

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 maybe even go on a pirogue trip, just hop off the taxi and put in a couple of overnight stops at the few brilliantly located camps that are sprinkled along the riverside. Most of these are well equipped for ardent bird-watchers, for whom a trip upcountry is a must. Numerous national parks – including the River Gambia and Kiang West National Parks and the Baobolong Wetland Reserves – feature such a stunning array of birds (and other wildlife) that nature lovers might be tempted to camp out here for days.

Gambia’s inland is best explored in leisure mode – there’s plenty to see, and most places are tucked away in the country’s remote corners. By far the most enjoyable way of travelling here is by boat – hardly surprising, as the narrow strip that is Gambia consists largely of waterway. Chugging slowly upriver, past mangrove-lined creeks, tiny islands and wide wetlands might easily be the unexpected highlight of your entire trip.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wake up to the lapping of the waves and the calls of the birds at **Bintang Bolong** (opposite), where huts stand on stilts in the river
- Take a pirogue from Tendaba to the maze of mangroves in the **Baobolong Wetland Reserve** (p131)
- Follow in the footsteps of histories old and new at **Georgetown** (Jangjang-bureh; p133), where relics of ancient African and modern European cultures document different eras
- Try your luck at spotting hippos and chimpanzees on a boat tour to **River Gambia National Park** (p138)

POPULATION: 450,000



CENTRAL GAMBIA

BINTANG BOLONG

A large, meandering tributary of the Gambia River, Bintang Bolong rises in Senegal and joins the river about 50km upstream from Banjul. The banks of the tidal river are lined with mangroves, and tucked away among the maze of shrubs near Bintang is the spectacular **Bintang Bolong Lodge** (☎ 4488035, 9867615; www.bintang-bolong.com; r per person D400; 🍽️), an intimate, ecofriendly camp made from local mangrove, and clay bricks. It was renovated in 2004 and now houses up to 16 people in stunning huts that sit on stilts on the river. If the tide is high, you can almost leap from your bedroom into a canoe and go bird-watching or fishing in the mangroves. The lodge offers boat trips (D800 per hour per boat), as well as plenty of other activities (visits to the local crocodile pool where you can get close-up views of baby crocs are a favourite). It can also arrange a pick-up from Brikama (D750), Banjul or Serekunda (D1200) or Soma (D2000).

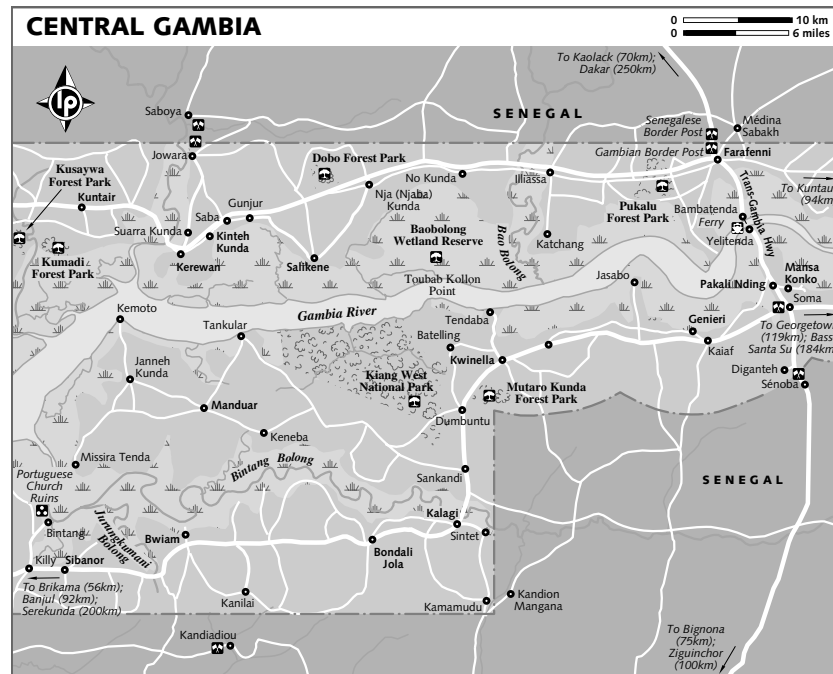
This is a great, family-friendly place to explore the natural surroundings of central Gambia, and catch a glimpse of rural life – the camp is closely integrated with the local community, employing villagers and investing in schools and hospitals.

Getting There & Away

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

KANILAI

A small village near the Senegalese border, Kanilai is the hometown of President Jammeh. He’s honoured his birthplace and put it on the tourist map through the construction of the **Sindola Safari Lodge** (☎ 4483415/6; kairaba@gamtel.gm; hut D1020, ste D2040; 🍽️ 🚿), a most luxurious upcountry lodging.



Sindola offers the whole dazzling range of tourist facilities, from tennis and volleyball courts to massage parlours and several bars and restaurants, spread out across a vast terrain of 30,000 sq metres. Birding trips and river fishing can be organised, too. The place owes its name 'Safari Lodge' to an adjoining wildlife park, a rather sad story of animals in cages. Several large mammals, including a couple of lions, were acquired to be 'put on display', but died before the park was completed.

To get here from the coast, you could take an all-inclusive tour from the Kairaba Hotel (p108), or hire a private taxi (around D3000). On public transport, take a bush taxi from Brikama and get off at the police checkpoint where the highway and the road to Kanilai meet. Kanilai is 6km further south.

TENDABA

On the southern bank of the Gambia River, the small village of Tendaba is 165km upstream from Banjul. The village occupies a place of honour in the upriver itineraries of many travellers, thanks to the enduringly attractive **Tendaba Camp** (☎ 4541024, 4465288; tendaba@qanet.gm; bungalows with/without bathroom from D245/225, VIP R D270). Established in the 1970s as a hunting camp, the hotel is something of a

classic on the travellers scene, providing consistently good accommodation, service and a range of excursions. Tendaba's attraction lies in its position – opposite the Baobolong Wetland Reserve 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 – great news, as there's hardly anywhere else to go for a meal in the near surroundings. The bush pig in pepper sauce is a treat, and the evening buffets leave you spoilt for choice. The camp frequently organises dance and drumming shows (donations always welcome).

From Tendaba, you can arrange 4WD excursions to Kiang West National Park 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. A good destination for the day is Toubab Kollon Point, about 7km from the camp (see opposite for details).

Getting There & Away

Many people come to Tendaba Camp as part of a tour, and most large hotels and tour operators offer two-day excursions or

longer trips. A river tour is a particularly good idea (see p290). Prices differ widely – it's worth doing some phoning around before making your booking. Tours typically include transport, accommodation, food and side trips.

Another option is to come from the Atlantic Coast resorts by green tourist taxi (about D4000 for the car, carrying up to four people) and pay for your own room, food and day trips directly to the camp.

Independent travellers on public transport should take a bush taxi from Banjul or Serekunda along the main road towards Soma. Get off at the village of Kwinella; the camp (signposted) is 5km north along the dirt road. There are no regular minibuses, but camp manager Saja Touray promises to collect anyone from Kwinella for free. Otherwise it's a walk or trip by donkey cart.

KIANG WEST NATIONAL PARK

South of the river, and to the west of Tendaba Camp, **Kiang West National Park** (admission D31.50) is one of the largest protected areas in Gambia, and boasts its biggest and most diverse animal population. Habitats include mangrove creeks and mud flats (the river is still tidal this far upstream), plus large areas of dry woodland and grassland. A major natural feature is an escarpment, which runs parallel to the riverbank. We're not talking Rift Valley here, but even 20m is significant in a country as flat as Gambia, and from this high point you can look over the narrow plain between the escarpment foot and the river itself. Animals are often seen here, especially at the three water holes.

Kiang is one of the best places in Gambia to get a close-up look at cute bushbabies. Other frequently observed mammals include baboons, colobus monkeys, warthogs, marsh mongooses and bushbucks. You may see an antelope called a roan – it's large and horselike (hence the name), and migrates into the area from Casamance. Making very rare appearances are sitatungas, a larger relative of the bushbuck that are aquatic and adept at swimming and moving through river vegetation using their wide hooves.

Other rarely sighted species include hyenas, leopard, manatees, dolphins and crocodiles. Birds are also plentiful, with more than 300 species recorded (see right for bird-watching tips).

TWITCHER TIPS: KIANG WEST NATIONAL PARK

With more than 300 recorded species, Kiang West National Park is one of the richest birding areas in Gambia, and something of a pilgrimage site for keen watchers. Even visitors with little interest in the feathered creatures have been converted to binocular-wielding bird spotters, attracted by the sight of the large Abyssinian ground hornbill, ospreys, fish eagles, martial eagles and bateleur eagles. While raptor species are particularly common here, many other varieties, including the rare brown-necked parrot and the more common white-rumped swift are found here. Tendaba Camp has regular excursions to Kiang West, though for expert birding advice, you should consider coming with a specialist guide, and exploring the area on your own.

A popular place for viewing wildlife is **Toubab Kollon Point**, a river promontory in the northeast of the park. Behind the point, the escarpment runs close to the riverbank, and 2km west is a viewing hide overlooking a water hole, which attracts a good range of animals, especially in the dry season. November to January are the best months to visit, but wear pants to avoid being bitten by tsetse flies. The admission fee is payable at the park headquarters in Dumbuntu, although this is included in the price if you're on a tour from Tendaba.

BAOBOLONG WETLAND RESERVE

A tributary of the Gambia River, **Bao Bolong** rises in Senegal and enters the main river on the northern side, upstream from Tendaba. It contains several other *bolongs* (creeks), as well as mangroves and salt marshes, which together with the surrounding dry savannah woods and grassland make Baobolong Wetland Reserve of international importance. Baobolong is a Ramsar (the international wetlands convention) site.

The mangroves in this area are some of the largest in the region, growing over 20m high in places and forming a virtual forest. Birds are a major attraction – marshlands attract large numbers of herons (including the white-backed night heron) and egrets, the rare Pel's fishing owls and mouse-brown

THE STATE OF THE ROADS

Two main arteries connect the eastern and western parts of Gambia – the north-bank road, on the upper side of the river, and the south-bank road, which parallels the Gambia River in the south. Both roads have been in a terrible state for years, the northern route being a washed-out dirt road, the southern a potholed stretch of tarred road. The southern connection used to be the better choice of two dire options, and the route used by most public transport. Yet continuous neglect has meant that the artery is now so rundown that it's even worse to drive on than the north-bank road. Bush taxis frequently drive on improvised dirt tracks beside the road, and Gambia's formerly proud bus network has literally been ground to a halt by the sand and stones.

If you're in your own car take the ferry from Banjul to Barra and travel via the north bank; your tyres and gearbox will be forever grateful. If you're travelling by bush taxi, you probably don't have much choice but to go via the southern route. From the coast to Brikama the tarred road is smooth, but the holes start only a few kilometres further down. The stretch from there to Soma is the worst, and things only really get better shortly before Georgetown. Georgetown to Basse is miraculously paved, raising hopes that the rest of the artery might be blessed with a new layer of asphalt, too, though no immediate works had been announced when we visited. The northern road, by contrast, is supposed to benefit from some fairly imminent improvements – ask around when you're there (and let us know!).

Whether you're going via the northern or southern connection, allow at least 12 hours for the tedious journey from the coast to Basse Santa Su. And if you want to eschew the treacherous potholes altogether and experience the scenery at its best, take the boat along Gambia's smoothest east-west connection – the Gambia River.

sunbirds. The reserve also protects various aquatic mammal species such as manatees, clawless otters and marshbucks.

The best way to experience this wonderful maze of islands and waterways is by boat, which is most easily arranged at Tendaba Camp.

SOMA & MANSA KONKO

Soma is a junction town where the main road crosses the Trans-Gambia Hwy, and is where you change transport if you're heading upcountry by bush taxi or, crucially, fill up the tank before continuing your journey east, where service stations are rare.

Soma is a dusty, flyblown place, with the main street full of trucks and rubbish, and nothing in the way of attractions. The border is only a few kilometres to the south, and the Gambian customs and immigration post is on the eastern edge of town. About 10km north of Soma is Yelitenda, where you catch the ferry across the Gambia River to Bambatenda, and then continue to Farafenni.

Near Soma is Mansa Konko, originally an important local chief's capital (the name means 'king's hill'), and then 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 the crumbling **colonial villa**.

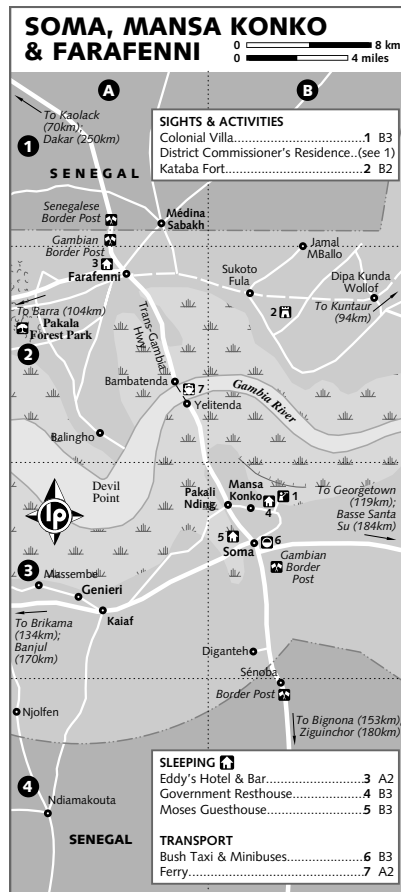
Sleeping & Eating

Moses Guesthouse (☎ 4531462; r per person D125) If you get stuck in Soma, this lively place on the north side of the main junction is the best option. Since it's the most popular place in a busy junction town, it can get quite noisy, but then again, it comes with the added attraction of 24-hour electricity.

Government Resthouse (s/d D150/250) This place in Mansa Konko is officially for government staff only, but desperate travellers can stay in the usually clean rooms. It's 2.5km from the main road near the old district commissioner's residence, which is the highest point for several kilometres around with some fine views over the Gambia River valley; the residence is also where to go if there's no-one around at the resthouse.

Getting There & Away

Most bush taxis from Serekunda terminate at the bush-taxi park in Soma's centre (the fare is D90) or go on to Farafenni (D100



from Serekunda). Transport to Georgetown (D80) and Basse Santa Su (D90) leaves from the same park. Heading south, you can also get bush taxis from the border to Bignona and Ziguinchor in southern Senegal.

If you're heading north from Soma, 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. The ferry service operates between 8am and 9pm, usually every half-hour, though waits can be longer, and the ferry suffers fairly frequent breakdowns. Tickets can be bought about 1km before you reach the ferry – anyone can indicate the

office to you. Taking your own car across will cost around D65 – exact rates often depend on the mood of the official you happen to encounter on the day. You'll probably have to wait a while for a place, but it's not as bad as the Banjul to Barra ferry.

If you're on foot, you can also jump onto a pirogue (D4). Pirogues leave when they're full. You'll have pay another D4 for access to the port. A private pirogue should cost about D80.

FARAFENNI

Situated on the Trans-Gambia Hwy north of the Gambia River, Farafenni is a busy little town and much more pleasant than Soma. People come from surrounding villages and merchants come from as far as Mauritania and Guinea to sell their wares at the main Sunday *lumo* (market). This is a good place to sample upcountry life, although it feels more like Senegal than Gambia: CFA francs are used more than dalasi, and more French is spoken than English. If you're low on cash visit the **Trust Bank** (☎ 5735238; fax 5735007); it's the only bank for many kilometres. The Senegal border, 2km to the north, is open from 7am to midnight.

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

Sleeping & Eating

Eddy's Hotel & Bar (☎ 7735225; s/d with bathroom D200/250; ☺) This place has been a popular travellers' meeting point for many years. You can eat chicken and chips or *benechin* (rice in a thick sauce of meat and vegetables) for in the shady garden courtyard (D35 to D45) while the apparently carefree Eddy shoots (unsuccessfully) at small birds with an air gun. Self-contained rooms come with either twin or double beds; note that room rates nearly double if you request air-con. There's also safe parking, cold beer and a disco at weekends.

For cheap food, there are several *chop shops* (local restaurants) on the main street, south of the junction.

Getting There & Away

If you're heading for Banjul, direct minibuses from Farafenni go to Serekunda most mornings for D90. If you're heading south

or anywhere upcountry on the southern bank, 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. A minibus from the bush taxi stop in Farafenni to the Senegal border post is D5.

EASTERN GAMBIA

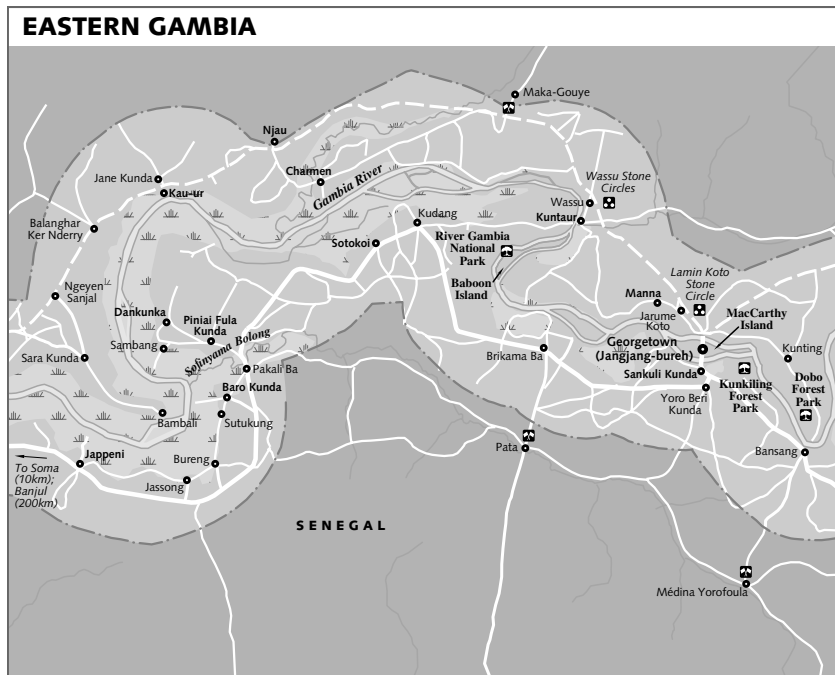
Beyond Farafenni is the Gambia River's transition zone – the area where it changes from saline to fresh water. The character of the river is also different: the tidal change is less noticeable, the mangroves thin out and thick forest grows down to the water's edge. And you'll increasingly notice islands on the river, the most famous being Baboon Island, which is part of the River Gambia National Park. As you head up the river there are several colonial-era towns. Georgetown and Basse Santa Su are both well worth visiting, as are the Wassu Stone Circles, enigmatic relics of an entirely different era.

GEORGETOWN (JANGJANG-BUREH)

Under the British, Georgetown was a busy administrative centre and trading hub full of grand buildings. Today it has 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 – it's the perfect place to relax for a couple of days.

Located on the northern edge of MacCarthy Island in the Gambia River, about 300km by road from Banjul, the traditional and now officially reintroduced 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, and has ferry links to both riverbanks. There is little in terms of infrastructure – no banks, no hospital – but there's an **Internet café** (per hr D25; ☎ 9am-6pm) for those who feel they need a connection beyond the island.

While in Georgetown, or even on the ferry taking you there, you'll undoubtedly be approached by persistent local youths offering their services as guides. Unless you're very directionally challenged you won't need their help; don't be afraid to say no.



Sights

It may only take you a couple of hours to wander around Georgetown, but there is probably more to see here and in the surrounding area than in almost any other town in Gambia. Most of the 'sights' have a historical bent; two of the most interesting are crumbling **late-Victorian warehouses** situated on the waterfront either side of the northern ferry landing. Enterprising local youths have created a local 'Roots industry' from the structures. It started with one of the warehouses being referred to as 'Slave House', which was then changed to 'Slave Prison'; the place was then decorated with lit candles and a matching story was created. A 'Freedom Tree', claimed to guarantee liberation to any slave who touched it, another 'Slave House' and finally a 'Slave Market' joined the scene. Although records show slaves were transported through Georgetown, it is unlikely that the buildings were used in this trade as they were built well after slavery was abolished in British colonies in 1807. You might find this profitable rewriting of history an insult to the victims

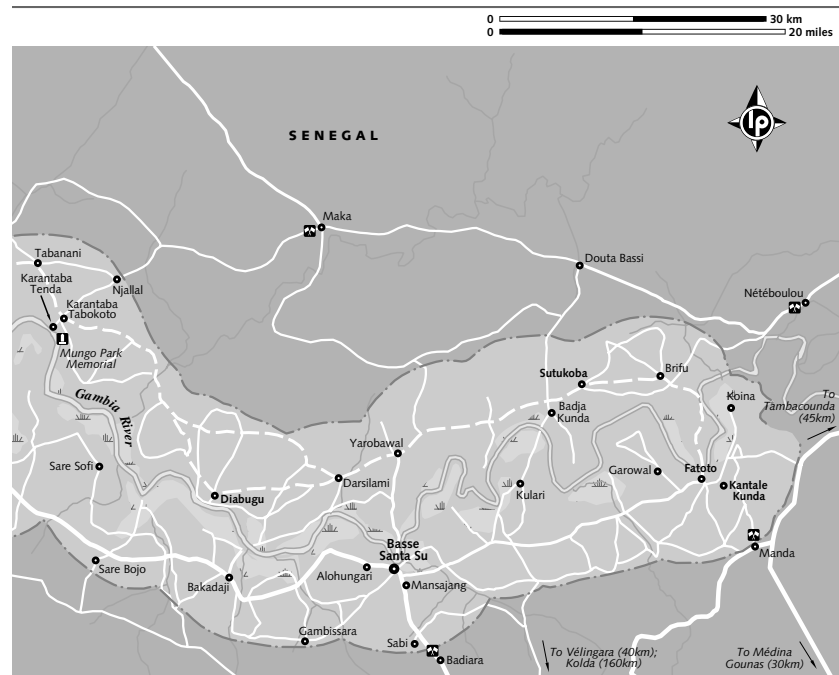
of slavery, or think of it as entertainment. Your choice – but be aware of the 'Visitors Book', encouraging incredibly generous donations in the memory of slavery.

Nearby is the old **Commissioner's Quarters** now inhabited by the district governor, and a **monument to Fort George** outside the police station. The fort was built by the British in 1823 after the local king asked for their protection against a neighbouring tribe. West of town is the **Armitage High School**, a historical building of vague interest to anyone keen on colonial architecture.

Those with a penchant for ancient historical features should take a trip to **Lamin Koto Stone Circle**. It's a smaller and less impressive monument than the famous Wasu Stone Circles, but sitting only 1.7km away from the north bank, it's closer and thus in good reach for those who can't make it to Wasu. The circle is on the right (northeast) side of the road, under a big tree.

Tours

Georgetown is an excellent base for pirogue tours and birding trips as well as for day



visits to the Mungo Park memorial at Karantaba Tenda, the River Gambia National Park, the Wasu Stone Circles and the Dobo and Kunkilling Forest Parks.

Most of the camps in Georgetown organise tours, and prices are roughly the same. Expect to pay D3500 per pirogue for day trips to the River Gambia National Park and D4000 for the double deal of a visit to Wasu and the River Gambia National Park. Baobolong Camp offers two-day boat trips to Karantaba Tenda (including on-board accommodation, D8000). Circumnavigations of MacCarthy Island also make for a good day out (per pirogue D1300).

Georgetown sees a lot of visitors interested in bird life, and most camps run birding excursions. The ones offered by the Bird Safari Camp are particularly recommended. Bird Safari Camp and Jangjang-bureh Camp are the best providers for river excursions.

Sleeping

Baobolong Camp (☎ 5676133; fax 5676120; Owens St; s/d D300/400) This is the best-functioning place in Jangjang-bureh itself – the luxury of a

generator is a good indicator. It's set in lush gardens near the river at the eastern end of town. The camp attracts plenty of birds, and some of the various pirogue tours on offer are particularly geared towards twitchers.

Bird Safari Camp (☎ 5676108; fax 5674004; www.bsc.gm; r with half board per person D1000; 🚶) Some 2.5km west of a tiny island town, this place is about as secluded as it gets. Accommodation is in bungalows or luxury tents with bathroom. It has a generator, which you'll appreciate after dark. A resident ornithologist, private hides and guided walks make it a favourite with bird-watchers. To get here from central Georgetown, you can either hire a taxi or call to arrange a pick-up. This camp is on the itinerary of Hidden Gambia river trips (see p290), and can be reached by river as part of its tour.

Jangjang-bureh Camp (☎ /fax 5676182, 9920618; www.gambiariver.com; r per person D200) This rooty place on the north bank of the Gambia River consists of an eclectic collection of rustic bungalows set in a mazelike garden. Lighting is by oil lamps, and a drink at the bar overlooking the river is a fine way to



spend the evening. It's an old favourite with travellers and belongs to the Gambia River Experience – naturally, there's an enticing range of boat trips on offer.

Dreambird Camp (☎ /fax 5676182; r per person D200) This is mainly the embarkation point for the transfer boat to Jangjang-bureh Camp (free to guests and diners). It also has a few rooms, but these had collapsed when we visited. It was hard to tell whether they would be open again soon; no-one seemed inclined to make any specific statements – not a good sign...

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

Eating & Drinking

Few options exist outside the camps and lodges, especially after dark, when Georgetown drowns in darkness and life retreats behind compound walls.

Talamanca Restaurant (☎ 9921100; Findlay St, meals from D100; ☎ 11am–8pm) A relaxed spot run by the enterprising young Banna Kongira,

who's so keen he'll open after hours if hungry guests knock on his door. He also seems to be growing his humble restaurant into a 'hotel', having added a low-key, mosquito net-fitted bungalow. Inquire about rates.

There are a couple of cheap eateries around the market, as well as the following: **Maradona Roadside Pub** (Owens St; snacks from D75; ☎ lunch & dinner) Opposite Alaka-bung Lodge; a good place for snacks. Has a cheap bar.

Yaa Olly's Restaurant (Findlay St; meals D100–150; ☎ lunch & dinner) An unpretentious address for cheap local meals.

Getting There & Away

Ferries reach MacCarthy Island from either the southern or northern bank of the river. The northern ferry operates from 8am to 7pm. The ferry connecting the island to the southern shore seems to run until demand dries up. We crossed onto the island at 11pm, while other travellers report the service inoperative after 6pm. Best to get there early. The main road between Banjul and Basse Santa Su does not go directly past the southern ferry ramp, but bush taxis turn

off to drop off or pick up passengers here if you ask them. Ferry crossing costs D50/5 for cars/passengers. On the island, pick-ups take people to Georgetown for D10.

When leaving Georgetown, take a local pick-up to the southern ferry, and cross over to the southern bank. You may find a direct minibus to Basse Santa Su for D10. Alternatively, take a local minibus or bush taxi to Bansang (D5) and change here for transport to Basse Santa Su (D5). If you're heading west, go to Bansang or just to the main road. From there you can get to Soma, then change for Banjul and other destinations.

WASSU STONE CIRCLES

The area between the Gambia River and the Saloum River in southern Senegal is noted for its concentration of stone circles; the group at Wassu, 20km by road northwest of Georgetown and about 2km north of Kuntaur, is a particularly good example.

There are several **circles** (admission D30) each consisting of between 10 and 24 reddish-brown, massive stones, 1m to 2.5m high and weighing several tonnes. Most of the region's circles date from AD 500 to AD 1000, before the Mandinka people migrated to this area. Excavations have unearthed human bones and artefacts at the centre of many circles, indicating that they were burial sites,

although dating techniques show that bodies may have been buried after the circles were constructed. Little else is known about the people who built these structures. Theories suggest they were farmers because all the sites are near rivers; but some are buried with spears, suggesting they were hunters.

The caretaker will show you to a small but well-presented **museum** with exhibits discussing the possible origins of the circles. It has to be said that not everyone will find them a major attraction. Go if you want to see evidence of ancient African cultures, but not if you're expecting Stonehenge.

Getting There & Away

The stone circles are about 500m before the village of Wassu, coming from Georgetown. In theory Wassu can be reached from Farafenni, but transport can be hard to come by; most people come from Georgetown. A bush taxi to Wassu (D25) waits most mornings at the north-bank ferry ramp, but this goes only when full (which can take several hours), and even if you reach Wassu in time there might be nothing coming back. Bush taxis are only an option on Monday, the day of Wassu's colourful **lumo**, when they are more frequent. Otherwise it's safer to hire a private taxi for the day (around D700), or jump on a tour with a Georgetown camp.

THE CENTRAL RIVER DIVISION FORESTRY PROJECT

Deforestation is one of the greatest environmental dangers in Gambia, so it's encouraging to hear of the initiatives of the **Central River Division Forestry Project** (CRDFP; ☎ 5676198; www.crdfp.org). This inspiring environmental programme has been active in educating the local population about the importance of keeping forests intact, and has in the process created a series of excellent ecotrails through the remaining woods of central and eastern Gambia. One of these leads through the tiny **Dobo Forest Park**, a 34.5-hectare gallery forest that winds along the north bank of the Gambia River, not far from Bansang, and boasts an array of wildlife, including crocodiles, antelopes, bushbucks, hippos and bushbabies, as well as various bird species such as eagles, kingfishers, bee-eaters, rollers and woodpeckers.

The **Kunkilling Forest Park** on the south bank near Bansang is a much larger affair, and can either be walked through or explored by donkey cart. Its 200 hectares of riparian canopy forest are jointly managed by four neighbouring villages. Four ecotrails wind through rich woodlands (where more than 40 types of trees have been counted) inhabited by more than 185 bird species (among them African finfoots, white-backed vultures, adamawa turtle doves, shining-blue kingfishers and nightjars), monkeys, manatees and hippos. A guided visit will also take a brief historical detour, past the tomb of the 19th-century king of Fouladou, Musa Molo.

The CRDFP in Georgetown arranges highly recommended guided tours to these parks. And if a one-day exploration isn't enough for you, you can stay in one of the CRDFP's well-equipped rooms, and get more deeply involved in their preservation work. (The CRDFP is funded by GTZ and KfW. The DFS is the commissioned consultancy company for implementing the project.)

HIGHLY STRUNG HIPPOS

The best time to see hippos is at low tide, when the shallower water cannot hide them so well. If you see a hippo, admire it from afar. These giants of the river are notoriously cantankerous creatures. Forget lions, leopards and snakes – hippos are responsible for more deaths in Africa than any other animal. Despite being vegetarian, they frequently kill animals and people with their enormous jaws and 60cm-long teeth – not to eat them, but to protect their living space. Hippos are very territorial and short-sighted, and will plough into anything they consider a threat, including, unfortunately, the occasional boat with camera-wielding tourists. Keep a respectful distance and, naturally, don't try to feed them by throwing food towards their chomping jaws.

RIVER GAMBIA NATIONAL PARK

South of Kuntaur, five islands in the Gambia River are protected as a national park. Its heart is so-called Baboon Island – the name is sometimes used to refer to the entire park – the site of a project (privately initiated but now government-owned) that takes chimpanzees captured by illegal traders and rehabilitates them to live in the wild. Boat trips are available, 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 about humans getting too close. While females and young ones may be docile, the males can be quick to attack. Having lost their fear of people, they are more aggressive than 'wild' chimps and, being several times stronger than humans, they're capable of awesome deeds when riled. If they are not able to get at the object of their frustration, they will often vent their spleen on the females and youngsters of their own troop. Because of the dense cloak of gallery forest on the banks of the island, it is difficult to see chimps, and getting in close might result in your boat being boarded by a bristling alpha male.

If you visit the area, 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

You can take a boat tour from Georgetown; several camps there have boats for hire at D1000 per day. Alternatively, you can go to Kuntaur by road and hire a boat from 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. Boatmen often try to please their passengers by getting closer, but this should be discouraged.

MUNGO PARK MEMORIAL

Historians may want to head for Karantaba Tenda, about 20km east of Georgetown. Near this village, on the river bank, is the memorial pillar marking where the Scottish explorer Mungo Park set off into the interior to trace the course of the Niger River.

A bush taxi comes here most mornings from the north-bank ferry ramp opposite Georgetown but if your time is limited, hiring a private taxi may be the only certain way of getting there and back in a day (around D250). The pillar is outside the village, but local boys will guide you there for a small fee. Another option is to go by boat. You can hire one for the day from places in Georgetown from about D1000.

BANSANG

Music-lovers may know Bansang as the middle name of one of Gambia's greatest kora players – Amadu Bansang Jobarteh hails from here. A pilgrimage to his birthplace will introduce you to a large town spread out between the river and the main road. It's a calm area that invites walking, particularly if you're a keen bird-watcher – spectacular red-throated bee-eaters nest in a nearby quarry. And, quite importantly, Bansang also has the largest upcountry hospital.

BASSE SANTA SU

Set on a beautiful waterfront, Gambia's easternmost main town is the last major ferry-crossing point on the Gambia River and an

area transport hub. It's a traditional trading centre, as crammed, busy, run-down and enterprising as any West African junction town, especially if you come on a Thursday, when the market is in full swing.

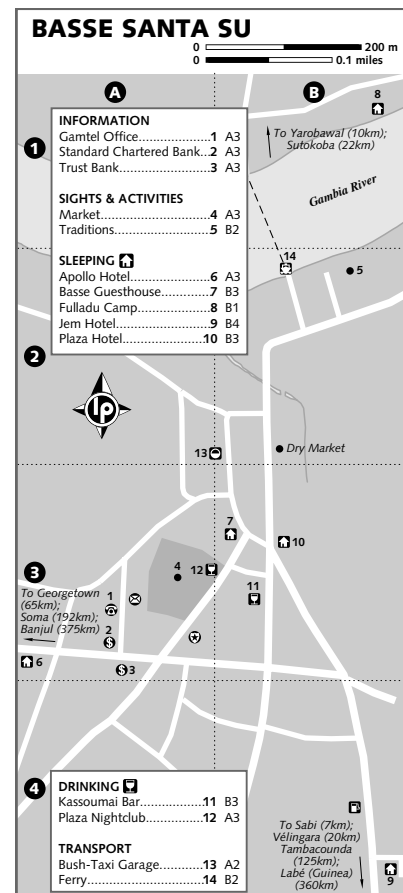
Both **Trust Bank** (☎ 5668907; fax: 5668907) and, opposite, **Standard Chartered Bank** (☎ 4668218) are in the town centre, on the road to Georgetown. They have branches in Basse that can advance money to Visa cardholders. You can make calls at the **Gamtel Office** (☎ 4229999; gen-info@gamtel.gm), opposite the post office, and possibly connect to the Internet, too, by the time you visit.

Sights & Activities

Most of Basse can be explored in an afternoon stroll, which should definitely include the town's bustling **market** and a walk along the waterfront. Heading for the ferry terminal, you'll see an imposing colonial warehouse on the riverside. A couple converted this building several years ago into the cultural centre and café **Traditions** (☎ 5668533; sulaymanjallowtraditions@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-6pm). They exhibited and sold locally fabricated crafts including handmade clothes, mats and wall hangings, sewn from beautiful indigo, tie-dyed and mud-dyed cloth. Since they have left, the place has started gathering dust; the café as well as the display spaces were neglected when we visited. But the staff is still immensely enthusiastic and optimistic that this major stopping point of any tour to Basse 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 station, and, between June and February, it's also one of the best places in Gambia to see the Egyptian plover, a rare species, known locally as the crocodile bird. This small wader might be missed when standing quietly on the riverbank, but it is instantly recognised in flight by its swept-back wings and beautiful black-and-white markings.

Boat rides to see this and other birds (with a chance of spotting hippos or crocodiles) can be arranged with local boatmen on the waterfront, but rates are fiercely negotiable. Expect to pay about D300 an hour for a motorboat (although a lot depends on how much time the engine is actually running) or less for a paddled canoe.



Sleeping & Eating

Staying the night in Basse can feel like a punishment if you're not used to roughing it a bit. Places that were once acceptable are now barely inhabitable – the end of the national bus service has meant that Basse has been almost totally deserted by tourists.

Fulladu Camp (☎ 5668743; r per person D300) On the north bank of the Gambia River this is undoubtedly the best place to stay. It sits about 100m from the ferry landing on a large terrain and has accommodation in comfortable bungalows. The management organises pirogue trips (prices negotiable) and shuttles you across the river if you call in advance. The restaurant here regularly gets good reviews, and is the best bet for eating in town.

MUNGO PARK

By the end of the 18th century, the incentive for exploring the interior of West Africa had switched from being commercial to 'scientific' (and evangelical – to convert 'heathens' to Christianity). Scientific exploration was based on solving two main puzzles: the position of Timbuktu (the mysterious 'city of gold') and the route of the Niger River. Although the Niger's existence was well known, its source and mouth, and even the direction of its flow, were a mystery.

In 1795 the London-based Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa sent a young Scotsman called Mungo Park to the Gambia River. Park followed the river upstream by boat, sailing between British trading stations. He based himself near present-day Georgetown, where he learnt several local languages, and then set off across the plains, with just two servants and three donkeys. He travelled northeast, crossing the Senegal River, getting captured and escaping, and eventually reached the Niger at Ségou, confirming that it flowed in a northerly direction. After more adventures and incredible hardships, he eventually managed to return to the Gambia River and to Britain, where he wrote *Travels in the Interior of Africa*.

In 1801 Park returned to the Gambia River and again set out for the Niger. This time he took a larger support crew, although most of the men were army deserters and completely unprepared for the rigours of the expedition. By the time the group reached the Niger River, many had died, and even more perished either from disease or attacks by local people as they took a boat downstream. Park and the few remaining members of his party all died under attack at the Bussa Rapids, in the east of present-day Nigeria.

Jem Hotel (☎ 5668356; s/d D300/600) When we visited, the manager of this place off the road to Vélingara was a boy who's been in charge since his father's death and is doing a good job, though running this hotel-restaurant-nightclub is clearly tough. It's still one of the cleaner Basse options and the restaurant (open for lunch and dinner with meals around D100 to D150) is a bright spot. Phone in advance for meals.

Basse Guesthouse (☎ 5668283; r D150) Has dingy rooms with shared toilets, but you can spend hours people-watching from the 1st-floor balcony above a tailor shop.

The **Apollo Hotel** (☎ 57000852; r D100), west of the market, and **Plaza Hotel** (r D100), east of Basse Guesthouse, are run (and largely inhabited) by young men. Neither place is ideal for women; they're equally shoddy.

Traditions (☎ 5668533; r D250) can dust off the apartment of the former manager for unexpected visitors (D250). It also serves food; announce your eating plans in advance.

The state of hotels apart from those mentioned often indicates the standard of restaurants. You guessed it, there aren't many options in Basse. For local meals, you're pretty well served at the *chop shops* around the taxi park. If you arrive late at night they might be closed, and you'll be grateful for the roast-meat stalls that line the main road west of the market.

Drinking & Entertainment

The Jem Hotel nightclub promises 'London sounds', but the manager admitted that the sign was old. Still, it gets busy with youngsters bopping to reggae, hip-hop and African music on occasional weekends. The Kas-soumai Bar opposite the market used to be a busy weekend spot; it's still active, though the quality has since declined. The Plaza Nightclub near the market gets packed on weekends. Otherwise it's back to the street meat stalls, beer in hand, where you can count on the company of locals.

Getting There & Away

Bush taxis 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 quick. The charge for a car is D50; passengers are D5. There are smaller boats taking passengers across; the fare is D10.

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

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