

January 2010

Your Experience

THE GAMBIA, SENEGAL AND THE ISLANDS OF CAPE VERDE



Jola Festival

A traditional initiation ceremony in The Gambia

Zebras, Spas & Rickety Cars

An action-packed trip to Senegal

The Real Cape Verde

Island-hopping in the archipelago

Welcome to the first edition of Your Experience, a magazine produced by the staff at Serenity Holidays. This is our opportunity to share our passion, personal experiences and images of The Gambia, Senegal and Cape Verde and hopefully in future issues we will be able to share some of yours. We want to take you beyond the brochures to the real heart of the countries.

Features

- 3 The Gambia:** A Gambian Smile
Visit The Gambia Experience Flickr group to see some wonderful images of this tiny West African Country
- 4 The Gambia:** Jola Festival
Initiation ceremonies, marabouts, music and dancing
- 6 The Gambia:** Wildlife on Your Doorstep
Exotic wildlife from the comfort of a hotel
- 7 Senegal:** Bird Song
Discover beautiful images of Senegal in The Senegal Experience Flickr group
- 8 Senegal:** Zebras, Spas & Rickety Cars
An action-packed trip for a first time visitor to Africa
- 10 Senegal:** In the Media
Top travel writers' experiences of the country
- 11 Cape Verde:** Boa Vista Dunes
Stunning images await you on The Cape Verde Experience Flickr group
- 12 Cape Verde:** The Salt Mine at Pedra de Lume
Discover the moonscape landscape of Sal's salt mine and ancient volcano
- 14 Cape Verde:** The Real Cape Verde
Island hopping – the best way to experience the authentic character of the islands

Front cover image: Kotu Beach, The Gambia

Contributors



Kathy Burrington is a graphic designer for our in-house design studio. In fact, as well as writing an article about her experience at a Jola festival in The Gambia, she took all the accompanying photographs plus a number of others featured elsewhere and designed this magazine.



Matt Smith has worked for us in various guises whilst studying for a degree in English and now puts his talents to good use writing for www.thegambiablog.co.uk. He is also our e-commerce guru. Matt recalls his visit to the salt mine of Sal and also the incredible wildlife he witnessed at his hotel in The Gambia.



Julie Pitt is a marketing executive for Serenity Holidays who first visited Africa on a press trip to Senegal in 2008. On page 8 you can read a full account of her whirlwind travels to Saly and the Sine Saloum regions of the country.



Jenny Adams, as the company's public relations manager, organises trips for journalists to discover the various destinations we feature. However, in this issue she describes her first trip to the islands of Cape Verde as well as providing press quotes about Senegal.

The Gambia



The smiling
coast of Africa

The Gambia on Flickr

A Gambian Smile

by Ferdinand Reus,
just one of the many
contributors to The Gambia
Experience Flickr group

[www.flickr.com/groups/
thegambiaexperience](http://www.flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience)

Jola Festival in The Gambia

Kathy Burrington describes all the colour and noise of a privileged day as a guest at a traditional initiation ceremony upriver near the President's village of Kanilai.

Although I had visited The Gambia on a number of occasions I had never had the chance to travel far from the tourist area, so when I received an invitation by a friend's neighbours to a very important event, the initiation of their sons, I jumped at the chance.

This is part of a large Jola festival with Jolas from across The Gambia (and beyond) gathering together. I was invited to photograph it for an exhibition on life in The Gambia for the charity Nyodema.

Most of the way the roads were good but eventually we reached the bumpy dirt tracks we'd been warned about. After about an hour of jostling along we arrived at the temporary village built for the festival. Thousands of people had formed an arena and various groups were marching around, singing and displaying banners. Outside the arena the crowds strained their necks to look on and many had climbed trees to get a better view.

We were lucky to be given permission to go inside the arena to get some better photos. Knife-dancers, dressed in baggy trousers that would give MC Hammer a run for his money, were dipping large knives in holy water prepared by their marabouts. They were only too willing to demonstrate for my camera how the sharp blades did not cut them. Unnerving but fascinating to watch, they used everything from cutlasses and razor blades to energetically strike their bodies without ever leaving a scratch.

Back outside the arena the atmosphere was just as exciting. With long strands of beads crossing their torsos the sisters of those being initiated danced to frantic rhythms tapped out on triangular chimes. Punctuating the drumming, whistle blowing,

chanting and dancing, thunderously loud bangs exploded in my ears as 'canons' were ignited (metal tubes stuffed with gunpowder that are pushed into the ground and lit by a fuse).

The mid-day sun was now high in the sky and we moved away from the crowds to find some shade. Sitting on a rug under a tree, we chatted with passers by while a couple of little girls plaited my hair. We were served a traditional meal of goat for which the families of those being initiated have to save for many years as they are expected to feed not only their relatives and guests but also the local villagers over a number of days.

When we'd finished our meal I was asked to photograph group after group of family members and friends, until I started to feel like a wedding photographer.

Then came the initiation of the sons. Friends and relatives pinned money onto their clothes before they were hoisted on to someone's shoulders and led out into the bush. Traditionally they would spend

weeks in the bush with their older male relatives learning about their responsibilities as a man, so I was surprised when they came straight back again! Presumably the training is now a more ongoing thing.

It really was a fascinating day and I felt very privileged to have been invited. When I next returned to The Gambia a few months later I presented the family with a photo album to say thank you for a wonderful day.

More photographs from the day can be found on The Gambia Experience's Flickr group. www.flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience

Punctuating the drumming, whistle blowing, chanting and dancing, thunderously loud bangs exploded in my ears as 'canons' were ignited



Kathy's hotel: Kombo Beach

Wildlife on Your Doorstep

Matt Smith suggests you take time out to find a secluded spot in your hotel garden, sit... watch... and wait a while... for the wildlife of The Gambia to come to you.



One of the great things about The Gambia is the abundant wildlife, and how accessible it is. The Gambia sits right in the centre of a broad number of habitats, something called a transition zone. It has forest-savannah environments and also drier woodland ones; it has marine systems and the life-giving River Gambia with its estuary mudflats and the intricate mangrove tributaries of the interior. What gets underplayed though, is that some of the best places to see Gambian wildlife are right there under your nose in the various hotel gardens. Sit awhile amid the full blazing glory of the day and who knows what might turn up?

The huge lush gardens of The Kairaba – a patchwork of pools of quiet shade and areas of intense sunlight where guests laze on bone white loungers - are a case in point. Here, amid the dazzling bougainvillea and frangipanis you might see troops of hooting and barking vervet monkeys, or young Nile Monitor lizards catching the spray from the hotel's sprinkler system. Not to mention the resident limping peacock, who is like something out of RADA.

Bakotu is well known for its wildlife, being as it's the favourite of birding expert Chris Packham – star of Spring and Autumnwatch and all round bird and wildlife expert. At the back of the hotel beneath a huge fig tree there is an oasis of calm and quiet. From here you'll see more birdlife than you might see in a whole month in an English garden – not to

mention shade-seeking reptiles and monkeys foraging in the trees.

One of the must see sights in The Gambia are the vultures at the Senegambia hotel. Everyday at 2pm, these huge, ragged birds are hand fed and anywhere up to 30 or 40 congregate in the hotel's lush gardens for a feast, and finally a drink and a wash in the sprinkler system. Whilst watching the feast one afternoon, I got chatting to a Norwegian who was taking photographs of the vultures – he was taking particular care to capture the remarkable detail of the birds' wings as he was going to use the photographs to design novelty angel's wings, to add to the 180 designs he was already selling from his business in Second Life. The best thing? He was already making enough money from the virtual business that he'd recently been able to give up his day job. Like I said, take the time to sit awhile and who knows what might turn up...

Discover The Gambia

To find out more about the country and holidays visit www.gambia.co.uk or telephone 0845 330 4567 to order a copy of The Gambia Experience brochure. Read more personal experiences and submit yours at www.thegambiablog.co.uk

View more images and upload yours to www.flickr.com/groups/thegambiaexperience

Senegal

The French Coast of Africa



Senegal on Flickr

Bird Song

by *Jon Banfield*,
just one of the many
contributors to The Senegal
Experience Flickr group

[www.flickr.com/groups/
thesenegalexperience](http://www.flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience)

Zebras, Spas & Rickety Cars

Julie Pitt recalls her first trip to Africa – an action-packed trip to Senegal where she stayed in luxurious hotels, drove an off-road buggy into the African bush and experienced the big game at Bandia Nature Reserve.



Following a short hop to Brussels, we arrived in Dakar, Senegal's capital, to be greeted with a gorgeous 30-degree heat and a smiling Senegalese tour guide. This trip was a twin centre adventure and our first stop was Saly, a beach resort about an hour and a half down the coast. The journey down to Saly was a spectacle in itself! Our mini bus drove bumper to bumper with rickety cars and trucks packed full of people travelling in and out of the city, plus one bemused goat strapped to the roof of a camper van! Adults and children alike also walked alongside the traffic, laden down with an array of interesting goods for sale. I saw everything from pens, sunglasses, exotic fruit and even a board game of Connect Four!

Saly offers immaculate sandy beaches and luxurious hotels you'd expect from any popular tropical destination. We stayed at the 5 star Lamantin Hotel, with thatched bungalows set amongst beautiful gardens with an inviting pool and a golden beachfront. There's also an impressive thalassotherapy spa onsite, to rival any top class spa in the UK – just a peek around it left me feeling relaxed and refreshed!

There's loads to do in Saly, particularly when it comes to watersports, deep-sea fishing and golf, but I was going to try something different – an off

road buggy adventure! I've honestly never experienced anything like it; as it was coming to the end of the rainy season, the usually arid dirt tracks were interspersed with puddles here and there, and we followed the instructor, zooming (well, perhaps 30mph) through villages where barefoot children ran alongside waving and laughing. Let's just say when I arrived at our lunch stop my yellow t-shirt was a muddy brown colour! For a girl who normally shies away from getting her hair wet in the swimming pool this was surprisingly fun!

The poverty there was gut wrenching but the sheer community spirit and joy from the children as they raced to greet us made me feel extremely humble.

The next day showed me yet another side of Senegal at the Bandia Nature Reserve in Saly. During the 1970s, Senegal suffered terrible droughts and many of the animals such as big cats, giraffe and antelope were driven out of the country. It is only in the last few years that environmentalists are slowly starting to introduce these animals back into Senegal and in an open top 4x4 a professional park guide took us around the 3500-hectare reserve for an amazing close encounter with rhinoceros, giraffes, zebras, buffalo and even a stop at a crocodile pool!

The second part of our trip involved a bumpy, yet incredibly scenic journey 40 miles down the coast to the Sine Saloum Delta, a 180,000-hectare National Park area and a region of great eco-



diversity, including rivers, beaches, mangrove swamps and sand dunes. On the way we stopped at a market to buy supplies such as pens, soap and rice to give to a small village nearby. The poverty there was gut wrenching but the sheer community spirit and joy from the children as they raced to greet us made me feel extremely humble.

We stayed at the 5 star Royal Lodge, nestled on the outskirts of the National Park, and it really lives up to its name, with every magnificent suite fit for a film star. However, there are some other equally amazing places to stay in this area, from intimate river lodges to modern day tree houses that embrace the natural environment that surrounds them.

When we arrived back at Dakar for the flight home, there was just one more stop to make –

a bustling ferry ride over to Gorée Island, in my opinion a must do for any visitor. Just a couple of kilometres off the coast, this island, which today is dotted with colourful colonial style buildings and buzzing with street sellers (prepare to barter!), was a former slave trading port and the original slave house still stands, where you can hear a moving commentary on what life was like for those who left the shores destined for a life as a slave in America and beyond.

When I got home I felt I'd had my eyes opened to how much there is to experience here – and what a great introduction to Africa! Senegal might be a little known holiday destination at the moment, but watch out, it won't be a secret for long.

Zebra photograph courtesy of Jan Schietse, The Senegal Experience Flickr Group

Senegal Seduces the Media

Since its first season of operation (08/09), The Senegal Experience has attracted considerable media interest. Here you can share the personal experiences of top travel writers.



Extract taken from Alex Spence's travel article, as featured on Times Online from 13 October 2009

“...There is a surprising variety of things for tourists to see and do, whether you're in the mood for relaxing in a hammock on a beach or something more adventurous. In a week-and-a-half, we cruised through crocodile-infested wetlands, drank tea with shepherds and slept in tents in the desert. We visited lively urban markets and isolated nomad camps — and, yes, there was some beach time, too. It was just the sort of raw, authentic experience that we'd hoped we would get in Africa...”

Extract taken from Tony Dawe's travel article, as featured in The Times newspaper & Times Online on 21 October 2009

“...Behind an endless stretch of sandy beaches bordering the Atlantic is a network of slow-flowing rivers, lined by mangrove swamps, and gently rippling lagoons with baobab trees, like illustrations from a Roald Dahl book, dotted along the shores. This is a land where vehicles are replaced by horse-drawn buggies and pirogues, the rickety wooden boats powered by a single white sail and a paddle, expertly handled by local fishermen...”

Extract taken from Martin Symington's travel article, as featured in the October 09 edition of Wanderlust magazine

“...this world seemed to come magically alight whenever we stopped at roadside markets to be greeted by women wearing boubous and headaddresses made of eye-bursting fabrics... We also deviated off the main highway to weave through a baobab forest... These enormous, upside-down-looking trees with hollow trunks are sacred to the local Serer ethnic group, as Yamar explained: “Spirits live within the baobabs, and sorcerers find inspiration among them.”...”

Discover more about Senegal

To find out more about the country and holidays visit www.senegal.co.uk or telephone 0845 338 8700 to order a copy of The Senegal Experience brochure. Read these press articles in full and many more at www.senegal.co.uk/press

View more images and upload yours to www.flickr.com/groups/thesenegalexperience

The Islands of Cape Verde

10 Islands, all different, all unique



Cape Verde on Flickr

Boa Vista Dunes

by Jon Banfield

From Cabo Verde 2008's
photostream and part of
The Cape Verde
Experience's Flickr group

[www.flickr.com/groups/
thecapeverdeexperience](http://www.flickr.com/groups/thecapeverdeexperience)

The Salt Mine at Pedra de Lume

Matt Smith has vivid memories of the moonscape appearance of the salt mine located in Sal's parched centre, a stark contrast to the stunning beaches found throughout the islands.



Sal is an odd prospect as a tourist destination. On the face of it, it is a dry husk of an island; a floating desert created by the same weather patterns that scoured the Sahara out of mainland Africa. Yet, of course, its edges are blessed with some genuinely jawdropping beaches – arguably among the finest in the world. And these beaches are the reason, despite a still creaking infrastructure that the island has become so popular, and so quickly. To me though, it's the arid centre that provides the real allure...

The parched interior of Sal summons up extra-planetary descriptions: moonscape, Martian. After a couple of hours of flying across the yawning mass of the Atlantic Ocean, the very rawness of Sal's scorched low blown surface is a shock - all low hills sculpted by parched gullies with the occasional tufting of acacias, gnarled and crouched, safely out of reach of the winds. Starved of stimuli, the eyes invent content: birds appear on the periphery - black against the smoky sky - disappearing at a turn of the head, lush coppices fill the horizon only to vanish with eye contact, phantoms created by a brain bewitched by so much emptiness.

Sal got its name from its only product, salt, which used to be exported by the ton out to Brazil and the west coast of Africa - Senegal, the Belgian Congo. At Pedra de Lume, within the cragged walls of the remains of an extinct volcanic crater, lies the rotting evidence of this once burgeoning industry - a skeletal but still semi-functioning salt mine.

The journey to the mine took us through Espargos, Sal's capital, which looked a little forlorn under a sheet-grey sky, and the people gazing at us from open doorways seemed lost for something to do. The road out was rutted and uneven, the land falling away to the coast; we saw the occasional goat pawing at the drifting topsoil. Pedra de Lume village itself was unremarkable – a small settlement at the foot of the crater, a remnant of headier times. At the edges of the village stood the first of a long line of wooden mine workings: like ancient torture devices these creaking engineering marvels stretched up the slope of the volcano, inside of which lay the fabled salt lake. In the early to mid twentieth century this pulley-driven system was able to transport up to 25 tons of salt per hour, but due to falling demand this had all but ceased by 1985. Now despite a drive to get the process moving again, these strange constructions stand dry and useless, coated in a fine layer of salt and sand, moaning in the damp sea wind.

The inside of the crater itself is a remarkable prospect. You climb the outside of the volcano and enter through a narrow tunnel, the land dropping sharply away before shelving onto a wide plateau segmented into artificial salt paddies. From afar the whole thing looks almost achromatic but as you get closer extraordinary ranges of colour become apparent from deep blues to incandescent reds and pinks. There is also a stark difference in the levels of water, which in places - noticeably the lake in the centre of the crater - is black and

*The sweeping sandy beaches
of Santa Maria, Sal*



unfathomable, in others almost altogether absent, the ground a hard crust of crystallising salt. It is thought that the water here comes from deep in the earth as opposed to infiltrating laterally from the ocean, and from stepping into the crater lake this is wholly believable as beyond knee deep the water becomes bath-warm, the rapidly disappearing lake floor like a bed of hot coals; and because of its huge salt content, up to 40 times more than the nearby ocean, the buoyancy of the water is remarkable, forcing you to simply lie back and be borne aloft, gazing at the sky.

Afloat on this salt lake, miles from anywhere, it is impossible not to feel cut off and isolated - both in the sense of being adrift in the middle of an extinct volcano some 500km away from the nearest landmass, but also distanced from the colonial centres of Praia and Mindelo. As the last of the Cape Verde Islands to be inhabited, and only then purely because of its salt industry, Sal could (and probably would) have been a forgotten place. From here, afloat and sun-drunk, it does feel a little like that. And yet, because of the international airport and its relative proximity to Europe - and of course its dazzling beaches and renowned accommodation - Sal is slowly coming to life and

becoming a vital hub for Cape Verde's mushrooming tourism industry. There is talk of the village at Pedra de Lume being turned into a golf resort - which sounds bonkers when you look at it, but is yet more evidence of Sal's likely future. Here's hoping that future is well thought out and well managed - these curious corners of the earth are worth preserving.

If any more evidence of this recasting as a playground for the rich of Europe was needed outside the massive and still growing construction industry on Sal (Praimar is like a ghost town in reverse with the sound of car engines and footfalls a future memory on its as yet unbuilt streets) and the ubiquitous cranes and the distant rumble of heavy machinery, the very fact that Pedra de Lume is currently being redeveloped as a golf resort is a stark pointer to Sal's probable evolution.

From here, the vantage point of a year later, Sal - like the rest of the Cape Verde islands to a large degree - still feels like a bit of a secret. The beaches are one thing for sure, but that obscure corner with its hidden flashes of colour and end-of-the-world feel has become one of those indelible memories that only travel provides.

The Real Cape Verde

Jenny Adams explores a variety of landscapes and cultures during an island hopping trip to Cape Verde: an archipelago of stunning beaches, diversity and emotive music which has become one of the “must visit” destinations.



With ten islands in the archipelago, you are inclined to feel that you would only really have a chance of discovering ‘the real Cape Verde’ if you island-hopped. This is what four journalists and I did a little while back, although our time scale meant that we only had time to cover Sal, Boa Vista, São Vicente and Santo Antão. It was the diversity of the islands that made the trip for us, as you really do see first hand the fusion of African, Brazilian and Portuguese cultures.

My highlights included taking a dip in the natural lava-formed swimming pool at Buracona in Sal. Our luck was in as we were also fortunate enough to see the Olho Azul or ‘Blue Eye’, formed when the light shines into the cave.



Boa Vista dazzled us with what seemed like its infinite dunes of powder white sands. Our drive south across the desert brought us to the best beach I have ever visited: Santa Monica. It was deserted, bar the crabs, which rapidly scuttled into the turquoise ocean as soon as we had the rudeness to disturb them.

We could see why Mindelo in São Vicente is the cultural capital of the islands. Although we couldn’t fully understand the ‘morna’ that the band we went to see were singing about, we couldn’t help but be moved, literally and metaphorically by the rhythm and emotion of it all.

From São Vicente we hopped on the boat to the island of Santo Antão, without doubt my favourite island. It was not just the striking mountain peaks and sense that time stood still here that wowed us, but also that our eyes were now greeted by ‘green’ in the form of lush, verdant valleys.

Cape Verde Fact File

To find out more about the country and holidays visit www.capeverdeexperience.co.uk or telephone 0845 330 2046 to order a copy of The Cape Verde Experience brochure.

View more images and upload yours to www.flickr.com/groups/thecapeverdeexperience

Congratulations to Sandele Bay Eco-Retreat for winning the Guardian & Observer Best Ethical Travel Award 2009



To book a stay at this unique property visit
www.gambia.co.uk/sandele
or call 0845 330 4567



COCO OCEAN



RESORT & SPA

The Gambia's Newest & Most Luxurious Hotel



To experience the tranquility and
sumptuous surroundings of
Coco Ocean visit
www.gambia.co.uk/cococean
or call 0845 330 4567



www.gambia.co.uk
0845 330 4567



www.capeverdeexperience.co.uk
0845 330 2046



www.senegal.co.uk
0845 338 8700



The Gambia Experience, The Senegal Experience and The Cape Verde Experience are all trade names of Serenity Holidays. As well as specialising in West Africa we offer holidays to the Mediterranean islands of Corsica and Sardinia and European short breaks with Great Escapes.

Call or go online to find out more.

Corsica 0845 330 2345

www.corsica.co.uk

Sardinia 0845 330 2056

www.sardinianplaces.co.uk

Great Escapes 0845 330 3434

www.greatescapes.co.uk

Serenity Holidays Limited, Registered in the UK 01744872
Serenity Holidays Limited, Cutter House, 1560 Parkway, Solent Business Park,
Fareham, Hampshire PO15 7AG

