

Travel

Basking in the glory of the

The Gambia is not the place for an African safari, but its stunning beaches, luxury hotels and friendly people make it the perfect place to unwind, as **Steph Elmore** discovered . . .

BE around the pool in six hours? Check. Glorious uncrowded beaches like those of the Caribbean? Check. Exactly the same time zone as the UK so no jet lag? Check. Interesting culture, non commercialised, unspoilt land yet with luxury hotels and hot, hot sunshine that doesn't cost an arm and a leg? Check mate!

Now, you would think the next thing I needed was a reality check on my list but this is exactly what is on the agenda when I reach the blaze of green, tropical flowering trees away from the crowded resorts of European destinations in the Gambia.

It is no wonder they call it the smiling coast of Africa as not only will you spend your time beaming from ear to ear here but the Gambians are the friendliest, most hospitable people I have ever come across. Even at passport control they greet you with a smile rather than with that unnerving stare that makes you seriously wonder whether someone could have actually smuggled something into your bag while you weren't looking and you are about to be hauled off to a cell instead of your hotel (or is that just me who does that?).

No, not even could the heightened tones of Jade Goody's mum on the plane and bumbling around at Banjul airport distract me from the fact that I knew this was going to be one fantastic trip!

Situated on the unspoilt coast of West Africa on approximately the same latitude as Barbados, Gambia is dominated by the majestic River Gambia from which it bears its name and is the smallest country on mainland Africa.

This isn't the place to come if you are looking for a safari adventure, however. It isn't littered with wild animals – except for the baboons, 560 different species of birds and the odd hippopotamus lazing around in the river, but it offers a whole other adventure that takes you right to the heart of African culture.

My first visit was to the 100-acre Makasutu Cultural Forest, (Makasutu means 'holy forest') and there is a real history here. Legend has it that tribal wars



➤ **RHYTHM OF THE NIGHT** Traditional dancers entertain the tourists staying at the Mandina eco lodges in Makasutu, right

took place here, a king was said to have been killed in the forest and his head, throne and crown are buried there.

Aside from its rich past, however, this is one of the key attractions in the Gambia for tourists, the result of 15 years of hard work of two Englishmen, James English and Lawrence Williams that earned them the Best Overseas Eco Development Project award from the British Guild of Travel Writers.

A journey here begins at base camp where you can enjoy all those African delights. Typical local dishes are 'benachin' (rice and vegetables) or 'domoda' (meat stewed in groundnut puree and served with rice). From base camp it's off to explore the dense forest on foot to see the many varieties of spectacular looking birds, monkeys and baboons until you reach the mangroves of the Gambian river, climb aboard a dugout canoe and set off for a magical and tranquil trip along the African waters.

It was here I noticed the luxu-

rious 'Mandina Lodges', also part of Makasutu forest. Many people choose to stay in these riverside lodges if they really want to get away from it all. The lodges are built on stilts over the water and are solar powered with their own private roof terrace, bedroom and upstairs day-room and are so eco-friendly they have a roofless and self-composting toilet.

During the evening there is a real magical feel to Makasutu, especially when they put on a tribal dance show – men and women in African costume thrashing about doing acrobatics, real African dancing, singing and chanting all around a 15 foot bonfire.

Another way to experience the real Gambia would be to take an off the beaten track adventure and drive through the town of Serrekunda to get among the Gambians trading on the streets, see the hustle and bustle of the market, the fish huts choking with steam as they smoke that day's catch, and if you fancy doing business, get



haggling. Solid wood carvings are the Gambians' forte, I haggled a top-notch African mask carving down from £80 to £20.

Tourism in the Gambia began around 1965 and has been developing slowly ever since. It is still behind many European destinations but the vast majority of Gambians earn their money from the land or the seas. I took a trip to the beach late afternoon and watched the fishermen bring in the catch.

Just to see a sea of men, and women with babies strapped to their backs, all dressed in vivid colours wading through the waters to haul in the shoals of fish and dish them out into buckets

while you watch the sun set is a picture postcard memory I will never forget.

Do remember to take plenty of water with you, suntan lotion and mosquito spray on any excursions, but remember, toilets are not so readily available, as I found out. Needs must, however, and I was kindly invited into a family's 'compound' where, aside from the use of the necessary, I was even offered food, to hold the new born baby of the family and had a good chat before leaving to get back on the truck.

Now I wouldn't let a tourist into my home to use the toilet but that is just another example

of friendly, hospitable Gambians.

There are no classification systems to the hotels in the Gambia, most travel agents will grade them based on feedback but all the hotels I visited were in the five star league, like the Mandina lodges in Makasutu Forest, they all had character and were not the 'sterile' places you often find in the West.

I stayed in the new Sheraton Gambia Hotel Resort and Spa, which was more like having your own little villas overlooking the beach and the restaurant food was as good as you would expect to find in the Lowry hotel back home.