The Gambia

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Banjul
Day 2/3	Sites along the Atlantic coast
Day 4/9	Exploring the river Gambia
Day 10/11	Re-visiting the coastal sites
Day 12	Fly London

Departs
October – December

Focus
Birds

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code GMB01) or brochure.

Grading
The tour is graded A/B (see grading section below for further information)

Highlights
- West African birding at its best!
- Great introduction to African birds along with Palearctic migrants in their winter quarters
- Journey upriver to view Egyptian Plover
- Glimpses of Gambia village life







Images from top: Egyptian Plover, Little Bee-eater and African Fish Eagle

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Introduction

The tiny West African republic of The Gambia is widely recognised as an ideal country in which to gain an introduction to the diverse and colourful birdlife of the African continent, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of European birdwatchers taking advantage of the Gambia's unique accessibility. There is a friendly, easy-going atmosphere in the country and a happy combination of superlative birdwatching and a warm sunny climate make it an ideal holiday destination. We begin this exciting tour at a hotel on the palm-fringed Atlantic coast then travel along the length of the Gambia River, stopping at strategically situated camps along the way to sample the changing birdlife at each locality. The range of potential species includes huge Goliath Herons, Pink-backed Pelicans and other waterbirds, a splendid variety of raptors and such typically African beauties as Red-throated and Carmine Bee-eaters. One of the highlights of any Gambia tour is the handsome Egyptian Plover and we will be hoping to see this confiding wader near the Senegal border before beginning our return journey to Banjul. With much of West Africa either in political turmoil or very expensive to visit, The Gambia remains an astonishing bargain for travellers and although many holiday-makers seek no more than the guaranteed winter sunshine, the more intrepid will find many examples of fascinating African culture in the rural heart of the country, where the latest European fashions and music have little part to play in the daily life of the villages.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1 Fly Banjul

We fly from London Gatwick airport to Yundum airport, Banjul, and on arrival transfer to a hotel near the Atlantic coast, assuming our flight is on time we should be able to enjoy some birding in the evening.

Day 2 & 3 Atlantic Coast

Dawn is announced by the liquid whistles of Common Bulbuls in the hotel garden and the raucous cries of Pied Crows setting off for another day's mischief. Yesterday the day began in the late autumn greyness of West Sussex, today we really are in Africa with swaying palm trees, cascades of exotic flowers in the garden and a warm, golden sun rising in a cloudless sky. During the first two full days of the tour we will concentrate our efforts on a variety of excellent sites close to the coast. Morning and afternoon excursions will take us to a range of different habitats. Coastal lagoons and creeks will provide us with a variety of migrant waders alongside less familiar fare such as Senegal Thick-knees, Spur-winged, African Wattled and Black-headed Lapwings, herons and egrets are abundant and, with luck, we could see spectacular Black Crowned Cranes. Dry savannah and coastal scrub will provide us with numerous sunbirds, warblers, glossy starlings, hornbills and finches while various raptors, bee-eaters, rollers and kingfishers can be found throughout. We will also make a


Bearded Barbet

visit to the famous Abuko Nature Reserve, a small remnant of dense 'gallery forest' that contains both Violet and Green Turacos and a range of other very localised Gallery Forest specialities found in the delightful reserve. Birdlife is at its most active in the mornings and evenings and we will relax during the heat of the day and enjoy leisurely lunches at various small restaurants and cafes though avian distractions are never far away. By the end of our second day we should already have amassed a list approaching 150 species, including such delights as Bearded Barbets, Blue-bellied Rollers and Red-necked Falcons, to name just a few.

Days 4 – 9 Gambia River Camps

Soon after breakfast we will embark on a six day odyssey into the heart of the Gambia, a journey that will cover almost the full length of the country. Today we will drive east to Tendaba Camp, an overnight destination on both the outward and inward legs of the journey. The main road that runs the length of the country is in a poor state in places and progress is consequently slow at times but we will make regular stops as we go. This morning there will be a particular emphasis on raptors (of which over 25 species are possible on this tour) and this will take us to productive roadside stops at Kampanti and Brumen Bridges where a good range of species could include Lanner Falcons, Grasshopper Buzzards, Beaudouin's and Brown Snake Eagles or even a Bateleur or Martial Eagle. Arriving at Tendaba mid-afternoon we will check the state of the tide and either embark on a creek crawl though the mangroves opposite, where localised species such as White-backed Night Herons, Mangrove Sunbirds and African Blue Flycatchers are always possible, as is the enigmatic and elusive African Finfoot. Or we will explore the productive scrub and woodland near Tendaba where a White-shouldered Black Tit or Brown-rumped Bunting is always a possibility amongst the numerous other species present, many of which are uncommon close to the coast, such as Bush Petronias and Yellow-fronted Canaries.

On Day 5 we will continue our journey eastwards and arrive at Janjanbureh, our base for the next three nights, in the evening. During the course of the journey we will stop to explore a range of roadside habitats, perhaps allowing us our first views of Egyptian Plovers or Spotted Thick-knees and certainly providing us with a wide range of savannah species, including numerous raptors. After a packed lunch we will make a small diversion to visit the productive moist grassland and paddyfields at Jahally


African Finfoot

where, with luck, we may come across such scarce or localised species as Quailfinch, Black Coucal, Winding Cisticola or African Pygmy Goose. Janjanbureh lies on a large island in the middle of the Gambia River and we will take a short ferry ride in order to reach our simple overnight accommodation.

Day 6 will be spent exploring sites on and near Janjanbureh. Arid savannah on the north side of the river will be searched for a range of dry country species such as Pygmy Sunbird and Northern Yellow White-eye and we are sure to see a range of other new species in this productive area. As the temperature begins to rise mid-morning we will seek the shelter of shady Baobab trees near a waterhole, where Red-breasted Swallows and Mottled Spinetails regularly come to drink, and scan the skies and tree tops for raptors and various other open country species such as Red-shouldered Cuckooshrike or White-crested Helmetshrike.


Red-throated Bee-eater

Day 7 will see us leave camp straight after breakfast and embark on a day trip to Basse Santa Su, the easternmost point of our up country adventure. Basse is famous for its Egyptian Plovers, which often inhabit a small muddy stream right in the middle of town, and we should have no difficulty seeing this most attractive species before moving on to nearby Prufru Swamp where, amongst other species, Northern Carmine Bee-eaters are sometimes found. During the heat of the day we will take refuge at a bar overlooking the Gambia River where further Egyptian Plovers are possible, before retracing our steps to Janjanbureh. This return journey will be punctuated by stops at a couple of waterholes, where a variety of finches, weavers and bishops come to drink, before visiting Bansang Quarry with its spectacular colony of gorgeous Red-throated Bee-eaters and further chances of drinking seedeaters such as Gosling's Buntings or Exclamatory Paradise Whydahs.

Day 8 sees the start of our journey back to the coast. After a pre-breakfast birding session, we will start to make our way west towards Tendaba, though we will now travel on the quieter north bank of the Gambia River to allow us access to some superb wetland birding at Kaur. As it is our aim to be at Kaur during the cooler late afternoon hours, our journey will be at a leisurely place with plenty of stops to look at anything of interest en route and a longer lunch stop at the reedbeds and pools at Panchang where African Pygmy Goose is a possibility. Kaur wetland is a seasonally flooded lowland area that is in prime condition during October, vast numbers of Collared Pratincoles use this site as a staging area and we would normally expect to see several thousand here, quite a sight! Kaur also holds a large seasonal population of Egyptian Plovers, with birds frequently seen running along the road that separates the two areas of open water and we have seen the rare White-crowned Lapwing here on some recent tours as well as Kittlitz's Plover and many other species. The last stretch of road to Tendaba is slow going on very potholed roads, but we will get there eventually and an arrival after dark does provide us with the possibility of nightjars on the road along the way

The morning of Day 9 will be spent at Tendaba, either exploring the mangroves opposite by boat or birding in woodland nearby, before we begin the final leg of the journey back to the coast. As usual this journey will be punctuated by stops to look at anything of interest or to scan for raptors and we should reach the coast by mid-evening.

Days 10 – 12 Atlantic Coast


Verreaux's Eagle Owl

Although the upriver leg of the tour is now behind us there is still plenty to do and see at the coast and we have two and a half days left to explore any habitats not previously covered, or to search for any particular species we have not so far seen. Our daily itinerary will be based on such requirements though a return visit to Abuko is certain, perhaps on our final morning. In addition to several new species we will find near the coast during these final days we will be able to re-familiarise ourselves with several species that have been absent during our time upriver. After lunch on Day 12 we will drive the short distance to the airport and take our flight home to chilly London, memories of about 300 species, many of which are truly spectacular, fresh in our minds.

Grading

The tour is graded A/B with day walks only. We cover up to around 4 miles during our birding excursions each day, and walks can sometimes be over rough terrain or loose/rocky ground. Please also note that although temperatures in the low 30s°C are typical, it can sometimes be hotter than this, and coupled with high humidity this can make walking during the day tough for those without a reasonable level of fitness.

Climate

Generally hot and sunny with a negligible risk of rain. Daytime temperatures at this time of year average in the low 30s°C, though can reach the high 30s°C. Nights remain warm and it can be very humid too.

Food & accommodation

We use tourist class hotels with private facilities for our nights at the coast. Accommodation in the river camps is simple and basic although the huts do have private facilities. Both water and electricity supplies can be erratic at the camps.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of this holiday: all items of a more personal nature such as drinks, laundry and souvenirs. Lunch on the final day is also not included in the holiday cost.

Extensions

There are many possibilities for extending your stay in the Gambia, with many people choosing to add a few nights on the coast, or just over the border into Senegal. Prices vary depending on the time of year, so please contact the Naturetrek office for more information. Two suggestions are as follows:

Ngala Lodge (3 night add on stay from £695pp on B&B in a Suite)

Enjoy a few days of relaxation by the coast after your trip, staying at the luxury boutique Ngala Lodge. With a stunning location, poised high above a quiet cove and facing the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, this award-winning lodge is renowned for its excellent cuisine and personal service.





Keur Saloum (3 night add on stay from £495pp on BB)

Spend a few days at the end of your trip in Senegal's Sine Saloum Delta. It is a region of great diversity consisting of a unique estuarine environment, glorious beaches, mangrove swamps, sand islands and ever-shifting sand dunes. Staying in traditional African-style round bungalows or larger suites at Keur Saloum, in the tranquil area of Toubakouta, explore your surroundings and take part in some of the birding day trips on offer. The transfer from Mandina takes approximately 5 hours including a river crossing (approximately 40 minutes) and border formalities, all of which we will organise for you.

Flight Upgrades

As standard the hold luggage allowance is 20kg and cabin baggage allowance 8kg per person.

Enhance your flight experience with these additional flight upgrades (subject to availability):

Emergency Exit Seats (£130pp return)
- A limited number of emergency exit seats are available for passengers who are 16 years or over and fully able-bodied.

Economy Plus (£395pp return)
This service offers additional benefits both at the airport and on board the aircraft. The service includes:

- Seats that are converted to a comfortable 2-2 configuration with a table in between, giving more personal comfort and space
- Seats at the front of the aircraft
- No. 1 Executive Lounge at Gatwick Airport
- First Class Lounge (air-conditioned) at Banjul Airport
- Increased hold luggage allowance of 30kg and hand allowance of 10kg
- Front row with extra legroom – additional £130pp

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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