

► [Contents](#)

[Current issue](#) | [Archive](#) | [Search](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Print friendly](#) | [Links](#) | [DFID](#)



The Gambia: paradise or purgatory?

Tourism offers much-needed income to poor countries. But who gets the holiday money? The Gambia is a popular winter sun destination for European tourists and its experience is an object lesson for the future, argue Harold Goodwin and Adama Bah.

“While low prices are good for tourists, they are not good for The Gambia.”



In the west coast of Africa, The Gambia is one of the continent’s smallest countries. Originally part of the Kingdom of Mali, The Gambia was a British colony formed along the River Gambia, an important 19th century trading route, and is surrounded by Senegal, originally a French colony.

“Tourism has the major advantage for The Gambia that developed countries cannot place tariff barriers against tourism exports.”

Both countries benefit from traditional winter sun, sand and sea tourism, are under six hours’ travel time from Britain and France, and in the same time zones, so there is no jet lag. The colonial language is relatively widely spoken making it easier for tourists to interact with local communities. The Gambia has 10 ethnic groups, all with different cultural traditions and languages, and for its size is a remarkably diverse and tolerant society – it is a shame that we fail to appreciate this diversity, but more could be done to enable us as holidaymakers to engage with and understand this richness.



“Partnerships between hoteliers, tour operators and the local craft workers, guides, juice pressers and fruit sellers can make a real difference.”

The Gambia is one of the 48 Least Developed Countries, ranking 160th out of 173 on the United Nations Human Development Index. More than half of the population lives on less than a dollar a day, with most of the population surviving on subsistence agriculture. The Gambia’s major cash crop is ground-nuts, but it is unable to compete with subsidised American peanut farmers. As is the case for many developing countries, tourism has the major advantage for The Gambia that developed countries cannot place tariff barriers against tourism exports. Every dalasi spent by a British tourist in The Gambia is a contribution to the country’s export earnings whether it is spent on the hotel bill or on crafts in the local market.

▲ up

Beginning in the 1960s when cruise ships started to call at Banjul, tourism saw a further development in 1965 when a



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Swedish investor, Bertil Hardings, brought 300 Swedish tourists to The Gambia through his company Hardings. Forty years on tourism is now a significant part of the national economy, attracting up to 100,000 visitors a year. However, the industry is highly seasonal, with only Gambia Experience operating a significant year round operation. The World Tourism Organization estimates that tourism is 7.8 per cent of The Gambia's Gross Domestic Product, that the industry directly employs 5,000 people and indirectly employs a further 6,000.

The Gambia is almost entirely dependent on charter flight arrivals scheduled by major tour operators in Europe. There are indirect flights via Dakar in Senegal, but Gambia Experience's charter flights and the smaller Gambia International Airlines provide the country's only direct European flights. Britain and The Netherlands account for two-thirds of all international tourists here, and British tourists benefit from the purchasing power of the major UK operators who feature The Gambia. Large tour operators function to some extent like supermarket chains – they contract in bulk on our behalf and secure good prices which UK tourists are pleased to accept. The large number of run-down hotels, some standing empty, and some semi-derelict, is testimony to the fact that the margins are tight and that it is often difficult to maintain the tourism asset.

European consumers are the beneficiaries of the purchasing power of the large operators but, while low prices are good for tourists, they are not good for The Gambia. However, without the large operators, the number of international visitor arrivals would be very much lower. It is the operators who give The Gambia a UK high street presence, enabling British tourists to purchase their holidays and offering reassurance about safety and quality – key issues in a highly competitive international market with an over-supply of sun, sand and sea tourism.

The Gambia is not competitive as a summer sun destination partly because of its rainy season and the associated malaria risk, but the real problem is that there are cheaper, easily accessible, summer alternatives. During the winter months, The Gambia's competitive position is better, it is the closest and cheapest winter sun destination for the UK, Dutch and German markets. However, if accommodation prices were to drop in the new destinations of the Middle East, and if tourists feel safe about travelling there, The Gambia's position may well be challenged.

▲ up

For The Gambia, tourism is an important export sector and a livelihood strategy for its people. There are concerns about sex tourism and the exploitation of children. The Gambia recently passed tough new legislation against child sex abuse. European

embassies and consulates in The Gambia are increasingly prepared to take legal action in the originating country against paedophiles who travel abroad to sexually exploit children. The larger part of sex tourism in The Gambia is European women looking for holiday romance, with young Gambian men. For some young men, this leads to marriage and a new life in the EU, becoming their personal route to betterment and contributing to their families' economic improvement.

The Gambia has large numbers of repeat visitors with 44 per cent of peak season winter arrivals having visited previously, 1 per cent having been more than five times and a fifth travelling with children. Forty per cent of all visitors bring school materials, a further 10 per cent bring other gifts, nurses bring out medicines; and sometimes cars and other equipment are sent out to The Gambia to create or enhance livelihood opportunities for poor Gambians. This kind of "person to person" aid is significant and increasing, and also plays a major part in the development of relationships between Gambians and visitors. Other tourists support schooling and higher education in the UK. The young men who seek to engage tourists in conversation and sell guiding services or trinkets, the 'bumsters', do so because for a significant number of their predecessors it has made a difference to their own and their families' opportunities. Although the "bumsters" are an annoyance for many tourists, others enjoy the opportunities to engage with Gambians and to make a difference.

Tourists spend an average of £25-30 per day in The Gambia on meals, souvenirs, crafts, guides, excursions and handicrafts, making a significant contribution to the economy. Roughly one-third of this is spent in the informal sector, providing a livelihood for juice pressers, taxi drivers, fruit sellers, craft workers and local guides. The bird guides have begun to establish small international marketing networks through birding groups and personal recommendations.

In an exit survey in 2002, it was found that 30 per cent of tourists were leaving the country having spent all of their holiday cash, but 40 per cent were leaving with between £11 and £50. There is clearly more scope for expenditure in the local economy. Increasing numbers of visitors are choosing to stay in locally owned and operated accommodation. The Gambian tourism industry is maturing and diversifying, and although large operators still predominate, they play a vital role in bringing tourists to The Gambia, in marketing the country, in providing assurances about quality, facilitating visits, and providing flights and accommodation.

▲ up

Concern in The Gambia about the growth of all-inclusive

holidays led to attempts by the government to ban them, but a storm of protest from European operators resulted in the policy being abandoned. The real issue is about how much of the tour operators' and tourists' expenditure remains in The Gambia. Small tour operators like Tribes Travel pride themselves on providing "the experience of meeting the local people, and not being confined to the usual 'resort' hotel holidays normally associated with this country. You will have a real insight into the culture of the local people, as it is they themselves who will be showing you around their country and sharing their vibrant music and dance with you." Larger operators such as Gambia Experience, which carries more tourists to The Gambia than any other, are diversifying their product with up-country trips and pirogue tours which contribute to spreading the benefits of tourism. They also provide suggestions about how to support schools and point out that by buying local products and services tourists can benefit the Gambian economy.

Partnerships between hoteliers, local and international tour operators and the local craft workers, guides, juice pressers and fruit sellers can make a real difference, creating better places for people to live in and better places for people to visit.

A DFID Tourism Challenge Fund project worked with these stakeholders to achieve change and increase informal sector incomes. At Kotu beach, fruit sellers and juice pressers adopted a code of conduct to reduce the hassling of tourists and established stalls so that they no longer needed to hawk for business on the beaches. Guides and craft workers took similar initiatives, and hoteliers invited craft workers to sell within the hotels on a rota basis. Hotel guests benefited from a less hassled environment and made more use of the beaches. Fruit sellers' incomes increased by 50 per cent; juice pressers' by 120 per cent; guides' by a third; and craft workers in the market report a doubling of their incomes and 43 new jobs. The Gambia now has a Responsible Tourism Policy supported by all stakeholders and a Responsible Tourism Partnership that is seeking to develop these initiatives and spread their impact.

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More information

<http://www.asset-gambia.com/>

www.responsibletourismpartnership.org/destination.html

<http://www.tribestravel.com/>

[▲ back to top](#)

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