 10 steps from the beach. You can stay in bungalows with shared toilets or sleep under a starlit sky (mosquito-nets provided). Another good option is **Tamba Kuruba** (☎ 9851857; r per person D350), a basic, but very friendly place that donates its profits to the local hospital. Right on the river, the fishing and birding camp **Stiching Stala** (☎ 9915604; www.stala-adventures.com) was getting ready to open when we visited. It should by now be a cosy eco-lodge.

A 300m sand track west of Kartong, **Morgan's Grocery** (snacks and meals from D50 to D200; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a great place for local information and bird tours as well as food and beer. In town, **Umpacola Bar** (☎ 4419111; meals around D150) is a good place to meet locals, while the **Italian Restaurant** (☎ 9957694, 00221 616 43 82 in Senegal; dishes D60-150; ☎ 11am-midnight) near the Fishing Centre (3km south of town) has excellent pizza, pasta and espresso.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

On the map, Kartong looks like a great launch pad into Senegal, but that's deceiving. You can cross the border here, but you need to take a pirogue across the river, then prepare for a 10km hike as there's no public transport on the Senegalese side. If you do decide on the adventure, get your passport stamped at the police post just south of town, then head towards the river and negotiate a pirogue (around D10). There's no border post in Senegal, so you need to make arrangements to get your passport stamped in Abéné or Kafountine.

Abuko Nature Reserve

For a park of only 105 hectares, the **Abuko Nature Reserve** (☎ 7782633; drumohq@qanet.gm; www.darwingambia.gm; admission D31; ☎ 8am-7pm) has amazingly diverse vegetation and wildlife. Bird-watchers will love this place – more than 250 species have been sighted in the gallery forest, Guinea savanna and along the calm waters of Lamin Stream. Species include African goshawks, oriole warblers, yellowbill, leaflove, green and violet turaco, white-spotted flufftails and western blue-

birds. Birds can be observed pretty much anywhere, though the trail of the birding extension is particularly good. Several photo hides also reveal mammal varieties, including bushbucks, duikers, porcupines, bushbabies and three monkey types: green or vervet monkeys, endangered western red colobus monkeys, and patas monkeys.

The reserve is also famous for its Nile crocodiles, and has a small animal orphanage, where animals are looked after before being released into the wild.

Abuko is an important hub of preservation work in The Gambia, largely thanks to the **Makasutu Wildlife Trust** (drumohq@qanet.gm; www.darwingambia.gm), a busy research centre that studies Gambia's biodiversity, trains wildlife guides and runs various education projects. They also take on volunteers and can provide them with accommodation next to the reserve.

If you're a bird-watcher, you can enter the reserve from 6.30am, otherwise mid-morning, before the heat, is the best time to visit.

A thin book about the reserve can be bought at the ticket office, and several publications on the reserve and Gambian flora and fauna are for sale at the **Darwin Field Station** (☎ 8am-4pm).

A private taxi to Abuko from the Atlantic coast resorts costs about D400, including two hours of waiting time. Alternatively, take a minibus from Serekunda towards Brikama (D10). The reserve entrance is on the right (west) of the main road.

Lamin

The village of Lamin is unremarkable, but **Lamin Lodge** (☎ 4497603; www.gambiariver.com), a rugged, handmade log cabin on stilts, overlooking a mangrove creek, makes for a great day out. The food here is good, the views fantastic, and, best of all, the lodge's eccentric owner is also head of the **Gambia River Experience** (☎ 4494360; www.gambiariver.com), which organises plenty of imaginative boat trips on the Gambia River. At the lodge, you can hire pirogues and small motorboats by the hour (D700), or for day trips (D10,000), and arrange drop-offs to Denton Bridge (D1600) and Banjul (D1500). Best-loved of all is their famous birders breakfast trip – think oysters and pancakes, binoculars clenched.

Most people get here by an organised boat tour. By road it's best to hire a taxi (D150), or combine Lamin Lodge with time at Abuko (D300). Or, from Banjul or Serekunda you can take a minibus to Brikama (D10), get off in Lamin and then follow the dirt road for about 3km to the lodge.

Brikama

Brikama, The Gambia's third-largest settlement, is a typical junction town; extensive, noisy and busy. People and goods moving in and out and up and down the country pass through this dusty upcountry place, though few choose to stay here.

There's little to see, apart from the bustle itself and the famous **crafts market** (also known as the Woodcarvers' Market) at the edge of town on the right as you come in from Banjul or Serekunda. It's a hectic corner of covered stalls crammed with souvenir-style sculptures, improvised ateliers and hordes of eager salesmen.

There's a hospital, post office, Western Union Branch, a couple of Internet cafés (the best ones are Bojank K Net and the Gamtel office), and a Trust Bank branch that's supposed to take Visa cards, though you shouldn't wholly rely on it.

KORA COURSES

For anybody interested in African music, Brikama should be an obligatory stop on the itinerary. The dusty town is home to one of the most renowned families of *kora* players in the country, a griot clan that reaches back several generations and has brought forth such mighty talents as Dembo Konte, his son Bakari Konte, and Malamini Jobarteh and his sons Pa and Tata Dindin Jobarteh. Forget about 'instant drumming courses' at the coast – this is one of Gambia's best places to learn traditional instruments, such as *kora*, *djembe*, *balon*, *balafon* or *sabar*, watch them being made, and get an introduction to the griot's métier. Prices are entirely negotiable, and depend on duration and whether you stay and eat at their compound (which is possible). The best way of contacting them is by phoning (☎ 7710015; www.kairakundaarts.org). If you can't get them on the phone, ask any kid in town to show you the way to their home.

SLEEPING & EATING

Brikama's hotels are certainly no enticement to stay here. The best of the worst is the nameless place known to locals at **Chief's Place** (☎ 9845959; off Basse Highway; r D200), right behind the mayor's home. Ask for chief Bojang's house and you'll be led to an iron compound door that hides a cluster of well-maintained bungalows.

Food options are mainly limited to greasy local eateries. The **Lucky Palace** (meals D15-45) is a fairly decent option, the **Kambeng Restaurant** (meals D15-45) has a pretty garden, and the **Gilanka Restaurant** (☎ 9851857; meals D15) serves enormous bowls of tasty rice and fish. More exotic things like chicken and chips are slightly pricier (D40).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Many minibuses (D10) pass through Brikama from Serekunda, about once every 10 minutes during the day.

If you're headed eastwards, there is frequent transport to Soma (D80), where you change for any other upcountry destinations. There are also frequent bush taxis to Gunjur (D10), where you change for transport to Kartong.

Brikama is the best junction from which to reach the Casamance region in Senegal. A bush taxi to the Senegalese border in Séléti costs D40 (CFA800), and then Séléti to Ziguinchor is CFA2200.

Makasutu

Makasutu means 'sacred forest' in Mandinka, or 'cultural theme park' in the language of tourist enterprise. The **Makasutu Culture Forest** (☎ 4483335; www.makasutu.com; admission adult/child D700/400) occupies about 1000 hectares of land along Mandina Bolong, land that's dedicated to display a pretty, lush and smiling Gambia, just a bit more perfect than the one beyond the forest boundaries.

A day in the forest includes a mangrove tour by pirogue, guided walks through a range of habitats, including a palm forest where you can watch palm wine being tapped, demonstrations of traditional dancing and a visit to a crafts centre. For a half-day visit, take D200 off the price and the food out of the programme. Next to the forest, tucked away in the mangroves, is the **Mandina River Lodge** (☎ /fax 4484100; [\[.makasutu.com\]\(http://www.makasutu.com\); r per person with half board D5440\), an exclusive eco-retreat that's world-famous for its successful marriage of lavishness and respect for nature, and for its stunning architecture, including floating, solar-powered luxury lodges. Bookings are made through Gambia Experience or the Makasutu website, and surprise visitors aren't even allowed near the site.](http://www</p>
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Most people come on a tour arranged through one of the ground operators. If you're making your own way, it's best to hire a taxi (D300). Alternatively, you can ask a bush taxi to drop you at Tuti Falls Rd (D12) and walk the last 3km.

Tumani Tenda

The **Tumani Tenda Camp** (☎ 9903662; tumani.tenda@hotmail.com; per person D200) is another eco-tourism venture situated about an hour from the coast on a *bolong* (creek) near the Gambia River. It's owned and operated by the residents of the neighbouring Taibatu village, who use the profits to fund community projects within the village. There are five traditional-style huts, each maintained by a different family from the village, where you can stay, with rates including breakfast. Other meals are D30. This is basic living, but for a taste of village life in a great location it's hard to beat. Bird-watchers venture here to try their luck spotting the rare brown-necked parrots.

Take a bush taxi from Brikama (D10) and ask to be dropped off at the turn-off to Taibatu (look for the sign). From here it's a 2.5km walk.

NORTH COAST & NORTH BANK

Gambia's north coast stretches all of 10km from Barra at the mouth of the Gambia River to the border with Senegal. Those with an interest in history should have a look at **Fort Bullen** (admission D25; ☎ 9am-5pm), built by the British in the 1820s to help control slave shipping.

Ginak Island (Niimi National Park)

Niimi National Park (Map p314) spreads across a small corner of northwest Gambia, including the long narrow island of Ginak (also spelled Jinak), where the range of habitats (beach, mud flats, salt marshes, dunes, mangrove swamps, lagoons and woodland) makes for excellent bird-watching.

Dolphins are occasionally spotted from the shore. In theory, the park protects small populations of manatees, crocodiles, bushbucks and duikers, plus various monkey species, but many animals have been hunted down, making chances of spotting them rather slim.

Ginak is a pretty stretch of land, by all means, though claims to celestial beauty made by various tour operators are a touch exaggerated. Over the last years, the heart of Niimi National Park has been eroded and replaced by large marijuana fields, which aren't quite as fascinating as the lush tropical forest that used to grow here.

The modest and charming **Madiyana Lodge** (☎ 4494088, 9920201; r per person D600) sits in a pretty spot on the western seafront and has accommodation in simple huts, with kerosene-lamp lighting and shared toilets. There's also a breezy bar-restaurant serving excellent food (meals D150). If you phone the lodge before arrival, you can organise pick-up from your front door (CFA1500 one way).

Another good option of getting here is joining an organised tour. The trips by the small operator Hidden Gambia (p327) get consistently good reviews. For D3000, they include transport, accommodation at Madiyana Lodge and full board.

Otherwise, a private taxi from Barra to the mainland opposite Ginak costs around D400. From there, you take a dug-out canoe across the river (D5), and a 20-minute walk west across the island to reach the lodge.

Jufureh & Albrede

Jufureh became world famous in the 1970s following the publication of the book *Roots*, in which African-American writer Alex Haley describes how Kunta Kinte, his ancestor, was captured here and taken to America as a slave some 200 years ago.

His story has turned the tiny community into a popular tourist destination, though there's actually very little to see except the overblown village action that ensues as soon as the tourist boats arrive. Women pound millet at strategic points, babies are produced to be admired and filmed, and one of Haley's supposed descendants, the sister of the deceased Binde Kinte, makes a guest appearance at her compound.

Five hundred metres from Jufureh, Albrede is a little more peaceful. The main

THE ROOTS DEBATE

Alex Haley based his research for his novel *Roots* on recollections of elder relatives who knew their African forebearer's name was Kinte and that he'd been captured by slavers while chopping wood for a drum outside his village. This later tied in with a story Haley was told by a griot at Jufureh.

Critics have pointed out (quite reasonably) that the story is flawed in many areas. Kinte is a common clan name throughout West Africa, and the griot's story of Kunta Kinte's capture would hardly have been unique. Also, as the slave stations of Albrede and James Island had been there for some decades, very close to Jufureh, it's unlikely that a villager from here would have been taken by surprise in this way. While the story of Alex Haley's ancestor is almost certainly true, it's exceedingly unlikely that he actually came from Jufureh. Despite the inconsistencies, Haley seemed happy to believe he was descended from the Kintes of Jufureh, and the myth remains largely intact.

Detractors may delight in exposing fabrication, but there is a danger that the debate on the accuracy of Haley's story may obscure a much more serious, and undeniable, fact: the slave trade was immoral and inhuman, and had a devastating effect on Africa. Millions of men and women were captured by European traders, or by other Africans paid by Europeans, and taken to plantations in the Americas. Many historians also hold that their labour, and the slave trade itself, was fundamental to the economic development of Europe and the USA in the 18th and 19th centuries.

thing to see here is the ruined 'factory' (fortified slaving station) originally built by French traders in the late 17th century, and the **museum** (☎ 710276; admission D100; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), which has a simple but striking exhibition tracing the history of slavery on the Gambia River.

The best place to stay is the **Kunta Kinte Roots Camp** (☎ 9905322; baboucarlo@hotmail.com; s/d D500/1000) in Albrede – an ambitiously sized hotel with spotless accommodation in colourfully decorated bungalows. If you phone before arriving, they can also organise excellent meals. The **Jufureh Resthouse** (☎ 5710276; amadou.juffure@yahoo.fr; r per person incl breakfast D300) is a slightly lethargic drumming camp that mainly works with French groups, but can accommodate independent travellers if there's space in the shabby bungalows.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The usual way to visit Jufureh and Albrede is by organised river tour. All the tour operators along the Atlantic Coast and several hotels have the 'Roots Tour' in their catalogue.

Alternatively, take the ferry across to Barra, then find a shared taxi to Jufureh (around D50) or hire a taxi (around D700 including a couple of hours waiting time). If you want to do the trip in a day, you'll have to catch the first ferry from Banjul. But, if you are making the effort to come all this way, you should consider staying overnight; both Jufureh and

Albrede are at their best in the evening, when the tourist groups have left.

James Island

James Island is in the middle of the Gambia River, about 2km south of Jufureh and Albrede. On the island are the remains of Fort James, built in the 1650s and the site of numerous skirmishes in the following centuries.

Today, the fort is largely in ruins, the only intact room being a food store, which is often called the slave dungeon because it sounds more interesting. The island is rapidly eroding, and at some points the water is lapping the battlements. Only the baobab trees seem to be holding the island together.

Most people take in James Island as part of a boat trip from Banjul to Jufureh, but you might be able to arrange a pirogue to take you over from Albrede. Admission to the island including a visit to the museum of Jufureh costs D100.

CENTRAL & EASTERN GAMBIA

Gambia being such a tiny sliver of land, nothing is really remote – yet once you've spent 12 hours on the tyre-busting road that leads upcountry, you'll probably feel as though you've crossed the continent. The

route winds through crop fields, rice paddies, palm groves and patches of natural forest. Every 10km or so there's a junction where a dirt track leads north towards the Gambia River, which is never far away, but always frustratingly out of view. If you want to see the waterway, or go on a pirogue trip, just hop off the taxi and make a couple of overnight stops at the few brilliantly located camps sprinkled along the riverside – or do the whole journey by boat, by far the most enjoyable way of travelling.

BINTANG BOLONG

Tucked away among the maze of shrubs lining the shores of the Bintang River is the spectacular **Bintang Bolong Lodge** (☎ 4488035, 9867615; www.bintang-bolong.com; r per person D400; 🕒), an intimate, eco-friendly camp made almost entirely from local mangrove woods and clay bricks. Stunning huts sit on stilts right on the river – you can leap from your balcony into a pirogue for a boat tour (per hour D800).

Twice a day, there's a bus from Brikama to Bintang (one hour, D25). If you can't face the wait for the bus to fill-up, you can hire a taxi (around D1700 to D2000). The driver needs to follow the main road east through the village of Somita, and turn left (north) at Killy along the dirt road to reach Bintang village and the lodge. Or, just phone the place and arrange to be picked up (D750).

TENDABA

Tendaba is a small village on the southern bank of the Gambia River, 165km upstream from Banjul. It's mainly famous for the enduring **Tendaba Camp** (☎ 4541024, 4465288; tendaba@qanet.gm; bungalows without/with bathroom D225/245, luxury r D270), a classic on the travellers' scene. Tendaba's attraction lies in its position – opposite the Baobolong Wetlands and in close proximity to Kiang West National Park – in short, it's a bird-watcher's dream destination.

Accommodation ranges from small bungalows to VIP rooms, fully equipped with a river-edge veranda and TV. The restaurant gets consistently good reviews, too.

From Tendaba, you can arrange 4WD excursions to Kiang West and boat rides around the creeks of the Baobolong Wetland Reserve. If you don't want to take a vehicle trip, there are lots of options for walking in this area.

Most hotels around the Atlantic coast resorts arrange tours here – prices differ widely, so do some shopping around. Hidden Gambia and the Gambia River Experience both include Tendaba in their tours (see p327). If you prefer to come by road, it's best to hire a taxi. Otherwise, take a bush taxi from Banjul or Serekunda along the main road towards Soma. Get off at the village of Kwinella – the camp is 5km north along the dirt road.

KIANG WEST NATIONAL PARK

The mangrove creeks and mud flats, dry woodland and grassland of Kiang West, The Gambia's largest national park, are home to an extraordinary variety of species, including bushbabies, baboons, colobus monkeys, warthogs, marsh mongooses and bushbucks. Rarely sighted species include hyenas, dolphins and crocodiles. Birds are also plentiful, with more than 300 species recorded, including Abyssinian ground hornbill, osprey, fish eagle, martial eagle and the rare brown-necked parrot. The 20m-deep escarpment that runs parallel to the riverbank is a good place for spotting animals – or for enjoying the scenery, if the beasts are proving too shy. A popular viewing site is Toubab Kollon Point, a river promontory to the northeast of the park. Behind the point, the escarpment runs close to the riverbank. About 2km west is a viewing hide overlooking a water hole which attracts a good range of animals, especially in the dry season.

Entry is D31.50, payable at the park headquarters in Dumbuntu, although this is included in the price of tours from Tendaba.

SOMA & MANSA KONKO

Soma is a dusty junction town where Gambia's southbank artery crosses the Trans-Gambia Hwy. About 10km north of Soma is Yelitenda, where you catch the ferry across the Gambia River to Bambatenda, and then continue to Farafenni.

Nearby is Mansa Konko, originally an important local chief's capital (the name means 'king's hill'), and an administrative centre during the colonial era. Today it's a sleepy ghost town with a few reminders of the glory days, such as the district commissioner's residence and his crumbling colonial villa.

The lively **Moses Guesthouse** (☎ 4531462; r per person D125) is the only place worth considering if you get stuck – it's popular, hence noisy, and holds little appeal beyond 24-hour electricity.

Getting There & Away

Bush taxis from the coast stop at the garage in the town centre, where you can change for a taxi to Georgetown or Basse Santa Su. If you're heading north, take a local bush taxi to the Gambia River ferry at Yelitenda (D6), go across as a foot passenger (D5), and take one of the vehicles waiting on the northern bank at Bambatenda to Farafenni (D6), where you can find transport to Kaolack or Dakar.

FARAFENNI

On the north bank, the market town Farafenni is much more pleasant than Soma. The main *lumo* (weekly market) is on Sunday, when people come from surrounding villages and merchants from as far as Mauritania and Guinea to sell their wares. If you're low on cash visit the Trust Bank; it's the only bank for many miles. The border with Senegal is only 2km to the north and is open from 7am to midnight.

If you do get stuck here, it's worth taking the 10km dirt road trail towards **Kataba Fort**. Though reduced to its dusty foundations, this 1841 Wolof construction tells a half-forgotten story of old African kingdoms.

To spend the night, head for **Eddy's Hotel & Bar** (☎ 7735225; s/d with bathroom D200/250; 🍷), a quirky place with a leafy courtyard that enjoys enduring popularity. It's also the best place to eat in town.

Getting There & Away

Direct minibuses from Farafenni go to Serekunda most mornings for D90. For most other places, you have to go to Soma and change. If you're heading for Dakar there are bush taxis for CFA4000; some go from Farafenni itself, but most go from the Senegal side of the border.

GEORGETOWN (JANGJANG-BUREH)

Under the British, the island settlement Georgetown was a busy administrative centre and trading hub full of grand buildings. Today it's got a new (or should that be old?) name, a host of crumbling monuments to

history and the sort of sluggish atmosphere that discourages all but the most necessary work – the perfect place to relax for a couple of days.

The traditional, and now officially re-introduced, name for the town and island is Jangjang-bureh, but most people still call it Georgetown. The island is 10km long and 2.5km wide, covered with fields of rice and groundnuts. It has ferry links to both riverbanks, but there is little in terms of infrastructure – no banks and no hospital. There is though plenty to please those with a weak spot for birds and history.

Sights

On the waterfront, either side of the northern ferry landing, are two crumbling colonial warehouses, which local youth will try to 'sell' you as 'Slave Prison', also talking up a 'Freedom Tree' and 'Slave Market'. This is fictionalised history – though slaves were transported through Georgetown, these buildings were constructed much later. Nearby is the old **Commissioner's Quarters** now inhabited by the district governor, and a **monument** outside the police station that recalls the building of Fort George in 1823 by the British after the local king asked for protection against a neighbouring tribe. West of town is the colonial **Armitage High School**.

Another place to visit is the **Lamin Koto Stone Circle**. At only 1.5km away from the north bank ferry ramp, it is far more accessible than the larger, and more famous, stone circles at **Wassu**, which can also be reached by tours from Georgetown. Those with a historical bent should visit **Karantaba Tenda** village, 20km from town, where an obelisk marks the spot where Scottish explorer Mungo Park started his journey to trace the course of the Niger River.

In town, the **Central River Division Forestry Project** (CRDFP; ☎ 5676198; www.crdp.org), which battles against deforestation, is a great place to visit, mainly for their tours along the eco-trails of various forest parks.

Sleeping

Most of the camps below have tours to Wassu, Gambia River National Park and bird-watching excursions on offer.

Bird Safari Camp (☎ 5676108; www.bsc.gm; r with half-board per person D1000; 🍷) In a secluded lo-

cation, this place has accommodation in bungalows or luxury tents and runs excellent bird-watching excursions accompanied by a resident ornithologist.

Baoblong Camp (☎ 5676133; fax 5676120; Owens St; s/d D300/400) Set in lush gardens at the eastern end of town, this camp has well-maintained rooms, friendly staff and the luxury of a generator.

Alaka-bung Lodge (☎ 5676123; alakabung@qanet.gm; Owens St; r per person D100) This low-key hostel is Georgetown's cheap and cheerful option. It mainly attracts a local clientele, and has email access (though not always reliable generator power).

Jangjang-bureh Camp (☎/fax 5676182, 9920618; www.gambiariver.com; r per person D200) This rootsy place on the north bank consists of an eclectic collection of rustic bungalows set in a maze-like garden. Lighting is by oil lamps, and a drink at the bar overlooking the river is a fine way to spend the evening. You reach the place by boat from **Dreambird Camp** (☎/fax 5676182; r per person D200).

Eating & Drinking

Few options exist outside the camps and lodges, especially after dark. The popular **Maradona Roadside Pub** (Findlay St; meals D50-100; 🍷 lunch & dinner) opposite Alaka-bung Lodge, is a good place for drinks and snacks and **Talamanca Restaurant** (☎ 9921100; Findlay St; meals from D50; 🍷 11am-8pm) is a relaxed address that's gradually growing from a decent restaurant into a humble 'hotel'. Otherwise, it's down to the eateries near the market.

Getting There & Away

Georgetown is only reached by ferry. Most bush taxis turn off the main road between Soma and Basse Santa Su to drop off passengers at the southern ferry ramp – you should request this when entering the taxi. The ferry costs D5 for passengers and D50 for cars.

GAMBIA RIVER NATIONAL PARK

South of Kuntaur, five islands in the Gambia River are protected as a national park. The heart of the park is the so-called Baboon Island, whose name is sometimes used to refer to the entire park. Baboon Island is the site of a project (privately initiated but now government owned) that helps once-captured chimpanzees to live in the wild again. Boat trips are available in the area,

but visitors are not allowed to land or get close to the islands. This is partly because it interferes with the rehabilitation process, but mainly because the chimps (there are more than 60) are nervous when humans get too close.

Because of the dense cloak of gallery forest on the banks of the island, it is unusual to see chimpanzees, so it's best to go with the aim of having a good day out on this beautiful stretch of river. You'll quite likely see baboons and monkeys, and possibly crocs and hippos too, plus an excellent selection of birds. And if you do happen to see any chimps – while keeping a responsible distance – it will be a bonus.

Getting There & Away

The easiest option is by boat tour from Georgetown. Alternatively, you can go to Kuntaur by road and hire a boat there. Several people provide the service; the going rate is about D250 for a three or four-hour trip, after some bargaining.

Boats are only permitted on the main channel between the islands and the east bank of the mainland, and are not allowed to approach the islands nearer than midstream.

BASSE SANTA SU

Set on a beautiful waterfront, this easternmost town is the last major ferry-crossing point on the Gambia River and a transport hub for the surrounding area. It's a traditional trading centre, and as crammed and busy, run-down and forever deal-making as any West African junction town, especially if you come on a Thursday when the market is in full swing.

Both Trust Bank and Standard Chartered Bank have branches in Basse Santa Su that can advance money to Visa cardholders, and there's an Internet café. You can make calls at the Gamtel office.

By the waterfront, an old colonial warehouse has been converted into the cultural centre and café **Traditions** (☎ 5668533; sulaymanjallowtraditions@yahoo.com; 🍷 9am-6pm). It exhibits and sells locally made crafts, including handmade clothes, mats and wall hangings. Since the place's founders have left, it has started gathering dust, and the café as well as the display spaces were slightly haunted by neglect when we visited. But the remaining staff are immensely enthusiastic, and

optimistic that this major stopping point of any tour to Basse Santa Su will shine once again.

Even if you find Traditions devoid of activity, a trip here is rewarding. The balcony gives a great view across the river and ferry point, and between June and February, it's also a good place to see the rare Egyptian plover. Boat rides to see this and other birds can be arranged with locals on the waterfront.

Sleeping

Staying the night in Basse Santa Su can feel like a punishment if you're not used to roughing it a bit.

Basse Guesthouse (☎ 5668283; r D150) This place has dingy rooms with shared toilets, but at least you can spend some entertaining hours people-watching from the first-floor balcony above a tailor shop.

Jem Hotel (☎ 5668356; off the road to Vélingara; s/d D300/600) When we visited, it was managed by a mere boy trying his best to prevent this large place from drowning in dust. He's doing a pretty good job, though running this hotel-restaurant-nightclub machine on teenage adrenalin alone is tough.

Traditions (☎ 5668533; sulaymanjallowtraditions@yahoo.com; apt D250) The staff here can dust off the former manager's apartment for unexpected visitors.

Fulladu Camp (☎ 5668743; r per person D300) This is undoubtedly the best place to stay on the north bank. Accommodation is in comfortable bungalows and they can organise pirogue trips.

Eating & Drinking

Food is pretty much limited to hotels – Fulladu Camp and Jem Hotel are particularly good – the café of Traditions and the *gargottes* (simple eating house) and roast-meat stalls near the market. The nightclub of the **Jem Hotel** (meals D50-150) promises 'London sounds', but the manager admitted that the sign was a little old. The **Kassoumai Bar** (opposite the market; ☎ 7pm-2am) and **Plaza Nightclub** (☎ 8pm-3am) are both a little run down, but still good for beers.

Getting There & Away

Bush taxis and minibuses go to the eastern outpost of Fatoto (D20, 40 minutes); the ferry ramp for Georgetown (D75, one

hour); Soma (D150, four hours); and Serekunda (D300, eight hours).

The ferry to the Gambia River's northern bank takes one car at a time, and the journey is fairly quick. The charge for a car is D50, and for passengers, D5.

If you're heading for Senegal, you can go by bush taxi to Tambacounda via Vélingara (see p326). Even further afield, a Peugeot taxi goes more or less daily (passengers depending) to Labé in northern Guinea. The fare is CFA30,000 (D1500) and the trip takes at least 24 hours (or longer if there are delays at roadblocks).

GAMBIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

In the Atlantic coast resorts, there's plenty of choice in places to stay, from basic guesthouses and self-catering apartments to palatial hotels. Upcountry, your options are severely limited, mainly to camps with accommodation in bungalows and round huts. Beware of the rapidly proliferating 'eco-lodges', only very few actually do justice to their name. If you want to travel responsibly, check their claims to eco-friendliness carefully. In this chapter budget accommodation is under US\$30, top end is over US\$75 and midrange is somewhere between the two.

ACTIVITIES

Most tourist activities in Senegal and Gambia tend to be related to the sea, beach tourism being the most important slice of the holiday industry. Some beaches aren't safe for swimming though, due to strong undertows. Upcountry, it's all about the scenery and wildlife, with bird-watching, tours around the national parks and hiking among favourite pursuits. Pirogue and fishing trips can be arranged at Denton Bridge near Banjul (p307) and at the coast, and watersports equipment can be hired (see p307).

BOOKS

The most famous work relating to The Gambia is probably *Roots* (1976) by Alex Haley. A mix of historical fact and imaginative fiction, the hugely influential book describes the African-American author's search for his African origins.

PRACTICALITIES

- *Africa Today* (Afro Media) has good political and economic news, plus business, sport and tourism.
- *Focus on Africa* (BBC) has excellent news stories, accessible reports and a concise run down of recent political events.
- *West Africa* (West Africa Publishing) is a long-standing and respected weekly with a focus on political and economic news.
- The electricity supply in The Gambia is 220V. Plugs either have two round pins, as those in continental Europe, or three square pins, as used in Britain.
- The Gambia uses the metric system.

For historical insights into the region, try Mungo Park's 19th-century classic *Travels in the Interior of Africa*. The written version of the Kelefa Saane epic, a famous recitation of Gambia's griots, affords excellent insights into the history of the Mandinka in Gambia. Mark Hudson's *Our Grandmother's Drum* is an entertaining fiction with moving insights into Gambia's music scene.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices are open from 8am to 3pm or 4pm Monday to Thursday, and 8am to 12.30pm Friday. Banks, shops and businesses usually open 8.30am to noon and 2.30pm to 5.30pm Monday to Thursday and 8am to noon Friday and Saturday. Restaurants tend to serve lunch from around 11am to 2.30pm and dinner from 6pm onwards. Most restaurants in the cities stay open until the last guest leaves, though in smaller towns and villages many close around 10pm or whenever the food runs out. Bars usually open around 8pm, tend to get going from 11pm onwards, and close around 3am or 4am.

CHILDREN

Children are generally welcome, though there's little in the way of child-centred activities. Most hotels offer the facility of adding an extra bed to a room. Children under 12 usually get a 50% discount or even stay free of charge.

Child-minding facilities are only available in a few hotels, most of them in the upper midrange or top-end bracket, and there's little in the way of professional baby-sitting agencies. Nappies and baby food are found in the big supermarkets, but upcountry you might encounter problems.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

On a world scale, Gambia is a fairly safe place to visit. Pickpocketing is rife though, and there are occasional muggings. Perhaps most annoying are the 'bumsters' near the coast, who try to make a living from hustling tourists. Firm but polite refusals to their offers of services should keep them away. Gambia's police checkpoints are notoriously irritating, being staffed with officials keen to extract some dalasi. Stay polite and friendly when faced with such behaviour – anger will only get you tied up in red tape. Women should be careful at beaches and on the road after dark – some readers have reported mild to very serious hassle.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Gambian Embassies & Consulates

Belgium (☎ 02 640 1049; 126 Ave Franklin-Roosevelt, Brussels 1050)

France (☎ 01 42 94 09 30; 117 Rue Saint-Lazare, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030 892 31 21; fax 030 891 14 01; Kurfurstendamm 103, Berlin)

Guinea-Bissau (☎ 0203928; Av de 14 Novembre, Bis-sau) Located 1km northwest of Mercado de Bandim.

Nigeria (☎ 0682 192; 162 Awolowo Rd, Ikoyi, Lagos)

Senegal (☎ 821 44 76; 11 Rue de Thiong, Dakar)

Sierra Leone (☎ 225191; 6 Wilberforce St, Freetown)

UK (☎ 020 7937 6316; 57 Kensington Court, London W8 5DH)

USA (☎ 0202-785 1399; gamembdc@gambia.com; Suite 1000, 1155 15th St NW, Washington, DC 20005)

Embassies & Consulates in Gambia

For details of embassies in Gambia not listed here, check in the phone book (most Gamtel offices have one).

Guinea (Map p299; ☎ 4226862, 909964; top fl, 78A Daniel Goddard St, Banjul; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1.30pm & 2.30-4pm Fri)

Guinea-Bissau (Map pp304-5; ☎ 4494854; Atlantic Rd, Bakau; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Mali (Map p299; ☎ 4226942; VM Company Ltd, Cherno Adama Bah St, Banjul)

Mauritania (Map pp304-5; ☎ 461086; off Badala Park Way, Kololi; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Senegal (Map pp304-5; ☎ 4373752; fax 373 750; off Kairaba Ave, Serekunda; ☎ 8am-2pm & 2.30-5pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri)

Sierra Leone (Map p299; ☎ 4228206; 67 Daniel Goddard St, Banjul; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri)

UK (Map pp304-5; ☎ 495133/4; fax 496134; 48 Atlantic Rd, Fajara; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri)

USA (Map pp304-5; ☎ 4392856/8, 391971; fax 392475; Kairaba Ave, Fajara)

Several European countries have honorary consuls in Gambia, including Belgium (at the Kairaba Hotel, Kololi), Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway (above Tina's Grill, Saitmatty Rd, Bakau).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Two of Gambia's most interesting festivals include the following:

International Roots Festival Biannual festival held all across Gambia in June, with a focus on the 'Roots' village, Jufureh. Features mainly traditional music, as well as debates.

Kartong Festival (☎ 8900411, 7730535; www.kartongfestival.com) Village festival in Gambia, featuring local, largely traditional dance and music groups.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Strictly speaking, being gay or lesbian is illegal in Gambia, and for many people, gay sexual relationships are a cultural taboo. It is probably best to avoid public displays of affection (which are also frowned upon in straight couples). Actual aggression is quite rare, though you might encounter some hostility.

HOLIDAYS

Apart from the state holidays below, Muslim holidays, such as Korité, Tabaski, Tamkharit and Mouldi are celebrated. Their dates are determined by the lunar calendar, and occur on different dates each year. See p818 for more information.

Holidays include:

New Year's Day 1 January

Independence Day 18 February

Good Friday March/April

Easter Monday March/April

Workers' Day 1 May

Anniversary of the Second Republic 22 July

Christmas 25 December

INTERNET ACCESS

There are plenty of Internet cafés in Banjul and around the Atlantic coast, and most upcountry towns have at least one sluggish cybercafé. The two main operators are **Quantumnet** (www.qanet.gm) and **Gamtel** (www.gamtel.gm). All charge about D30 an hour as a base rate.

INTERNET RESOURCES

ASSET (www.asset-gambia.com) The homepage of the Gambian Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism lists plenty of interesting, one-man businesses.

Gambia Tourism Authority (www.visitthegambia.gm) Gambia's official tourist website, it covers the basics of travel information, though not in any great detail.

One Gambia (www.onegambia.com) Tells you all about Gambia's vibrant reggae scene, complete with its own radio station 'West Coast Radio'.

MONEY

The Gambia's unit of currency is the dalasi, which is divided into 100 bututs. Notes in circulation are D5, D10, D25, D50 and D100. Over the years, the dalasi has drastically decreased in value and had recently stabilised when this book was written. You need to check the situation when you travel, and bear value-decrease in mind when considering prices listed in this book.

ATMs

ATMs exist at several banks (notably Standard Chartered) and a couple of petrol stations in Banjul and around the Atlantic coast. In theory, ATMs accept credit and debit cards from banks with reciprocal agreements, but in reality, Visa tends to be the only reliably accepted card. Withdrawal limits can be tight, with some banks only allowing withdrawals of up to D2000.

Black Market

The government has clamped down on The Gambia's once flourishing black market, which means that changing money with moneychangers is now risky, without giving you better value than at a bank. If you travel overland from Senegal, moneychangers will probably crowd around your taxi as you enter The Gambia. Don't feel pressured – many places and most taxis in The Gambia also accept CFA, so that you can get by without changing before reaching Banjul or the coastal resorts.

Cash

In Senegal and Gambia, major international currencies such as euros, US dollars and British pounds can be changed in banks and hotels in the capital cities, major towns and tourist areas. Upcountry, changing might be difficult.

Credit Cards

The use of credit cards is mainly limited to midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants, car rental, air tickets and some tours, but there's a real risk of fraud. Amex and Visa are the most widely accepted.

Moneychangers

All the major banks change money, as do exchange bureaus, which are found in the tourist zones. Bureaus tend to give a slightly better rate for cash than banks, and a slightly worse rate for travellers cheques, but as rates and commissions can vary, it might be worth shopping around.

Tipping

Tipping is usually expected in upmarket places – cheap hostels would be surprised to receive a tip. At the better restaurants, you're expected to tip around 10%, though many places include this in the bill. No one tips taxi drivers.

Travellers Cheques

Changing travellers cheques can be tricky, even at banks, which invariably charge high commissions. Forget about changing them upcountry and don't bring anything but American Express.

POST

The Gambia has a fairly reliable postal service, with letters from Banjul and the Atlantic resorts usually arriving in Europe within a week, and in North America and Australasia in 15 days. The poste restante service, which is available in the main post office in Banjul, is reportedly slow.

TELEPHONE & FAX

There are plenty of public telephone offices, from where you can make local, national and international calls, and send faxes. Even the tiniest towns tend to have at least one, either privately owned or run by the national company Gamtel.

There are no area codes. Calls are charged by the unit, and add up fast on a call abroad. National calls are cheap, but to call abroad, you'll pay around D50 per minute. A 33% discount applies between 11pm and 7am.

For directory assistance dial ☎ 151.

Mobile Phones

Mobile coverage is generally good. The main operators are Gamcell and Africell. A Gamcell SIM card costs D500. You can top up with prepaid cards, which are available in units of D50, D100, D150 and D300. Calls from mobile to mobile are fairly cheap, while mobile-landline costs almost the same as an international call.

TIME

Gambia is at GMT/UTC. The country has no daylight savings. When it's noon in Gambia, it's 7am in New York, noon in London, 1pm in Paris and 10pm in Sydney.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Gambia is represented in Britain by the **Gambia National Tourist Office** (☎ 020 7376 0093; www.gambiatourism.info), based at the Gambian high commission.

In The Gambia, the **Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism** (ASSET; www.asset-gambia.com) is a great umbrella organisation, trying to help small businesses. In Kartong, the local **Kartong Association for Responsible Tourism** (KART; ☎ 4495887; www.safarigarden.com) is a good source, especially for independent travellers.

VISAS

Visas are not needed by nationals of Commonwealth countries, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Ecowas or Scandinavian countries for stays of up to 90 days. For those needing one, visas are normally valid for one month and are issued in two to three days for about US\$45; you'll need two photos.

Visa Extensions

Visa extensions are usually dealt with swiftly at the **Immigration Office** (☎ 4228611; OAU Blvd, Banjul; ☎ 8am-4pm). They cost D250.

Visas for Onward Travel

For onward travel, get your visa from the relevant embassy. Most deal with requests within 24 hours.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

While it's not exactly dangerous to travel on your own as a woman in The Gambia, unwarranted interest is a pretty steady travel companion. Guys won't hesitate to approach you, and see how far they can go. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Inventing a husband is a pretty good strategy, and can help ward off suitors. On the same note, it's always better to refer to your boyfriend as husband in order to see your relationship respected.

Beaches are prime hassle zones, and the areas where female readers report the most irritating, sometimes downright threatening, advances.

It's often suggested that dress code can make a crucial difference to how you are regarded. That's true, though only to a certain extent. In urban areas, tight jeans and tops are perfectly acceptable, but in villages and when visiting people stick to long skirts or trousers (skirts are better in Muslim areas). You'll make your own life very hard if you walk around in miniskirts.

TRANSPORT IN GAMBIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering The Gambia

A full passport is essential for entering The Gambia. If you cross by land from Senegal, you might experience difficult officials. Stay polite, and make sure that your papers are in complete order; meaning you've got a passport with a valid visa (if you need one) and your vaccination certificate.

Air

The Gambia's main airport is **Banjul International Airport** (BJL; ☎ 4473117; www.gambia.gm/gcaa) at Yundum, about 20km from the city centre.

Most people travel to Gambia by charter flight. Regular airlines include the following:

Air Guinée (Map p299; 2U; ☎ 4412907; www.mirinet.com/airguinee; OAU Blvd cnr Davidson Carrol St, Banjul) Hub Conakry.

Air Sénégal International (Map p299; V7; ☎ 4202117; www.air-senegal-international.com; Ecowas Ave, Banjul) Hub: Dakar.

Slok Air (Map pp304-5; ☎ 4377782; www.slokair.com; Kairaba Ave, Fajara) Hub: Banjul.

SN Brussels (Map pp304-5; ☎ 027232323; www.flysn.be; Kololi) Hub: Brussels.

West Coast Airways (Map p299; WCG; ☎ 7767666; Nelson Mandela St, Banjul) Hub: Accra.

Land

If you travel by land, you'll invariably enter from Senegal. The virtual disappearance of Gambia Public Transport Corporation's (GPTC) bus service has left the bush taxi as the only reliable option.

There are frequent connections between Dakar and Banjul. Most pass through the border crossing at Karang. You need to change vehicles twice – first into a minibus to cross the 'no-man's land' between the Senegalese and Gambian border post, then into a taxi of the nation you're entering – Senegalese taxis don't continue all the way to Banjul, neither do Gambian taxis take you into Senegal. To get to Banjul, you'll have to take the ferry in Barra. If you're coming from Dakar and think you might miss the last ferry across to Banjul (it leaves at 7pm), accommodation in Barra is limited to a couple of sleazy hotels. You'd be far better off staying in Toubacouta and getting the ferry from Barra to Banjul the next morning.

A second option takes you eastwards from Banjul to Soma, where you cross the Gambia River to Farafenni, then along the Trans-Gambia Hwy to Kaolack and Dakar. It's an interesting journey, but you'll have to put up with some terrible roads. The stretch from Brikama to Soma counts among the worst roads of the region.

There are a few border crossings between Gambia and the Casamance in Senegal. To get to Ziguinchor, you take a taxi from Brikama or Serekunda to the Senegalese border post at Séléti, where a bush taxi to Ziguinchor is CFA2200.

If you're heading for Kafountine, you could get yourself to Diouloulou via Giboro, then change for Kafountine. It's also possible to go from Brikama to Kafountine via the tiny border town Darsilami. This route isn't frequently used by public transport, but perfectly possible to do in a hired taxi.

The short hop from Kartong to Kafountine you see on the map isn't that time-saving, if you consider a pirogue crossing of the Hallahein River, a 10km walk on the Senegalese side, and the absence of border posts to complete your formalities.

From Basse Santa Su bush taxis go to Vélingara (D20, 45 minutes, 27km). An-

other tiny crossing is the one at Pata, from where a smooth dirt road takes you to Kolda. This isn't very frequented, and there isn't always a post at the Senegalese border, but it's the most direct route from Georgetown to Kolda.

GETTING AROUND

Boat

There's no regular transport upriver, though a couple of tour operators, including **Gambia River Experience** (☎ 4494360; www.gambiariver.com) and **Hidden Gambia** (☎ in UK 01527 576239; www.hiddengambia.com) run excellent river excursions and cruises. Denton Bridge near Banjul (see p307) is the starting point for many pirogue excursions around the coast and western end of the river. The main ferries across the Gambia River are at Barra, Farafenni, Georgetown and Basse Santa Su.

Bus

The GPTC bus network was once the envy of many West African nations, but has now almost completely disintegrated. There are occasional buses that go to upcountry, all the way to Basse Santa Su, but they are not reliable, and can take an extremely long time (more than 12 hours) to arrive.

Bush Taxi

There are two main routes though Gambia: the potholed dirt road along the northern bank of the river, and the potholed tar road

along the southern bank. At the time of writing, the north bank was in a slightly better state than the south bank, but most bush taxis take the southern route. Bush taxi upcountry leave from Serekunda. They usually go to Soma, where you have to change for transport to Georgetown and Basse Santa Su. Bush taxi can take up to 12 hours for the 360km to Basse Santa Su.

There are two types of taxis, the yellow ones and the green 'tourist taxis'. Both can be hired for particular journeys or daytrips. Yellow taxis are just hailed down and tourist taxis usually park at hotels to pick up customers. Their prices are fairly fixed, and usually at least twice as expensive as yellow taxi rates (though these are entirely up for negotiation). Costs rise enormously the further you go upcountry. Day-hire of a yellow taxi for trips around the coast costs between D1000 and D1500, and going up to Basse Santa Su will set you back at least D6000.

Car & Motorcycle

It's possible to hire a car or motorbike in Gambia's resort areas, but it's often advisable to hire a taxi with a driver, as driving on Gambia's dilapidated roads shouldn't be taken lightly, and in case of mechanical problems, it's the driver who'll be responsible and not you.

Despite the British heritage, traffic in Gambia drives on the right.

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