

Western Gambia



Heading inland or southward from the bustling tourist zones, big-business tourism gives way to a more intimate experience of Gambian nature and culture. Small fishing villages line the southern strip of white-sand coast, inviting visitors to experience local life.

Further inland, the clamorous junction town of Brikama lures you to more distant destinations. Though the town itself spells dusty discomfort, it is in fact a great artistic centre, being home to some of Gambia's most renowned families of kora players. Music-lovers should definitely put a stop in here. Those with a penchant for nature are probably better off at Abuko Nature Reserve, a tiny park that features a stunning range of wildlife on a stretch of land so small that it's easily explored on foot. For bird-watchers in particular, this is a dream destination – over 250 species have been spotted. West of here, the Makasutu Culture Forest is the place to experience a glossier-than-life version of Gambian nature and culture; treat yourself to a night in the adjacent luxury ecolodge.

On the north bank, the villages Jufureh and Albrede tempt with a fictionalised slice of history. Ever since Alex Haley's work *Roots* traced the author's ancestral lineage back to the Kinte family of Jufureh, the village has turned into a symbolic destination for those in search of answers to their past. While actual links between the Kintes of Jufureh and Haley are disputed, James Island off Jufureh's shore allows for no such ambiguities; the crumbling walls of its ancient slaving station remain a stark reminder of the cruel trade in humans that once took place here.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walk around the beautifully conserved landscape of **Abuko Nature Reserve** (p122), spotting crocodiles, monkeys and hundreds of bird species
- Glimpse local culture and see artisans at work at **Tanji Village Museum** (p118)
- Enjoy a leisurely day hammock-lounging, boat-riding and artwork-gazing in the tranquil river village of **Kartong** (p119)
- Indulge in the calm atmosphere of **Makasutu Culture Forest** (p124), Gambia's cultural 'theme park'
- Motor up the Gambia River to **Jufureh** (p126), the village featured in Alex Haley's novel, *Roots*



■ POPULATION: 600,000

SOUTH COAST

South from Serekunda and Kololi, a smooth tarred road takes you past the calm villages of the south coast, right to the Senegalese border at the Allahein River, some 50km away. This area is more peaceful than the crowded Atlantic resorts area of Kololi, Kotu, Fajara and Bakau, though the tourist industry is fast elbowing its way into the region, gradually transforming fishing beaches into sea resorts. Still, plenty of small-scale initiatives are springing up across the zone, proposing forms of tourism that align more with local interests and sensitivities.

BRUFUT

Brufut is a rapidly expanding village 17km south of Serekunda. It's famous for its fishing centre and a busy working beach, whose rhythm depends entirely on the tide. Boats roll in and out of the sea, and sell their still-jumping catch to dealers from Serekunda. Most of the fishing is done by Ghanaians who live in nearby Ghana Town, their pirogues identified by the coloured flags on their bows.

Tourism is trying hard to outdo fishing as a source of income; two gigantic multistar hotels were almost completed on the beach at the time of research, and in some areas, the sea view is already being obstructed by unimaginative rows of terraced housing.

TWITCHER TIPS: BRUFUT WOODS

A short but hard-to-follow track leads from Brufut town to Brufut Woods, a small forest and well-known haunt of bird-lovers.

Over the years the area's woodland has permanently decreased in size due to deforestation, putting at risk one of Gambia's primary sanctuaries for species such as Verreaux's eagle owls, woodland and malachite kingfishers and various species of sunbirds.

Thanks to an enduring local initiative, the remaining area has now been fenced in and equipped with a drinking pool and hide. Initially managed by the West African Bird Study Association (Wabsa), it is now looked after by the village of Brufut and is an excellent destination for birders, as long as the expansion of tourism in the region doesn't put the area at risk once more.

About 50m back from the sea is **Texas Beach Bar** (meals around D100; ☎ 11am-9pm), which serves meals, drinks and snacks, and even has a couple of improvised guestrooms (D300). Brufut lies on the coastal road, just south of the Atlantic resorts. You reach the beach via dirt tracks from the main road.

TANJI RIVER BIRD RESERVE

About 5km south of Brufut Beach is the small village of Tanji. The area between these two points is called Karinti by locals, and is the site of the **Tanji River Bird Reserve** (adult/child D31.50; ☎ 8am-6pm). An area of dunes, lagoons, dry woodland and coastal scrub, the reserve also incorporates the mangrove creeks and estuary of the Tanji River, and the offshore Bijol Island with its surrounding reefs and islets.

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 water birds are the most prolific, there are also 34 raptor species. The Bijol Island section of the reserve is an important area for the breeding of green turtles, the Caspian tern and grey-headed gull. This is a bird-protection area, and any visit means a disturbance to the fragile breeding project. The only legal tours (around D500) are organised by the wildlife department; these are run only outside breeding season.

Other people will probably offer to take you there – respect the breeding project and stick to the official tour. Even if you don't visit Bijol, a guided walk (per hour D200) around Tanji Reserve will have you spotting plenty of birds.

If you're already at Brufut Beach, a 2km walk along the road takes you to the reserve office, signposted on the right (western) side of the road, where you pay your entry fee. Otherwise, stay in the bush taxi from Serekunda and go directly to the office.

TANJI

About 3km south of the reserve office, the road crosses a small bridge to reach the village of Tanji. You can walk along the beach or through the reserve to get to this point.

If a dromedary tour along the beach is your idea of a good holiday, then you'll be well looked after by any aspiring camel 'drivers' on the coastal road, a tour-group favourite for camel rides along the Tanji coast. Right opposite, **Nyanya's Safari Lodge** (☎ 4461083) on the coastal road, a tour-group favourite for camel rides along the Tanji coast. Right opposite, **Pepe's Camel Safaris** (☎ 4461083) on the coastal road, a tour-group favourite for camel rides along the Tanji coast. Right opposite, **Nyanya's Safari Lodge** (☎ 9822627; s/d D400/500) can put up any aspiring camel 'drivers' in simple but adequate rooms.

Those who prefer a sheltered mangrove setting to a busy beach, and watching birds to crouching on camels, are better off at the stunning **Paradise Inn Lodge** (☎ 8800209; www.paradisainngarden.com; r per person incl breakfast D660). This has a well-deserved reputation for organising excellent bird-watching excursions in the surrounding mangroves and the Tanji reserve. Most rooms in this lush garden setting are enormous, and they also have bikes for hire and organise kora and drumming courses.

In Tanji village, **Kairoh Garden** (☎ 4414019; d with/without bathroom D500/400) is a spacious, palm-shaded place with good-value, clean rooms. It mainly attracts local visitors and the *chef de cuisine* claims to excel at Asian, African and vegetarian meals (meals around D150). Give him a try, or head for the cluster of local restaurants at the south end of Tanji Beach.

Tanji lies on the coastal road; a bush taxi from Serekunda is around D10.

TUJERING

About 3km south of Tanji, this tiny village is home to **Bendula Lodge** (☎ 7717481; www.bendula.com; s/d D510/680), a great place for some remote relaxing. Accommodation is in simple, pretty huts huddled on green terrain



TANJI VILLAGE MUSEUM

On the southern side of Tanji, about 2km from the centre, is the fascinating **Tanji Village Museum** (☎ 9926618; tanje@dds.nl; admission adult/child D100/25; 🕒 9am-5pm). It was planned, developed and built largely due to the vision of Abdulie Bayo, who worked for 20 years at the National Museum in Banjul before establishing this museum at Tanji, free of government bureaucracy.

The museum's centrepiece is a traditional Mandinka compound, made up of various round-houses that contain a carefully assembled selection of traditional furniture and artefacts. But it's beyond the compound walls that things get really interesting. A tranquil nature trail teaches you about Gambia's flora and fauna, and birds chirp in the tops of the many local trees. Further along the path, you can watch craftsmen such as weavers and woodcarvers, and buy the products of their work at the nearby shop.

There's also a good collection of traditional instruments including drums, koras, *balafon* (xylophone) and *simbingo* (a string instrument, similar to the kora), and resident artists who show you how they are played. Their playing usually accompanies your meals in the picnic area or small on-site restaurant.

Lovingly maintained and continuously expanded, the museum is one of the best in the region, and doesn't have any of the stuffiness that weighs down most of the state-owned exhibitions. And if you're still looking for a quiet place to stay – in traditional style, of course – there are a few comfortable self-contained huts round the back (per person D250). The museum lies on the coastal road, a 15-minute walk from Tanji village.

surrounded by lush forests. A long stretch of white beach is in walking distance. It's the perfect place to do very little at all, but if your energy flows over you can take up drumming or dancing, watch batik makers and weavers in the village, or even produce your own herbal tea and medicine together with a local healer. Don't forget your torch (flashlight) – there was no electricity at the time of research.

You can take any bush taxi that goes along the coastal road and ask to be dropped off at the turn-off to the lodge. From there, it's a 10-minute walk to Bendula. Or you hire a taxi (around D1000 to D1500) and get dropped directly at the lodge.

SANYANG BEACH

The small fishing village Sanyang, 20km south of Serekunda, lies on an attractive stretch of beach. The locals are so proud of it they call it paradise beach. It's a notch quieter than the coastal stretches further up, though mushrooming beach bars signal the increasing impact of mass tourism.

Sleeping & Eating

All along the sand strand, beach restaurants compete for customers.

Sanyang Nature Camp (☎ 9902408; per person incl breakfast D400) About 1km inland from the beach is this secluded and slightly neglected

place run by the people from Leybato in Fajara. It is almost eerily quiet, but might get livelier once the huge terrace restaurant is completed.

Kobokoto Lodge (☎ 9984838; www.salla.se/kkl; r per person D250) This is by far the prettiest option in Sayang. Rooms are simple but attractive, and the restaurant upstairs is a stunning place to have a meal (meals around D150, open for lunch and dinner). Don't confuse it with the similarly named beach bar (following).

Kobokoto (☎ 7005511; d D300) Far more basic than Kobokoto Lodge, this beach bar and popular picnic space has simple rooms. Bathrooms are shared.

Rainbow Beach Bar (☎ 9827790; dishes D150-500; 🕒 11am-9pm) This is one of the better beach restaurants, with a good selection of seafood dishes including such delicacies as grilled king prawns and lobster. Crucially, it's also got an enticing reputation for using fresh ingredients. The 8pm to 9pm happy hour is particularly popular.

Osprey (☎ 9924010; meals D100-550; 🕒 11am-8pm) This place serves similar food to the Rainbow Beach Bar, but seems to be a little less sheltered from hustlers and bumsters.

Both Jungle Resort Bar and Pelican had just started out when we visited. Several of the restaurants listed also had plans to expand into small hotels.

Getting There & Away

To get to the beach, follow the coastal road towards Sanyang, then take the dirt road that branches off towards the beach about 2km before reaching Sanyang village.

GUNJUR & GUNJUR BEACH

Some 30km south of Serekunda, Gunjur still seems a little lost between the holiday hype of the Atlantic resorts and the emerging tourism of Kartong. Tiny as it is, it's one of Gambia's largest fishing centres, and absorbing daily life at the bustling Gunjur Beach (a 3km walk or D5 taxi ride from town) is one of the nicest things to do here. Boats go in and out or rock on the waves, nets are being mended, and fish gutted, sold and dried. A couple of drinks in one of the beach bars is not a bad way to pass a day. Scantily dressed sun seekers, however, are better off a little bit further on, away from the nets, guts and disapproving eyes of the locals.

Sleeping & Eating

Footsteps Eco Lodge (☎ 7706830; www.natureswaygambia.com; camping D250, d D1750) If you can afford it, stay here. This is the only place in Gambia that truly deserves the title ecolodge. Compost toilets, solar power, a freshwater pool and an extensive garden producing a large part of the restaurant's fresh ingredients make this something of a self-sustaining eco-island. And the birds love it, too; 100 species or more have been counted in its vast garden terrain. Of course there's vegetarian food, and you can hire bikes for D100 to D300 per day.

Balaba Nature Camp (☎ 9919012; huts per person D550/700) A 5km drive from Gunjur down the coastal road will take you to this laid-back camp, set amid dense savannah woodland. It's deservedly proud of its efforts at operating an environmentally friendly business, and runs a host of activities from drumming and dancing to bird-watching excursions, boat trips and basket weaving.

African Lodge (☎ 4486143; fax 4486026; r per person incl breakfast D400) This peaceful, low-key hotel sits right in the heart of Gunjur village – perfect for a feel of 'real life' away from the tourist zones. What seems to be a tiny lodge turns out to be a well-kept maze of lush gardens, restaurant and bar corners and spread-out bungalows that invite relaxation.

Wulaba Madina (d D600) On the way to the beach from town, you pass this simple camp with clean huts and a spacious terrace restaurant serving standard European fare for lunch and dinner (meals around D175). For most of the day the place seems too quiet, but the restaurant can get lively in the evenings.

Dalaba Lodge (☎ 9815865; d D800; 🍷) For a place as tiny and humble as Gunjur, this hotel is surprisingly upmarket. It tempts with spacious, apartment-style bungalows and a pool. It's quite a trek to the beach, though – the lodge sits 2km from Gunjur on the road inland to Brikama.

Gunjur Beach Motel (☎ 7788283) Gunjur's former place of pride was closed at the time of our visit, and people couldn't agree whether it just hadn't opened for the season or folded for good.

Most of the camps provide food; the imaginative menu of Footsteps Eco Lodge is particularly good. For something cheaper and more local, try the African Lodge (order in advance), or the small food stalls behind the fishing centre. The spacious beach restaurant Sankule once enjoyed a reputation as a great place for food, music soirées and even camping, until the volatile owner started throwing clients out and locking himself in. It could have hit better times again, and even if it hasn't, the area surrounding it gives great views of ocean and beach life.

Getting There & Away

The quickest way to reach Gunjur is by direct bush taxis, which depart from Tippa Garage in Serekunda. The longer route via Brikama is also still frequently used by drivers; taxis leave from the main garage in Serekunda and you have to change in Brikama. Both options cost about D25. From Gunjur village to the beach, you'll pay about D5.

KARTONG

Kartong is a calm little village that sits 10km south of Gunjur and only a short pirogue journey north of Senegal. It's one of Gambia's best-kept secrets, a picture-postcard village where gigantic palm trees sway over women with children on their backs and old men on wobbly bicycles.

Kartong lies close to the coast, and most turn-offs leading from the main road to the holiday camps also take you to the shore.

The main beach, mainly used by fishermen but suitable for bathing, is a couple of kilometres further south, past the army and customs post. Take a right at the fork (2km from the village), and after a pleasant 1km walk through grassy dunes you'll be rewarded with a wide sand strand. If you turn left instead, the road meets the Allahein River marking the border of The Gambia and Senegal. There's a small harbour here, plus the Kartong Fishing Centre and several pirogues that ferry between the Gambian and Senegalese sides of the river.

Like elsewhere on the coast, things are changing here too, and several ambitious hotel projects are likely to put an end to Kartong's sleepiness. The good news is that the local community is active in trying to determine the direction of tourist development. The humble offices of **KART** (Kartong Association for Responsible Tourism; ☎ 4495887; www.safarigarden.com) in the heart of town are absolutely worth a visit – they can tell you how to best support their endeavours, as well as organise a variety of activities, ranging from bird-watching tours and apiary visits to pirogue, bicycle and walking tours.

KART also organises the rootsy **Kartong Festival** (☎ 8900411, 7730535), an annual dance and music event featuring a stunning array of dancing, drumming troupes and orchestras from the region. The first event happened in March 2006; inquire about future dates.

Sights & Activities

Kartong is a great place to lean back and enjoy the slow pace of African village life, and most activities here fit right into this lazy holiday scheme. Bird-watchers don't have to go far to spot numerous species, and the area is great for walking and bicycle tours (the KART office and Boboi Beach Lodge have a few wonky bikes for hire). A pirogue tour on the Allahein River is another great way of getting birds in front of your binoculars, or just to enjoy the picturesque surroundings. The **Riverside Café** (☎ 9957694) – which is a couple of plastic chairs and a cool box with drinks next to the Italian Restaurant – organises a range of river tours (D500 for one hour; D800 for two hours). Otherwise, you can practise your negotiating skills with the fishermen at the Fishing Centre.

Tours to the local **Reptile Farm** (admission D100) consist of guided walks, complete with tape-

recorded information, around 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. You'll need guidance; it's tricky to find.

Kartong is home to the pretty **Lemon Fish Art Gallery** (☎ 4394586; www.lemonfish.gm), well signposted on the main road. It has an excellent exhibition of contemporary paintings, sculptures and batiks by Gambian artists and it also runs art workshops. There's a boutique where you can purchase art, jewellery and fashion at fixed prices, and you can even rent rooms here.

Sleeping

Boboi Beach Lodge (☎ 7776736; www.gambia-adventure.com; camping per person D150, tree house D250, d incl breakfast D600) With bungalows set in a lush tropical garden, giant palm trees lending shade to hammocks, an invitation to sleep under a starlit sky (and a provided mosquito net), and 10-step access to the beach, this place is hard to beat as far as settings go. If it just sorted out its shared showers, too, this would be a dream destination.

Lemon Fish Art Gallery (☎ 4394586; www.lemonfish.gm) This pretty gallery overlooking the ocean has five excellent, colourfully decorated rooms to rent. They're intended for conference guests and friends of the gallery, but if there's space the friendly manager will no doubt accommodate you. Rates are negotiable; around D600 is appropriate.

Stiching Stala (☎ 9915604; www.stala-adventures.com) This Dutch-run bird-watching and fishing camp was getting ready to open when we visited – if no financial or other disaster has occurred, it should by now be a cosy ecolodge, driven by solar and wind power, and set in a breathtaking location right on the river. Prices weren't available yet at the time of research, so call to find out.

Tamba Kuruba (☎ 9851857; r per person D350) This place consists of six huts spread across a wide area – the beach is only a few metres past the dune. It's basic, but very friendly, and all profits go to the local hospital.

Country Edge Lodge (☎ 9933193; per person D350) This tranquil, solar-powered camp has clean, though uninspiring bungalows spread across a wide, and slightly barren terrain. The beach is in tempting proximity, possibly a good enough reason to stay here.

Sandele Eco-Retreat (☎ 4495887; geri@gamspirit.com) Another work in progress, this was about to become Kartong's first luxury hotel when we passed. The ambitious plans envisaged an ecolodge, but with attention paid to the minute details that add up to total comfort. The first beach bungalows nearing completion were as stylish as they were enormous – check if they're inhabitable yet. Prices weren't available at the time of research – but you can expect a top-end rate.

Eating

Eating options are limited, and self-catering isn't a bad idea. Most of the camps provide food, though you'll have to let them know if you intend to eat.

Italian Restaurant (☎ 9957694, 00221 616 43 82; ☎ 11am-midnight) Right on the river, past the Fishing Centre, you find this curious gem. It really is Italian, from the management and the chef (with his scooter parked outside), to the *al dente* spaghetti and the perfect espresso. Absolutely worth a visit – though you'll need a taxi or the leisure for a 3km walk to get there.

Morgan's Grocery (snacks & meals D50-200; ☎ lunch & dinner) About 300m west of the village along a sandy track, Morgan's stands atop a sandy hill from where it's an easy walk to the crocodile pool. The African and European meals served here are simple but good, and taste even better in the friendly company of the well-informed management.

Umpacola Bar (☎ 4419111; silwia_barke@web.de; meals around D150; ☎ lunch & dinner) In the heart of Kartong, Umpacola serves generous, hearty meals. The name means 'meeting place', and for making contact with locals the restaurant's central location is unbeatable.

Getting There & Away

There are two ways of getting to Kartong by public minibus from Serekunda; either the longer journey via Brikama to Gunjur where you change to another minibus to Kartong, or the more direct route from the Tippa Garage in Serekunda, which follows the coastal road. You also have to change in Gunjur if you take the coastal road. Both journeys should cost around D36. Note that waiting times for transport from Gunjur to Kartong can be discouragingly long. Hiring a bush taxi from Gunjur will cost around D200, and many of Kartong's camps offer

a pick-up service. Or take a bike with you from Serekunda and cycle the remaining few picturesque kilometres between Gunjur and Kartong. Hiring a taxi all the way from Serekunda should cost around D400; from Brikama it's D250.

On the map, Kartong seems like the perfect launch pad for a trip to Casamance, but with no regular transport, a river to cross, no border post and a 10km hike on the Senegal side, this is just an illusion. The police point at the southern exit of Kartong can normally stamp your passport, provided someone's there to do so. If not, don't cross the border without the stamp, as you'll run into difficulties on the Senegalese side.

If you can get that all-important stamp in Kartong and wish to attempt travelling into Senegal from here, you can cross the Allahein River border by negotiating a pirogue at the Fishing Centre. Don't count on motorised traffic on the Senegalese side; you might have to walk about 10km to reach Kabadio. From Kabadio regular taxis depart to Abéné or Kafountine, where you'll need to have your passport stamped by Senegalese officials to complete your border crossing. See the boxed text, p251 for details.

If boat trips are for you, you might be able to negotiate a pirogue straight to Kafountine; ask at the Fishing Centre.

SOUTH BANK & INLAND

There's plenty besides beach tourism in Gambia, and you don't even have to step far beyond the sand's end to find it. The following four places can all be reached in day trips from the coast. The tiny village of Lamin on the main road southeast of Serekunda is worth visiting for the impressive river-set Lamin Lodge and Abuko Nature Reserve, which lies just around the corner. A few kilometres further south is dust-blown Brikama, the first 'upcountry' town on the route to the interior. And on the route to Casamance, the birders' paradise Marakissa and border town Darsilami make for peaceful stops.

LAMIN LODGE

This quirky **lodge** (☎ 4497603; www.gambiariver.com; ☎ 9am-11pm, meals around D200) looks like a little boy's dream; it's a rugged, handmade log cabin on stilts, overlooking a mangrove

creek. It's one of the most ingenious restaurant ideas around – so treasured that the owner rebuilt and expanded it after it burnt to the ground a few years back. Most tour groups stop at this place, and for good reason. The food, mainly European cuisine with a seafood touch, is delicious and tastes best on the creaking 3rd floor at sunset.

The eccentric owner is also head of the **Gambia River Experience** (☎ 4494360; www.gambiariver.com), an inspired little company that organises plenty of imaginative boat trips on the Gambia River. At the lodge, you can hire pirogues and small motorboats for trips by the day (D10,000), by the hour (D700), or you can arrange drop-offs to Denton Bridge (D1600) and Banjul (D1500). Best-loved of all is its famous birders' breakfast trip – think oysters and pancakes, with binoculars.

Getting There & Away

Most people get here by an organised boat tour. By road it's best to hire a taxi (D150 from Serekunda), or combine Lamin Lodge with time at Abuko Nature Reserve (D300 to D400 from Serekunda, including two to three hours' waiting time.). Alternatively, from Banjul or Serekunda you can take any minibus towards Brikama (D10), get off in Lamin village and then follow the dirt road for about 3km to the lodge.

ABUKO NATURE RESERVE

Despite its tiny size – 105 hectares, less than 1/8000th the size of Senegal's main national park Niokolo-Koba – **Abuko Nature Reserve** (☎ 7782633; www.darwingambia.gm; admission D31; ☎ 8am-7pm) is the mightiest force of Gambia's national parks.

The gallery forest, open woodlands and Guinea savannah of Abuko are home to myriad species of flora and fauna. The Lamin Stream runs through part of the reserve and is integral in attracting many of the more than 250 bird species regularly seen here; Abuko is one of the best places in West Africa for bird-watching.

Among the 52 mammal species calling Abuko home are bushbucks, duikers, porcupines, bushbabies and ground squirrels as well as three monkey types: green or vervet monkeys, endangered western red colobus monkeys and patas monkeys.

The reserve is particularly famous for its Nile crocodiles. Unlike those found in

the various sacred pools, the crocodiles of Abuko are completely wild and often enormous – you don't want to get too close, and certainly do *not* try patting them.

Crocs aren't the only reptiles here; they have the company of more than 30 other species including an impressive array of snakes such as pythons, puff adders, green mambas and forest cobras. They can sometimes be seen sunning themselves on the paths, but usually make for the undergrowth at the slightest approach – no incidents of snakebite have been recorded by the park staff.

Assuming that the mamba you've spied does decamp into the bush, it could be sliding off underneath any one of more than 115 species of plants, many of which are labelled.

At the far end of Abuko is a small animal orphanage. Most of the animals staying here will be returned to the wild when ready, but there are also a few permanent residents, including hyenas and various monkeys. A few years back, the orphanage also famously housed a lion, but it was tragically shot by military when it was thought to be at risk of escaping.

Abuko is a great place to visit, but like all of Gambia's national parks, it's not having an easy time. It's fighting to preserve its area in its entirety, as well as its amazing biodiversity. Right at the heart of the reserve's amazing preservation work is the **Makasutu Wildlife Trust** (www.darwingambia.gm), a busy research centre that studies Gambia's biodiversity, trains wildlife guides and runs various education projects. The trust also takes on volunteers and can provide them with accommodation next to the reserve. Contact them for details.

Information

Even if you're not an early-rising birder, the morning hours before the midday heat are the best time to visit Abuko, although the reserve gets quieter as the sun rises.

There are several photo hides near Darwin Field Station by the crocodile pools and behind the animal orphanage (the latter is private and costs D50). You'll get the best pictures at the west-facing hides in the morning, when you've got the sun behind you.

The longest bird trail takes about two hours. If you're pressed for time, check the map at the main gate for shorter options.

TWITCHER TIPS: BIRD-WATCHING AT ABUKO NATURE RESERVE

Compact Abuko teems with birds, but the best places to spot the feathered creatures are an area of open Guinea savannah woodland, the bird extension behind the orphanage, and the main pool, where you can hope to view from photo hides collared sunbirds, green hylia, African goshawks, oriole warblers, yellowbills and leafloves. Abuko is about the only place in Gambia where you can observe green and violet turacos, white-spotted flufftails, ahanta francolins and western bluebills. The private hide near the animal orphanage is a good place to try your luck.

Early morning is the best time to observe bird activity; the gates open at 6.30am for keen spotters. You will get the opportunity to see plenty of species by following the trail through the gallery forest, then along the extension walk with stops at the hides.

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).

Sleeping & Eating

African Zoo Rest & Lodge (☎ 4473414; s/d D500/600) Most people come to Abuko as part of a day trip. But if you want to explore the area for a bit longer you can stay here, opposite the reserve's entrance. It's a simple affair with shared bathrooms, and the restaurant usually serves no-frills meals during lunch and dinner hours (around D100 to D200). Management is friendly and welcoming.

Getting There & Away

A private taxi to Abuko from the Atlantic coast resorts costs about D300 to D400, including two hours of waiting time. Alternatively, you can take a minibus from Serekunda towards Brikama (D10). The reserve entrance is on the right (west) of the main road (you pass the exit about 200m before reaching the entrance).

BRIKAMA

Brikama, 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 here, apart from the bustle itself, and the famous **craft market** (also known as Woodcarvers' Market, open 9am to 6pm daily) 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. It's the perfect place to acquire some tat and practise your negotiation skills.

Information

There's a hospital, Western Union branch, post office, 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 rely on it.

Sleeping & Eating

Brikama's hotels are certainly no enticement to stay here.

Domor Deema (☎ 903302; Mosque Rd; r D200) Located about 300m from the taxi park, this place has never been great, and is rapidly getting worse. At least the plates are clean; the restaurant serves generous platters of the local classics *benechin* (fish with vegetables on a bed of rice) or *domodah* (rice, fried meat and vegetables covered with a groundnut sauce).

Bojang & Kawinkel Fast Food & Guest House (☎ 7700123; r D200) This place is only for the desperate or very brave-hearted. The rooms are shoddy and the shared toilets almost frighteningly filthy. Only a last resort.

Chief's Place (☎ 9845959; off Basse Hwy; r D200) 'Chief's Place' is what the locals call this surprisingly decent but hard-to-find nameless lodging, 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 is a fairly decent option, the Kambeng Restaurant has a pretty garden, and the **Gilanka Restaurant** (☎ 9851857; meals D15) serves enormous bowls of tasty rice and fish. More exotic things such as chicken and chips are slightly pricier (D40).

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 Konté, his son Bakari Konté, and Malamini Jobarteh and his sons Pa and Tata Dindin Jobarteh. Forget about the 'instant drumming courses' on the coast, this is one of Gambia's best places to learn traditional instruments – such as kora, *djembe* (a short, goat hide-covered drum), *bolonbolong* (a three-string bass harp), *balafon* or *sabar* (a tall, thin, hourglass drum) – from brilliant players and teachers. You can also watch the instruments being made, and get an introduction into the griot's métier. Prices are entirely negotiable, depend on duration, and whether you stay and eat in your teacher's compound (which is possible). If you can't get the **musicians** (☎ 7710015; www.kairakundaarts.org) on the phone, ask any kid in town to show you the way to their home.

Getting There & Away

Brikama is easily reached by public transport as minibuses go up and down the main road between Banjul and Brikama, via Serekunda, about once every 10 minutes during the day. The fare both to and from Banjul and Serekunda is D10.

If you're headed east, there is frequent transport to Soma (D80), where you change for any other upcountry destination. The road between Brikama and Soma is probably the worst stretch of tarmac in the country – be prepared for a rocky ride, delays and punctures.

There are frequent bush taxis to Gunjur (D10), where you change for transport to Kartong.

Brikama is the junction from which it's best to reach the Casamance region in Senegal. A bush taxi to the Senegalese border in Séléti costs D40 (CFA800); Séléti to Ziguinchor is CFA2200. A direct taxi from Brikama to Kafountine is D60, and a bush taxi from Brikama to the tiny border post in Darsilami is D8 (see the boxed text, p251).

DARSILAMI

The tiny border village of Darsilami sees only the occasional tourist en route to Kafountine in Casamance. This is a shame, because it's a very pretty place, and a great birding site to boot. The best thing though is Sow Jallow Jeeri, the local NGO (nongovernmental organisation) that produces the best yogurt anywhere in the country. And yes, it is worth seeking out a small village for the sake of its dairy products, especially if the journey there is as beautiful as the scenic route from Sanyang via Sifoe, a rarely travelled but stunning stretch of tropical landscape. (There's no public transport, so you'll need to hire a taxi, which will cost around D400 to D500 from the coastal resorts.)

There's also a very nice place to stay, the friendly (and ecofriendly) **Timberland** (☎ 9946981; www.senegam.net; r incl full board per person D510). The simple rooms are nicely furnished, the restaurant serves excellent African and European meals (around D150), and you won't find friendlier management than that of the Dutch-Gambian couple running the place.

MARAKISSA

The peaceful quiet of this tiny village on the route from Darsilami to Brikama is only disturbed by the chirping of countless birds. This is a favourite spot of bird-watchers, who come to see white-breasted cuckoo shrikes, sunbirds, blue-breasted kingfishers, African darters and dozens of other species in the woodlands surrounding a calm river. Just spending a day on the terrace of the friendly **Marakissa River Camp** (☎ 9905852; marakissa@planet.nl; r per person incl breakfast D380; 📍) you will see several types of birds. Or you can always take part in one the river camp's excursions on foot or by pirogue (from D200).

MAKASUTU CULTURE FOREST

Makasutu means 'sacred forest' in Mandinka, or 'cultural theme park' in the language of tourist enterprise. Not far outside Brikama, the **Makasutu Culture Forest** (☎ 4483335; www.makasutu.com; admission per adult/child D700/400) occupies about 1000 hectares of land along Mandina Bolong; it's land that's dedicated to displaying a pretty, lush and smiling Gambia – just that little bit more pristine than the pristine environment 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; and a visit to a crafts centre and demonstrations of traditional dancing. For a half-day visit take D200 off the price and the food out of the programme. The tours are well organised and make for a nice day out, though they'll appeal more to those who like their adventures with safety-net than those out to experience the 'real' Gambia.

Next to the forest is the **Mandina River Lodge** (☎/fax 4484100; www.makasutu.com; r per person incl half-board D5440), one of the most extravagant places to stay in the entire country. This exclusive ecotreat is known for its successful marriage of lavishness and respect for nature, as well as for its stunning architecture. Its four solar-powered luxury lodges float on the river, and intimate dining areas are tucked away in the mangroves. Bookings are made through Gambia Experience (p102) or the Makasutu website, and if you're not a guest, you're not allowed to visit the lodge.

Getting There & Away

Most people come on a tour arranged through one of the tour operators. Most people come here on an organised tour. If you're making your own way, it's best to hire a taxi (D250 from Serekunda). Alternatively, you can ask a bush taxi to drop you at Tuti Falls Rd (D12 from Serekunda) and walk the last 3km. The place isn't well signposted, but any local can help you out.

TUMANI TENDA CAMP

This **camp** (☎ 9903662; tumanitenda@hotmail.com; per person D200) is another ecotourism 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; rates include breakfast and 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 rare brown-necked parrots. With the help of a guide from the camp, you should also be able to observe porcupines from a hide.

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 the camp's a 2.5km walk.

NORTH BANK

Gambia's north coast is even smaller than its south coast, stretching all of 10km from Barra at the mouth of the Gambia River to the island of Ginak, which marks the border with Senegal. Upriver from Barra are the historical sites of Albreda and James Island and the village of Jufureh, made famous by Alex Haley's book *Roots*.

BARRA

Barra lies on the northern bank of the Gambia River, opposite Banjul, and ferries regularly chug between the two towns (see p96). Most travellers pass through Barra as quickly as they can, taking transport to/from Senegal, but those with an interest in history may want to have a look at **Fort Bullen** (admission D25; 🕒 9am-5pm). Built by the British in the 1820s and '30s to complement the fort in Bathurst (now Banjul) and to control slave shipping on the Gambia River, the fort was abandoned in the 1870s. It was rearmed briefly during WWII before falling into disuse again. In 1996 the fort was renovated as part of the International Roots Festival, and today is open to visitors. The large, rectangular fort has low round bastions at each corner, and you can walk along the battlements overlooking the river mouth. An informative leaflet on the fort's history is available from Banjul's National Museum (p94).

GINAK ISLAND (NIUMI NATIONAL PARK)

Niumi National Park spreads across a small corner of northwest Gambia, including the long, narrow island of Ginak (also spelt Jinak). The island is separated from the mainland by a narrow creek, and is contiguous with the Parc National du Delta du Saloum in neighbouring Senegal.

A dead-straight border dating from colonial times runs through the island, and its northern section is in Senegalese territory. There are three main villages on the island. The two in Gambia are Ginak Kajata and Ginak Niji and the one in Senegal is Djinakh

Diatako, but the locals are all of the same Mandinka-speaking Serer clan and ignore the international boundary. This doesn't seem to matter as very few government officials from other countries ever venture onto Ginak.

The island has a good range of habitats in a very small area – beach, mud flats, salt marsh, dunes, mangrove swamps, lagoons, grassland and dry woodland – and is very good for bird-watching; waders and water birds are the main residents, but many other species can be seen, including birds of prey. Dolphins are occasionally spotted from the shore, and turtles nest on the beach. In theory, the park protects small populations of manatees, crocodiles, clawless otters, hyenas, bushbucks and duikers, plus various monkey species, but many animals have been hunted down, making the chances of spotting them 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 few 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. To see the remaining beautiful spots and not get lost in the illegal plantations, it's best to join an organised excursion.

Sleeping

Madiyana Lodge (☎ 4494088, 9920201; r per person D600) This modest place on the western seafont was privately built in close cooperation with the local population and the national park authorities. Accommodation is in simple huts, lighting is by kerosene lamp and toilets are shared. There's also a breezy bar-restaurant serving excellent Gambian and European food (meals D150).

Getting There & Away

If you phone Madiyana Lodge before arrival, you can organise pick-up from your front door. For CFA1500 (one way) you'll be driven to Banjul, and then taken to the lodge by boat. Another good option is joining an organised tour. The trips by the small operator **Hidden Gambia** (☎ in UK 01527 576239; www.hidden-gambia.com) get consistently good reviews. For D3000 they include transport, accommodation at Madiyana Lodge and full board.

If you insist on independence, take the ferry from Banjul to Barra, and then hire a taxi to Ginak Niji (around D400). To get to Ginak Niji, take the main road north for a few kilometres to the village of Kanuma, then turn left and follow the sandy track north-west to reach the lagoon opposite the village of Ginak Niji. From there you need to negotiate a canoe across the river, and once on the other side it's a 20-minute walk directly west across the island to reach the lodge.

JUFUREH & ALBREDA

Jufureh (also spelt Juffure or Juffereh) is a small village on the Gambia River's northern bank about 25km upstream from Barra.

It became world famous in the 1970s following the publication of *Roots*, in which African-American writer Alex Haley describes how Kunta Kinte, his ancestor, was captured here and taken as a slave to America 200 years ago. His story turned the tiny community into a popular tourist destination, though there's little to see except the overblown village action when tourist boats arrive. Women pound millet at strategic points, babies are produced to be admired and filmed, the artisans in the craft market crank into gear and one of Haley's supposed relatives, an old lady (sister of the deceased Binde Kinte) makes a guest appearance. Photos are displayed of Alex Haley and the family, and tourists give money to take photos of the photos.

Albreda village is very close to Jufureh (a 500m walk) and is usually visited at the same time. It's a peaceful place, with huts and houses between baobabs, palms and kapok trees. The main thing to see is the ruined 'factory' (fortified slaving station) built by French traders in the late 17th century. It's on the river's edge near the quay where the tour boats land. Nearby is a large British cannon dating from the same period.

Between Jufureh and Albreda is a small **museum** (☎ 4710276, 7710276; admission D100; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) with a simple but striking exhibition tracing the history of slavery on the Gambia River.

Sleeping & Eating

Jufureh Resthouse (☎ 5710276; amadou.juffure@yahoo.fr; r per person incl breakfast D300) This is mainly a rootsy, slightly lethargic drumming camp that works with French groups, but can

THE ROOTS DEBATE

Alex Haley based his research for his novel *Roots* on recollections of elder relatives who knew their African forebear'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 Albreda and James Island had been very close to Jufureh for some decades, 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 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.

accommodate independent travellers if there's space in the shabby bungalows.

Kunta Kinte Roots Camp (☎ 9905322; baboucarlo@hotmail.com; s/d D500/1000) Down the road from the Rising Sun Restaurant, this ambitiously sized hotel has spotless accommodation in colourfully decorated bungalows. If you phone before arriving, staff can organise excellent meals. For groups, African buffet lunches are D125 per head.

Rising Sun Restaurant (meals D100-200; ☎ lunch & dinner) Right on the beach, you get a good view over the river from this unpretentious place. Meals aren't particularly inspiring, and there are a lot of hasslesome freelance guides lurking around, but it's one of the very few food options in town.

Getting There & Away

The usual and easiest way to visit Jufureh and Albreda is by organised river tour (p290). All the tour operators along the Atlantic coast and several hotels have the 'Roots Tour' in their catalogue. If you go independently, it's cheaper to travel here by taxi. Take the ferry from Banjul to Barra and find a shared taxi to Jufureh, which costs around D50.

Hiring a private taxi for a day trip is best done in Barra rather than Banjul, so that you avoid paying the steep ferry car fee. From Barra you should pay around D400 there, up to D1000 if you ask the driver to wait and drive you back too. There are only a few shared taxis per day on this route, so if you want to do the trip in a day you'll

have to catch the first ferry. But if you are making the effort to come all this way, you should consider staying overnight; both Jufureh and Albreda are at their best in the evening, when the tourist groups have left.

JAMES ISLAND

This island in the middle of the Gambia River is about 2km south of Jufureh and Albreda. On it are the remains of Fort James (1650s), the site of numerous skirmishes in the following centuries. The fort was held variously by British, French and Dutch traders, as well as a couple of privateers (pirates), and was completely destroyed at least three times (twice by the French, and once by accident when a gunpowder store exploded). It was used as a slave collection point by British traders until slaving was outlawed, and finally abandoned in 1829.

The ruins of the fort are quite extensive, although the only intact room is a food store, which is often called the slave dungeon because it sounds more interesting. The island is rapidly being eroded, and at some points the water laps around the battlements. Only the sturdy baobab trees seem to be holding the island together.

Most people take in James Island as part of a Banjul-Jufureh boat trip, but you might be able to arrange a pirogue to take you over from Albreda, especially if you overnight in the village. Island admission including a visit to the museum of Jufureh costs D100; the pirogue costs D300 to D400.

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