

Short Guide to: The Gambia

Location: Mid West Africa- surrounded on 3 sides by Senegal

Population: 2.25 million approx

Languages: English (OFFICIAL), Mandinka, Wolof, Fula, plus many indigenous vernaculars.

Major Religions: Muslim 90%, Christian 9%, Indigenous beliefs 1%

Major Ethnic Groups: African 99% (Mandinka 42%, Fula 18%, Wolof 16%, Jola 10%, Serahuli 9%)

Greetings, culture and society

Greetings are very important in Gambian culture, and as a conservative Islamic country, the general greeting is the Arabic Salaamaleikum (Peace be unto to you), and one responds with Maleikumsalaam (and peace be also with you). Gambians tend to favour an indirect style of communication, not directly asking for something straightaway, but spending some time getting to the point. Humour, quick wit and teasing are the key to Gambian conversation, which is art form!

Time runs on "In Shallah" time, or "god willing." - no one is truly expected to be on time! Gambians joke that GMT stands for 'Gambia Maybe Time', or WAIT stands for 'West African International Time'. The more you relax the quicker you get things done!

In Society, The family is key. Typical Gambian families are huge and extended, with Polygamy still the norm. Marriage is expensive and so most young people stay at home until they can save up and make this step. Elder relatives are generally respected and always looked after, and there is no alienation between generations, as the young and old are in permanent contact with each other. Single women, single-mother households or even households of all female students- common in the West- are very rare. The Gambian approach towards diversity is unique. Unlike other countries, Christians and Muslims have very good relationship, and celebrate each other's festivals; Such Christmas and Eid.

Women have traditionally expected to be wives and mothers, but more and more now have careers, although it is still very much a male-dominated society. Emigrants from The Gambia are often expected to send money home to a large family, which can put enormous pressure on them.

Music

Music is a huge part of Gambian and West African life. Whether it's Mbalax (made famous by Youssou N'Dour) or Zouk, a kora playing griot, Cuban beats, reggae or some home made hip hop, The Gambia is alive with music. Boundaries between modern and traditional music are fluid and you can find it all here.

Political background

Recent decades of Gambian politics have been dominated by former president Yahya Jammeh, a military colonel who took over in 1994 in a coup d'etat. He stayed for 22 years until he lost the recent election in 2017, only agreeing to stand aside to new president Adama Barrow after the regional peacekeeping co-coalition (ECOWAS) arrived to enforce the results, which Jammeh declared void. Jammeh ruled in dictatorial style- political opponents disappeared, journalists were tortured, and in 2013 he withdrew Gambia from the commonwealth. A 2015 Human Rights Watch report described a population living 'in a climate of fear in which government justice and accountability for abuses is utterly beyond reach.'

Barrow- now in post, has promised change after so many years of repression, and has set up the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC), which will tour the country seeking testimony about abuses committed under Jammeh, in order to inform future reforms and prosecutions. It is early days for the new president.

Geography

The shape and position of Gambia epitomise the absurdity of the national boundaries carved by European colonial powers at the end of the 20th century. The Gambia is 300km long from the Atlantic ocean on the west to its eastern border, but averages only 35km wide from top to bottom, determined by the course of the Gambia river, which divides it all the way along. It is surrounded on all but its coastal side by the much larger Senegal. Gambia is Africa's smallest country- 11,000 sq Km, or around half the size of Wales. Most tourists visit the West coast resorts, which are most developed, with cheap package flights available, but some - including bird watchers- venture upcountry. Beaches and birds are the countries main draws. Senegal and Gambia share many ethnic groups, indigenous beliefs and languages.