The Gambia in Style at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly London to Banjul
Day 2/7	Birdwatching excursions from Mandina River Lodges
Day 8	Fly Banjul to London

Departs

December

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GMB05) or brochure

Grading

A. Gentle, daily birdwatching walks

Focus

Birds and mammals

Highlights

- A warm-weather, single-centre birdwatching holiday
- Mandina Lodges and Makasutu Forest
- Day trips to other nature reserves such as Kartong and Pirang
- African Birdwatching at its best
- Led by an expert Naturetrek tour leader and knowledgeable local guides







Images from top: Beautiful Sunbird, Floating Lodges, Violet Turaco

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Introduction

Also known as the 'Smiling Coast of West Africa', the republic of The Gambia is an ideal country in which to gain an introduction to the diverse and colourful birdlife of the African continent. Accessed by an easy, direct flight to Banjul, The Gambia boasts a friendly, easy-going atmosphere and a happy combination of superlative birdwatching and a warm sunny climate, making it an ideal holiday destination. The Gambia is a top destination for birdwatching providing an assortment of colour, variety and a little familiarity amongst its 570+ species. Within 100 miles of the sea, primary forest known as the West African Coastal Forest still remains in places and we'll be visiting these sites to make the most of the colourful birdlife living here. Our lodges are just a 45 minute drive from the airport, but feel a world away, set within the 1000 acres of the tranquil Makasutu Cultural Forest and bordering the secluded mangrove-lined tributary of the River Gambia. The lodges are discretely positioned over the water or set back within the forest wilderness. This setting provides the unique chance to combine birdwatching, holidaying by the pool, relaxing in your lodge and eating alfresco. During our 7-night stay our friendly, local guides will accompany us on morning and afternoon tours, often by boat, into the forest, rice fields, mud flats and savannah. And while exploring different parts of Makasutu we expect to see a range of birdlife including various herons, egrets, kingfishers, bush shrikes, sunbirds, raptors, rollers and glossy starlings. On two days we will travel out of Makasutu and visit other nature reserves such as Pirang Bonto, a small section of gallery forest reserve where Verreaux's Eagle Owl, African Wood Owl and Violet and Green Turacos can be found; and Tanji, a coastal reserve with sandbars for loafing gulls and terns, and a myriad of sunbirds, oriole and hornbills in the nearby scrub woodland. This tour is designed to offer easy yet exciting and varied birding from an exceptionally comfortable base with good photographic opportunities. With much of West Africa either in political turmoil or very expensive to visit, The Gambia remains a 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.


Mandina Lodges


Woodland Kingfisher

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 In flight

We fly from London Gatwick airport to Yundum airport, Banjul, and on arrival transfer the approximate 45 minutes to the beautiful Mandina Lodges for a 7 night stay. Leaving the gloom of the UK winter behind, we will soon find ourselves enjoying the warmth of the Gambian sunshine as we unwind and begin to enjoy the vast number of new species that we are likely to encounter during our stay. Following in the footsteps of many of our summer migrants that winter or pass through this part of West Africa, over the next week there will be plenty of time to relax and birdwatch from our comfortable base. Located amongst lush riverine forest, we need not venture far to encounter some of the Gambia's famed avian inhabitants with species frequently encountered around the lodge including such delights as African Golden Oriole, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Bearded Barbet, White-throated Bee-eater, Little Bee-eater, Pied and Blue-breasted Kingfisher, Green-headed, Scarlet-chested and Beautiful Sunbirds, Northern Crombec, Yellow-crowned Gonolek and Violet Turaco.


White-throated Bee-eater

Days 2, 4, 5 & 7

During these days there will be optional 3 hour birding outings in the mornings, and 2-2.5 hour birding excursions in the afternoon. These will be carried out on foot or by boat, exploring the surrounding forest, tidal creeks, rice fields, grasslands and wetlands located within the vicinity of the lodge, breaking to take brunch and relax during the hottest part of the day.

The choice of day and time for some locations will depend on the tides, but each habitat is likely to present us with a different range of birds and we will have plenty of time to familiarise ourselves with them, observing some familiar British migrants alongside a range of colourful local residents.

Tidal creeks and mudflats

The tidal creeks and expanses of mudflats provide ideal wintering habitat for a host of wading birds and we'll be looking out for wintering Whimbrels, Common Sandpipers and Redshanks, miles away from the icy grip of Northern Europe where they breed. Amongst the mangroves and mudflats, fiddler crabs busy themselves at low tide, darting frantically over the exposed mud and excavating new burrows as they seek refuge from marauding waders, egrets, herons such as Purple and Goliath

Herons. The over-hanging branches of riverside trees will provide suitable vantage points for insect catching species such as Glossy-backed Drongos, Blue-bellied Rollers and Little Bee-eaters, whilst Grey Kestrels and Lizard Buzzards, both small raptors, watch intently for an opportune moment to snatch a small bird. From the depths of the forest, a soft drawn out whistle-like call, will alert us to the presence of a Pearl-spotted Owlet.


Pied Kingfisher

Amongst the tangled web of mangrove roots, we may be fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of a Black Crake, a secretive rail, with a bright yellow bill and bright pink legs. On the stretches of open water, we can expect to see both Pied and Giant Kingfishers, the former, often seen hovering above the water, before plummeting beak-first in pursuit of small fish. Overhead, Ospreys, many from the UK, may drift past at any time, as well as Yellow-billed and Black Kite, Hooded Vulture and flocks of Pink-backed Pelicans, that can often be seen flying in squadron like formation.

Kembujeh Rice Field and Nambikala Field


Bearded Barbet

Rice paddies are the ideal place to search for a variety of egrets, crakes and wading birds such as the sought after Greater Painted-snipe. Nearby bushes and trees will also attract Yellow-billed Shrike, Fine-spotted Woodpecker and Hoopoe while Northern Black Flycatcher and Senegal Coucal are all possible. The areas of open grassland on the edge of the forest provide good hunting grounds for insectivorous species such as Little, Swallow-tailed, Blue-cheeked and White-throated Bee-eaters, as well as Bearded and and Vieillot's Barbet, with Pied-winged Swallow and African Palm Swifts also taking advantage of the open clearings. Amongst the trees lurk Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Violet Turaco and Greater Honeyguide, and small pools can be good for Black Egret, Squacco Heron, African Jacana and Wood Sandpiper, with Hamerkop, African Spoonbill and Sacred Ibis also possible. Four-banded Sandgrouse, superbly cryptic amongst the grasses can also be found here and it will take all of our ornithological skills to pick them out from their surroundings.


African Spoonbill

Makasutu Cultural Forest


Senegal Parrot

As dawn breaks, the forest becomes alive with the sound of bird song and calls. African Golden Oriole produce melodious whistled phrases from the upper canopy, while Senegal Parrots squawk noisily, dashing past excitedly in a whirl of colour when flushed from their feeding. In the depths of the forest, family groups of White-crested Helmetshrikes, forage in the understory, watched on by Blue-breasted Kingfishers, hidden secretively in the darkness. In the more open areas of the forest or at the forest edge, other woodland kingfishers are possible such as Striped and Grey-headed, but Rufous-crowned Roller may also be seen hawking insects or perched on the exposed limb of a tree. As we walk along the forest trails, African Paradise Flycatchers or the very similar Red-bellied Paradise Flycatcher may dart out from cover to snatch unsuspecting flying insects. Throughout the forest we will keep a watchful eye out for African Harrier Hawk, Dark Chanting Goshawk and Lizard Buzzard, with a wide variety of other raptors possible overhead at any time.

Whilst it is the forests prolific birdlife that we shall focus on, we will inevitably encounter some of its other residents, including the local Guinea Baboons and Patas Monkeys. Numerous fabulous butterflies can be found gliding through the vegetation, many with equally enchanting names such as Striped Policeman, African Spirit and White Lady Swallowtail.


African Paradise Flycatcher

Kubeneh and Kembujeh

We shall also enjoy a morning or afternoon trip boat trip to Kubeneh and a fascinating walk to Kembujeh. At Kubeneh we will be on the lookout for Senegal Parrot, Piapiac, a bizarre looking corvid that looks not unlike a cross between a crow and a Magpie, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Whimbrel, African Thrush and Greenshank. This is also a good site for Caspian Tern and Bronze Mannikin.

At Kembujeh, Scarlet-Chested, Splendid and Beautiful Sunbirds may also be seen, alongside Snowy-crowned Robin Chat and the fabulous Orange-breasted Bush-shrike. With a little more searching, we even find a wintering Melodious Warbler alongside resident species such as Senegal Eremomola and Yellow-breasted Apalis.

Days 3 & 6

During our full day excursions we shall visit a few key birding sites including Kartong Wetlands and Pirang Bonto Forest, and perhaps some other locations depending on time, all within an hour of the Makasutu Forest.

Kartong Wetlands


Hamerkop

This patch of wetland at the southern end of the Gambian coastline is a magnet for all kinds of birdlife. On the way there we will make a couple of road-side stops which could yield sightings of Senegal Thick-knees, White-faced Whistling Ducks, Broad-billed Roller, Northern Bishops, Orange-cheeked Waxbills, Red-billed Firefinch, African Green Pigeon and more! Arriving at the wetlands we will slowly make our way towards the coastline, perusing the various pools and scrubland. Scanning we are likely to see in the water Hamerkop, Spur-winged Lapwing, Black-winged Stilt, African Swamphen, African Jacana, various egrets and herons including Squacco, Black-headed and Black Crowned Night Heron, as well as Western African Crocodile warming up in the morning sunshine. We can also expect to see various kingfishers including Malachite, Grey-headed and Striped Kingfisher, as well as other species in the surrounding scrubland such as Abyssinian and Purple Roller, Senegal Coucal, and Speckled Pigeon on the tracks. Overhead there are likely to be African Palm and Little Swifts screeching past and this hive of activity also attracts birds of prey such as Marsh Harrier, Palm-nut Vulture and Tawny Eagle.

Tanji


Tanji

A visit to the fishing village and market of Tanji is to see Gambian life in full colour. Off shore the fishing vessels are full of that day's catch, and the beach is populated with locals selling the fish, and beyond that the various smokehouses from which the final product is ground up and used for fertiliser. All of this activity attracts various birdlife, and we should find flocks of gulls and terns loafing on the beach, with the clean cut Slender-billed Gulls lurking out among the slightly larger, stockier and commoner Grey-headed Gulls. Out on the sandbar, Sandwich, West African Crested, Caspian and Lesser Crested Terns are all possible.

Pirang Shrimp Fields

At Pirang is a vast disused shrimp farm which is now a key birdwatching site with endless pools stretching off into the distance. There are likely to be many egrets, herons and waders here, with some notable species including Little Stint, Avocet, Curlew and Marsh Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank and Ruff. Red-rumped and Wire-tailed Swallows fly over the pools and other species here which we might not have seen yet could include Crested Lark, Black-winged Bishop, Woodchat Shrike and a Zitting Cisticola.

Pirang Bonto Forest


Verreaux's Eagle Owl

Neighbouring the pools of Pirang is Bonto, a small section of evergreen gallery forest which is home to over 200 bird species! Some of the rarer species we might be lucky to see are Verreaux's Eagle Owl, African Wood Owl, African Goshawk, African Hobby, Green Crombec, Green and Violet Turacos, African Pied Hornbill, Buff Spotted Woodpecker, Collared Sunbird and Yellow-bellied Hyliota amongst all of the other less restricted species that can be found here.

Marakissa

South west of Makasutu, close to the Senegalese border, is the village of Marakissa, which is on a creek as well as having various freshwater pools. As a result, this habitat is similar to that of Makasutu and Kartong, so provides a good opportunity for any species that we have not already seen during the week. Species that can be found here also include Black Crake, Broad-billed Roller, African Golden Oriole, Black-crowned Night Heron, African Spoonbill and Long-Crested Eagle.


Black Crake

Day 8

During our final day we have the opportunity to enjoy the sunshine and wildlife around our lodges before taking brunch and finishing any last-minute packing. The journey to the airport should take less than an hour and before long we will be on our light back to the UK, albeit with memories of some spectacular birds, fresh in our minds.

Tour grading

Grading Grade A. Leisurely half day walks and boat trips (all of them optional), with two full day excursions to nearby reserves.

Accommodation

A stay at Mandina Lodges is a peaceful, tranquil and unique experience. There are nine lodges built both on and off the river, each maintaining an exclusive yet slightly rustic feel. All are built to a good standard, largely from local materials, and are suitably furnished, all of which is impressive given the remote location. There is an inviting, freeform pool and al fresco bar and dining areas, where Epauletted Fruit Bats roost under the palapa coverings. As you would expect in this rural setting, the lodges come equipped with fewer practicalities than mainstream hotels, however we believe this simply adds to the charm of the lodges and offers a more authentic experience.

Mandina Lodges is arguably the best place to stay in the country, and the vast majority of people thoroughly enjoy their time here. However, it should be noted that Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world, where almost all supplies have to be imported, leaving it prone to shortages. The whole property is given a face lift before the tourist season starts, but over the course of the next six months it can suffer from a bit of 'wear and tear', which cannot be readily repaired. That said, staff are always available and willing to sort out any small issues that may arise. The experience of staying here is different and not comparable to the luxurious lodges that can be found in east and southern Africa.

There are five styles of lodge; Jungle, Mangrove, Garden, Floating and Stilted Lodges. All lodges come equipped with large four-poster beds and mosquito nets. Two of the Jungle Lodges and the Garden Lodge have two king sized beds for twin occupancy. Solar power is used where possible and there are no fridges nor air conditioning (though the lodges are designed with high ceilings, fans and good ventilation to keep them cool). The standard tour price is based on Jungle or Mangrove Lodges, with upgrades to Garden, Floating and Stilted Lodges offered at a supplement (as indicated below). Lodges are offered on 'first-come first-served basis' and therefore we strongly recommend that you check availability before booking.

Mangrove Lodge (standard)

The Mangrove Lodge is an attractive thatched lodge set on one level with a large bedroom, indoor bathroom with flushing toilet and its own sun terrace. The views from the terrace are across the mangroves and the jungle.



Jungle Lodge (standard)

The three Jungle Lodges have a ground floor large bedroom, open-air bathroom and separate, enclosed flushing toilet. Two Jungle Lodges are furnished with two king-sized beds for guests that require twin occupancy (most other lodges have one king bed). All have a small terrace out the front with views of the mangroves and forest.





Garden Lodge (extra from £195pp based on two sharing)



The Garden Lodge is the largest of the lodges on land and is also the closest to the pool and other shared areas. It has a large bedroom with two king-sized beds and seating area with sofa, chairs and coffee table. It has a large indoor bathroom with flushing toilet and dressing area, and a generous terrace out the front. It also has exclusive use of a canopied seating area on the river, in between a couple of the Floating Lodges.

Floating Lodge (extra from £195pp based on two sharing)

The three Floating Lodges are built and furnished in a rustic style, on a single-storey platform jutting into the river with al fresco private bathroom with shower and specially designed non-flushing toilet. There is also a canopied seating area to one side, also overlooking the river.





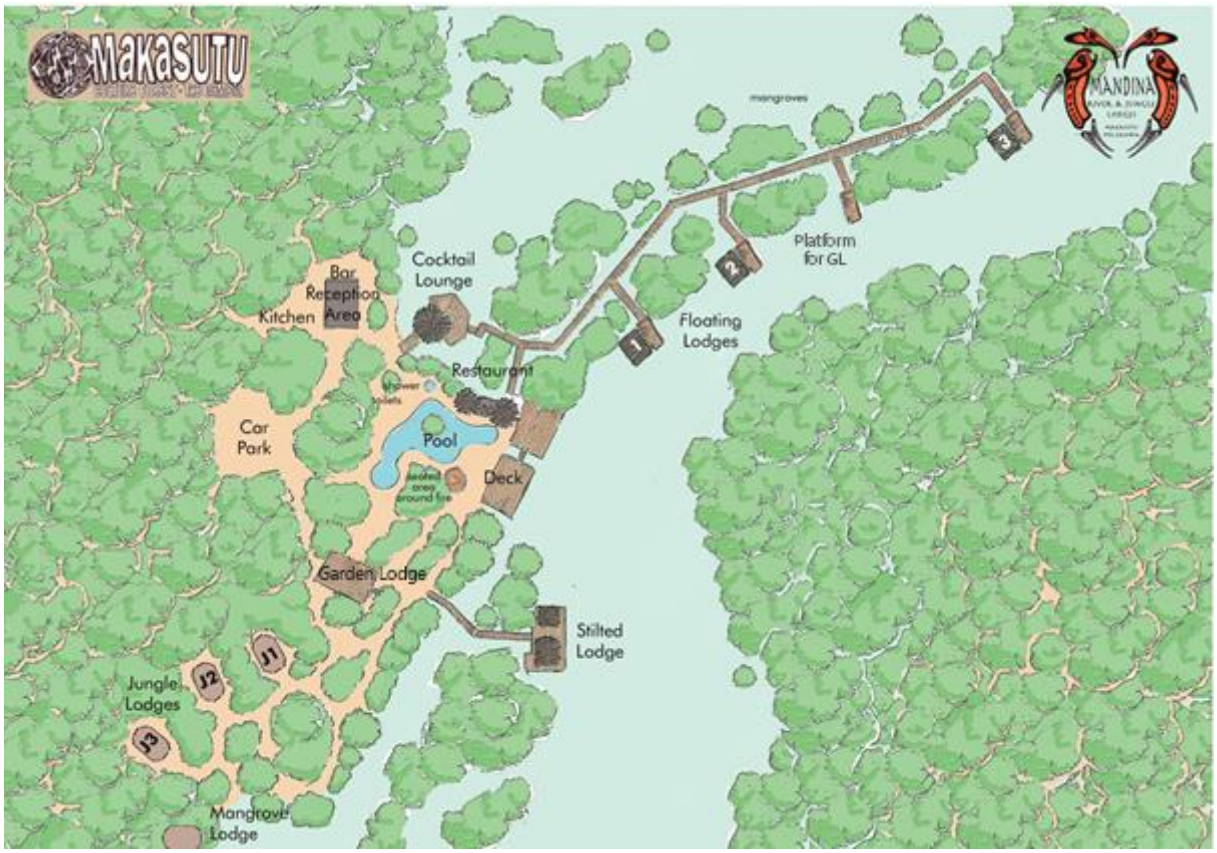
Stilted Lodge (extra from £295pp based on two sharing)

The stilted lodge is extremely spacious with a separate bedroom, open-air lounge area, open-air but private bathroom and second story dayroom. It has unrivalled, extensive views of the mangroves and along the creek.





Map of Mandina Lodges



Food

Breakfast and dinner are included in the tour cost, leaving you free to purchase lunch at the hotel if you wish or at one of the restaurants that we will visit on our two full day excursions. We suggest allowing approximately £10-15 per person per day for this. On the days we are based at Mandina a brunch is provided following our morning excursion, meaning many people just purchase a small snack to keep them going during the afternoon. Sandwiches, omelettes, etc. are available from the bar at Mandina. As mentioned in the Accommodation section above, occasionally supplies can be erratic, and this can include food, so there might be some days when the offering for brunch in particular can be limited. Vegetarians can be catered for, but those who are vegan or have a gluten intolerance, food options will be very limited.

Weather

The Gambia enjoys virtually uninterrupted sunshine and high daytime temperatures with almost no rainfall from November to June and long days of sunshine, with temperatures frequently rising to 30 – 35 degrees Celsius (up to 40 degrees at its hottest).

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 £795pp 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 £595pp 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 (£450pp 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 or flight upgrade requests, at the time of booking.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to The Gambia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice prior to travel.

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