

Getting Started

Whether it's a lazy beach holiday you're after or a solitary tour around remote villages, myriad mangrove swamps and endless savannah plains, you'll be well served in Gambia and Senegal.

For a brief stay in the built-up tourist zones – such as the Atlantic resorts in The Gambia, and Saly and Cap Skiring in Senegal – you won't need much advance preparation, next to none if you travel with an organised tour.

Independent travellers and those intending to venture far off the beaten track should spend a good amount of time crouched over maps and travel guides – if you know where you're hoping to stay, many of the isolated lodgings upcountry can help you with transport if you contact them in advance. Most tourists tend to visit either Senegal or Gambia – and they're all missing out. A trip to Casamance can boost a Gambia holiday enormously, and a tour along the Gambia River can make a visit to Senegal complete.

Apart from some tedious border formalities, it's relatively easy to combine a visit to both – don't let the language differences (French in Senegal and English in Gambia) scare you.

Both countries have a good choice of accommodation facilities, restaurants and travel options to suit most budgets. However, shoestring travellers will find Dakar a challenge, while those who prefer to travel like kings will find their choices limited when travelling inland.

WHEN TO GO

By far the most popular tourist season in Gambia and Senegal is the period from November to February, when conditions are dry and relatively cool. This is also the best time to watch wildlife and birds (including many European migratory species) in the countries' many national parks, and the season you're guaranteed best access to all regions, as the absence of rains makes even the remotest dirt road reasonably accessible. And if you want to party, the urban centre of Dakar is a great place to spend Christmas and New Year.

Several of Senegal's famous dance and music festivals, however, tend to take place between March and June, when temperatures are higher and the climate still dry.

See Climate (p258) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- your vaccination certificate with a yellow-fever stamp – Gambian officials love to check it
- checking the latest security situation in Casamance
- making copies of all official documents – it will make getting any necessary replacements much easier
- a torch (flashlight) – many remote places don't have electricity and cuts are frequent even in the urban zones
- binoculars – even those with no ornithological inclination whatsoever are likely to be converted in this region
- a set of smart clothes – don't be outdazzled by the impeccably dressed locals
- a warm jersey – January nights in Dakar can get wool-sweater chilly.

VISITS DURING RAMADAN

Ramadan, the holy month of the Islamic calendar, is a time of religious contemplation, dedicated to prayer and the study of the Quran. Most importantly, it's the fasting month – Muslims are not allowed to eat, drink, smoke or have sex from dawn until dusk.

The Ramadan fast completely changes the rhythm of life in the Muslim world. Many people wake around 5am for an early breakfast before sunrise, and some businesses cancel the usual lunch break and finish around 4.30pm, allowing their tired and hungry employees to return home.

It isn't an ideal month for travelling, even if you're not a Muslim. Many restaurants, bars and nightclubs close for the 30 days and there won't be many live concerts, as music and other worldly pleasures are frowned upon for its duration. Collective hunger also means that tempers tend to rise, especially towards the late afternoon. A Ramadan traffic jam before dusk is always a scene of loud arguments and occasional fist fights.

As a non-Muslim you won't be expected to fast, and people won't take offence if you eat in their presence. Just bear in mind that most others around you run on empty stomachs, and be considerate of their needs. If you use the services of a driver, allow for prayer stops and try to get back before the break of the fast. If that's impossible, make sure you put in a stop when the prayer is called after dusk, allowing him to take in a hot drink and a bite to eat. The fast is usually broken with a handful of dates, so you can offer the driver some if you're running late and want to show your appreciation. Generally, be patient with the occasional show of grumpiness. If you want to know what it's like, try to live the Ramadan rhythm for a while. You'll understand what most of the locals are experiencing.

The wet season (late June to late September) is the time most tourists avoid. The rains wash away some of the roads, rendering certain journeys upcountry impossible. Malaria is widespread, the humidity can become stifling and many national parks (and a few hotels) shut down. But there's a positive side to this, too. Everything is greener, independent travellers will enjoy the absence of large tourist groups, and many places (especially in The Gambia) reduce their prices by up to 50%.

October and November are again fairly dry, though very hot – but if you can take the temperatures, this is a great time to come. You can still enjoy the sight of lush greens, swelling rivers and large waterfalls, while staying dry yourself. The beaches aren't packed yet and you're bound to find a hotel room.

Since you're travelling to a predominantly Muslim region, it's worth checking the lunar calendar, particularly for the dates of the fasting month of Ramadan (above). Though it's perfectly possible to visit during Ramadan, and the month's special ambience is worth experiencing, many restaurants close and the entertainment scene goes into hibernation.

COSTS & MONEY

It's pretty much up to you how cheap or expensive you render your trip to Gambia and Senegal. Shoestringers can get by on a budget of around US\$15 per day, but that means battered minibuses, dorms and street food. Spending US\$30 to US\$40 allows for some creature comforts. With US\$50 you'll be at ease, and with US\$100 there are few luxuries that aren't within reach.

Locally produced items (including food and beer) are much cheaper than in Europe or America, but as soon as you head for the supermarket for some French yogurt or a box of cornflakes, you pay twice the amount you would at home.

All around the region, you can get a generous platter of rice and sauce in a local-style restaurant for US\$3 or even less, but a three-course

meal for two at the smart restaurants of Dakar or the coastal resorts of Gambia will set you back US\$30. In between, you get the whole range of quality and cost.

Hotel prices vary enormously between the urban centres and up-country villages. In Dakar even staying in a brothel might set you back US\$20, while the same amount gets you a spacious, stunning double room (or two) in a *campement* (hostel accommodation in bungalows) outside the capital.

On average allow US\$25 to US\$50 for midrange hotels; top-notch establishments go for anything from US\$75 and far, far above. Couples can save on accommodation costs, as double rooms are normally only 25% to 50% more than singles or don't cost extra at all. In most hotels, children sharing with their parents stay free of charge or for 10% to 50% of the full price.

It's in transport that differences in costs are most notable. Bush taxis are fairly cheap (US\$1.50 to US\$3 per 100km) but rough. For anything more comfortable you have to pay – around US\$40 to US\$60 per day for a private taxi, and US\$80 or more per day for a 4WD with driver.

READING UP

Very few travel books have been published about the region, but you can still read your way into the countries' culture through a whole range of related topics.

The most famous work relating to The Gambia is probably *Roots* by Alex Haley, which was written in 1976. A mix of fiction and historical fact, this hugely influential book describes the African-American author's search for his African origins.

For historical insights into the region, give Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* a try. The classic tome details the author's expeditions through Gambia and Senegal to the Niger River in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. His descriptions of the musical performances by griots could still apply to their timeless art today.

The stunning art book *Senegal behind Glass* (1994) by Anne-Marie Bouttianaux-Ndiaye contains reproductions of beautiful *sous-verre* paintings (p50), from historical to contemporary examples, thereby giving artistic insights into the country's religion, culture and arts scene.

A Saint in the City (2003) by Allen and Mary Roberts takes a similar approach, discussing Senegalese culture via the arts and the ubiquitous images of Senegal's great Sufi leader Cheikh Amadou Bamba (p197) around urban Dakar, which you're bound to see on your travels.

Most works on Senegal are written in French so if you're familiar with the language, *Sénégal* (2005), Christian Saglio's musings on the country, should be your first choice. The author, currently head of Dakar's Institut Français, has spent the greater part of his life in Senegal where, among other things, he helped conceive the fabulous network of *campements villageois* (p237) in Casamance in the 1970s.

For an easy-to-read and entertaining account of travels around West Africa's music scene, try Mark Hudson's *Our Grandmother's Drum* and the amusing *Music in My Head*, which describes the power, influence and everyday realities of modern African music set in a mythical city that is instantly recognisable as Dakar.

Overland travellers to the region must read *Sahara Overland – A Route & Planning Guide* by Chris Scott, which covers every tiny detail you might need to know. Published by Trailblazer in 2000, it can be 'upgraded' at Scott's website (www.sahara-overland.com).

HOW MUCH?

French bread D8/CFA150

Newspaper D10/CFA200

Internet 1hr D30/CFA300

Soft drink D15/CFA300

Sandwich D50/CFA1000

TOP TENS

Top 10 Festivals

It's hard to come to Dakar and not find a festival in full swing. The country has a fantastically vibrant arts and music scene, as well as a population that loves a good party. Gambia is barely keeping up, though it's also got a couple of events that mustn't be missed.

- Ziguinchor Carnival (p235), Ziguinchor, late February or early March
- Kartong Festival (p120), Kartong, March
- Dak'Art Biennale (p156), Dakar, every two years in May
- Saint-Louis International Jazz Festival (p206), Saint-Louis, May
- Kaay Fecc (p156), Dakar, June
- Roots Homecoming Festival (p264), throughout Gambia, every two years in June
- Gorée Diaspora Festival (p167), Ile de Gorée, November
- Festival International du Film de Quartier (p156), Dakar, December
- Abéné Festivalo (p247), Abéné, December
- Les Fanals de Saint-Louis (p207), Saint-Louis, December

Top 10 Albums

Look on any 'world music' shelf in your nearest record store and you'll find the Senegal section spilling over with a wide mix of styles, ranging from acoustic kora to heavy hip-hop. This country has brought forth a long chain of renowned artists including, of course, the best-known African singer of all – Youssou N'Dour. See p54 for more information on individual artists.

- *Dikaale*, Abdou Guité Seck
- *Djam Leeli*, Baaba Maal and Mansour Seck
- *Né la Thiass*, Cheikh Lô
- *Esperanza*, Daara J
- *Jaliology*, Dembo Konté and Kausu Kuyateh
- *Myamba*, Omar Pene
- *L'itinéraire d'un Enfant Bronzé*, Sérigne Mbaye (Disiz La Peste)
- *Orientissimo*, Thione Seck
- *Viviane & Frères*, Viviane N'Dour
- *Immigrés*, Youssou N'Dour

Top 10 Bird-Watching Sites

Senegal and Gambia are among the world's major bird-watching destinations, and you never have to venture far to get some shiny feathers in front of your binoculars (see also p71).

- Abuko Nature Reserve (p122), Gambia
- Baobolong Wetland Reserve (p131), Gambia
- Îles de la Madeleine (p170), Senegal
- Footsteps Eco Lodge (p119), Gambia
- Kiang West National Park (p131), Gambia
- Marakissa (p124), Gambia
- Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj (p214), Senegal
- Réserve de Popenguine (p180), Senegal
- Tanji River Bird Reserve (p117), Gambia
- Toubakouta (p190), Senegal

INTERNET RESOURCES

ASSET (www.asset-gambia.com) The home page of the Gambian Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism; lists plenty of interesting small businesses, from juice pressers and hotels to fashion designers and taxi drivers. The perfect guide for venturing off the beaten tourist trail and exploring the 'underground' of the travel scene.

Au-Senegal (www.au-senegal.com) Information overload – no detail of practical information, cultural historical aspects or news has been left out. You can book hotels online, get the latest updates on the political situation and much, much more.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Up-to-date information on travelling to the region and links to other good travel resources.

Senegal Tourist Office (www.senegal-tourism.com) Comprehensive tourist site that lists attractions and gives travel and accommodation tips.

Stanford Site Guide (www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/sene.html) Has links to hundreds of websites about Senegal, both in English and French.

The Gambia Tourism Authority (www.visitthegambia.gm) Gambia's official tourist website; covers the basics of travel information, though not in any great detail.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

This itinerary travels the entire country. It takes you to all the major sites of Gambia, from the beaches and fishing villages of the Atlantic coast to the most important national parks – from **Ginak Island** in the west to **River Gambia National Park** in Eastern Gambia. Approximate return length is 950km.

GAMBIA – COASTAL COMFORTS TO RURAL REMOTENESS

One to Two Weeks

The Gambia's compact size makes it an ideal destination for a one- or two-week visit. From Banjul airport, head for the **Atlantic coast** (p98), where you find the biggest choice of places to stay. Spend a couple of days at the beaches, and take the occasional day trip to the surrounding areas once the glamour of sea and sun alone has worn off. The busy market of **Serekunda** (p98) is close by, and the pretty museum and bird reserve of **Tanji** (p117), as well as the small fishing villages of **Gunjur** (p119) and **Kartong** (p119), are only a short hop further along the coast. You can spend the night in one of the villages, then visit the bustling junction town of **Brikama** (p123). Carry on to **Makasutu** (p124), visit the Culture Forest and head back to the coast.

Abuko Nature Reserve (p122), Gambia's smallest stretch of protected nature, is only a short drive away from the coast. A trip here can be combined with a meal at **Lamin Lodge** (p121), a creaking wooden restaurant that nestles in the mangroves.

The small and dusty capital of **Banjul** (p90) sits roughly 20km from the coastal resorts, and tempts with a lively market and colonial architecture. Take the ferry to the north bank for a visit to **Jufureh** (p126), and make time for the beautiful **Ginak Island** (p125).

If you have two weeks, take a journey upcountry. A river trip to **Georgetown** (p133) is an absolute treat. If that's beyond budget, you can follow the southern shore by road, stopping at Bintang for **Bintang Bolong** (p129), then carrying on to Georgetown, from where you can take pirogue and walking excursions to **Wassu** (p137), **River Gambia National Park** (p138) and **Basse Santa Su** (p138).



THE MANY FACES OF SENEGAL'S COAST

Two Weeks

Most flights go to **Dakar** (p145), and you shouldn't leave the vibrant capital without tasting its nightlife, checking out the arts and restaurant scenes and perusing the markets. From Dakar, day-trip to peaceful **Île de Gorée** (p167) and **Îles de la Madeleine** (p170).

Next, head north to historical **Saint-Louis** (p203) and from here day-trip to **Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj** (p214) and **Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie** (p214).

Return south, taking in the **Désert de Lompoul** (p214) on your way to the Petite Côte. Stop at the chilled-out fishing village of **Toubab Dialao** (p178), before following the shoreline south to **Mbour** (p183). If you're after low-key beach time, visit the seashell town of **Joal-Fadiout** (p184) or, if you're more at home in a holiday-resort zone, check out **Saly** (p181). From Mbour, trace the coastal road to **Palmarin** (p185), the stunning entry port to the Siné-Saloum Delta region, then head for **Toubakouta** (p190), one of the prettiest spots in the Delta.

Alternatively, head back to Dakar and take the plane or boat to Ziguinchor, for a few days in **Casamance** (p228), Senegal's most beautiful region.

Travel north from **Dakar** to **Saint-Louis'** nearby national parks for bird-watching then south past the dunes of **Lompoul** and along the **Petite Côte**. Culminate in the **Siné-Saloum Delta**. Starting and ending in **Dakar**, this tour is around 1050km.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE CASAMANCE–GAMBIA TOUR

Two to Three Weeks

This is a perfect holiday – a tour around Senegal’s beautiful Casamance, including the beaches of Cap Skiring, the surrounding mangroves and pretty villages, some major sights of Gambia – even a tour around Bassari country in Senegal. Starting in Cap Skiring and finishing in Dakar, it’s 1700km.

It’s perfectly possible to visit the Casamance for a chilled weekend at the beach only, but the region has so much to offer that it’s best explored on a longer trip. Fly from Dakar to **Cap Skiring** (p242), the coastal area of the Casamance. Day-trip to **Diembéring** (p245), then take a pirogue to **Île de Karabane** (p240), stay at the calm island for a day, then visit **Elinkine** (p240) by wooden boat, before taking the road towards **Oussouye** (p239). On the road, you’ll pass the impressive *cases à étage* (mudbrick houses) in **M’Lomp** (p240), and once in Oussouye, you can inhabit one, in the town’s stunning Campement Villageois. Next, head eastwards to **Ziguinchor** (p232), the relaxed capital of the Casamance. Having spent a couple of days there, take the northbound road towards the chilled-out villages of **Kafountine** (p247) and **Abéné** (p250). Then it’s off to Gambia, perhaps via the tiny crossing in **Darsilami** (p124). From here, join the pothole-troubled road eastwards, stopping at beautiful **Bintang Bolong** (p129), then braving the tired tarmac towards **Georgetown** (p133), a great place for river excursions and forest walks. **Basse** (p138), and the Senegalese border is only a few kilometres away. Head towards Vélingara, from where you get frequent transport towards **Tambacounda** (p221). If you’ve got time, add a trip to **Parc National de Niokolo-Koba** (p223) and the **Bassari country** (p225), as described in the Senegal River Tour, before heading to **Dakar** (p145) for a half-forgotten feel of city life.



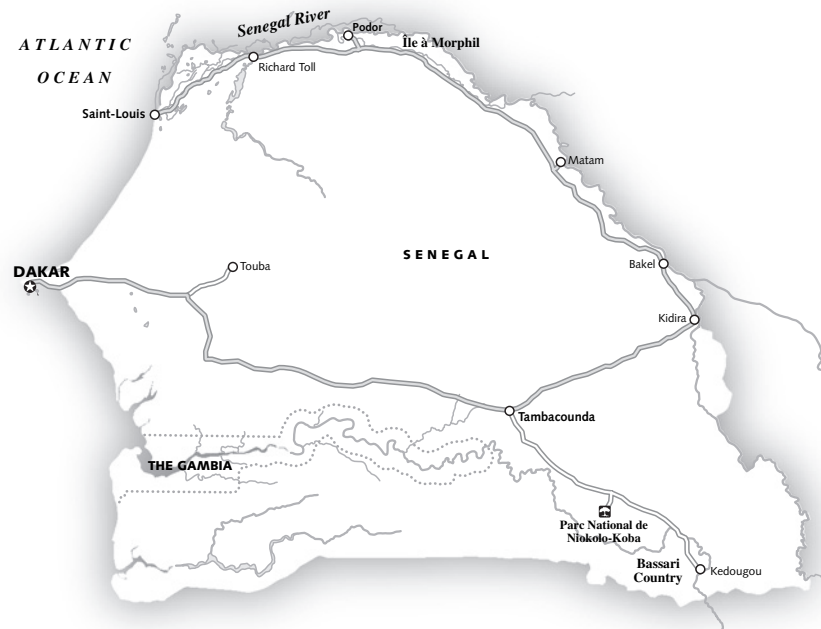
THE SENEGAL RIVER ROUTE

Two to Three Weeks

This historical itinerary follows the Senegal River, the country’s national border with Mauritania, tracing the route of French colonial incursion. Start in **Saint-Louis** (p203), the ancient capital of French West Africa, where you can learn about the town’s unique history and culture on guided city tours and through independent exploration. From here you can either take the classic *Bou El Mogdad* upriver to Podor, or mirror the ship’s journey on a trip by road. The town of **Richard Toll** (p216), home to the derelict Folie de Baron Roger, lies on the way. In **Podor** (p217) you visit the ancient fort and head on an off-road journey around the **Île à Morphil** (p218), which delights with classic Omarian mosques, stunning savannah countryside and Tukulor villages rooted in ancient times. Further along you’ll reach **Matam** (p217), with its crumbling colonial architecture and **Bakel** (p218), which has another impressive fort and the René Caillié Pavilion. A short hop south, and you reach **Kidira** (p219) at the Malian border. If you’re not crossing into Mali, head west for the junction town of **Tambacounda** (p221). If you have enough time, take a trip to the **Parc National de Niokolo-Koba** (p223), then keep going south towards **Kedougou** (p225) and **Bassari country** (p225). Here you can go for long hikes in the mountains, take in the strong traditional culture of the Bassari and Bédik people and see plateaux, waterfalls and forests.

From here, it’s a long way back to Dakar. Put in another day’s rest at Tambacounda, and, if you’ve got the time, a side-stop at the holy town of **Touba** (p196) before re-entering the capital.

This takes you along the rarely travelled road following the Senegal River, past the ancient forts of Podor, Matam and Bakel. You’ll travel to the Parc National de Niokolo-Koba, Senegal’s largest national park, and hike through the hills of Bassari country. Starting in Saint-Louis and finishing in Dakar, this tour is about 1800km.



TAILORED TRIPS

AS THE CROW FLIES

Senegal and Gambia are among the best destinations for bird-watching in West Africa.

In Gambia the chirping of hundreds of species greets you before you've even left your hotel, in the backyards of the Senegambia Hotel in **Kololi** (p108) or the Ecolodge in **Gunjur** (p119). The **Abuko Nature Reserve** (p122) is a more 'official' bird-watching site, complete with guides and hides.

The nearby **Tanji River Bird Reserve** (p117) is a great place to spot a variety of wading and forest birds. Inland, **Marakissa** (p124) is worth a visit, as are **Baobolong Wetland Reserve** (p131) and **Kiang West National Park** (p131). **Georgetown** (p133) tempts with numerous bird-watching excursions, complete with trained guides based at various camps in town.

In Senegal, the *bolong* (creeks) of **Siné-Saloum** (p185) and **Casamance** (p228) are bird-watchers' dream destinations, with hundreds of sea birds and waders nesting on river islets and

circling above thick mangrove forests. The bird-watcher's highlights in Senegal are the **Parc National des Oiseaux du Djoudj** (p214), the world's third-largest bird sanctuary, and the stunning peninsula of **Parc National de la Langue de Barbarie** (p214).



ARCHITECTURAL GEMS

You can almost trace the history of colonisation by following the architectural 'monuments' of Gambia and Senegal. If it's local culture you're after, you will have a fantastic time checking out the different building styles of the countries' various regions.

For colonial impact, **Île de Gorée** (p167) and **Saint-Louis** (p203) with their partly preserved French buildings, complete with wrought-iron balconies and leafy patios, are a must-see. **Rufisque** (p175) and **Banjul** (p90) have similar colonial houses, though in a less well-kept state.

Along the Senegal River, the Folie de Baron Roger in **Richard Toll** (p216) is a monument to the grand aspirations of colonialism, as are the Faidherbian forts of **Podor** (p217) and **Bakel** (p218). On **Île à Morphil** (p218), the Sudanese architecture of Omarian mosques reminds of local resistance to colonisation.

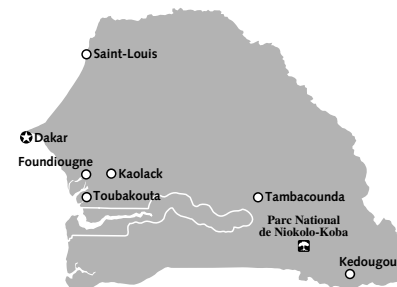
In Gambia, the British **Fort James** is partly preserved (p127), and **Georgetown** (p133) has a couple of crumbling colonial warehouses. In

the Casamance, you can sleep in the old governor's house and mission on **Île de Karabane** (p240), and admire the *cases à étage* in **M'Lomp** (p240) and the *cases à impluvium* (round mud houses) in **Enampor** (p238) and **Affiniam** (p246).



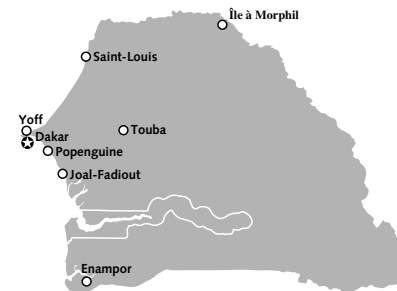
THE JOURNEY IS THE DESTINATION

People often complain about how difficult it is to get around Gambia and Senegal, particularly if you rely on public transport. Well, they're right. But everything depends on attitude, and with the right sense of adventure (and humour) mastering the local transport system will be a trip indeed. Start in **Dakar** (p145) on a *car rapide* (a form of bush taxi, often decrepit) and tour around the inner city – stop whenever you want by tapping a coin on the roof. Take a *sept-place* taxi to **Saint-Louis** (p203), and explore the town by horse-drawn cart. Or, if you really want it rough, travel by *car mouride*, the large long-distance bus of the Mourides, to **Kaolack** (p197). Explore the city on the back of a *mobylette* (pedal-power moped) and watch pedestrians passing you by as you circle the local market. Then catch a Ndiaga Ndiaye (32-seater Mercedes minibus) to **Tambacounda** (p221), take a luxurious 4WD side-trip to **Parc National de Niokolo-Koba** (p223), and head for **Kedougou** (p225). Exploring the stunning villages of the Bassari region by public transport means waiting for the local market days, having an early start and enduring a bumpy ride. Just what you want! Alternatively, take a bush taxi from Kaolack to **Toubakouta** (p190), from where a combination of pirogue trips and donkey-cart rides gets you to the Siné-Saloum Delta. Head up the lonely dirt road (pick-up truck, anyone?) to **Foundiougne** (p189), from where it's a ferry ride and *sept-place* bush-taxi journey back to Dakar.



A MULTIFAITH PILGRIMAGE

Senegal is a country renowned for its religious tolerance, where Christians, Muslims and those following traditional beliefs live together in harmony. Take a trip around the major sacred sites of all these faiths. In **Dakar** (p152), the floodlit Grande Mosquée is a sight to behold, as is the Mosquée de la Divinité, perched on the steep coast of Les Mamelles. The Layen Mausoleum in **Yoff** (p172) is also worth a visit. Along the Petite Côte, the Pentecostal pilgrimage site of **Popenguine** (p180) has a large, modern cathedral while in **Joal-Fadiout** (p184) images of the Virgin Mary sit close to the mosque, and a Christian and Muslim cemetery is reached via a long wooden bridge leading to a seashell island. In the holy city of **Touba** (p196) an annual pilgrimage of the Mouride Brotherhood attracts millions to the town's gigantic mosque – one of the most impressive places of prayer in the whole of West Africa. The Omarian mosques along the **Île à Morphil** (p218) are far more humble in their Sudanese mud architecture. The cathedral in **Saint-Louis** (p206) is one of the oldest in West Africa, while the town's mosque features a churchlike clock tower. Traditional faith doesn't require the construction of huge prayer sites, but you will observe ritual objects in many public places, such as the *campement* (hotel) in **Enampor** (p238).



Snapshot The Gambia

Take a shared taxi along the coastal road from Bakau to Kartong. Keep your eyes on the beachfront and your ears open for the keen conversations of your fellow passengers. Outside you'll notice a string of new multistar palaces, restaurants and houses extending Gambia's coastal resort zone further south. In the car, a verbal commentary on their construction will run like a subtitle to the holiday movie you are watching.

Tourism is big business in The Gambia, and everyone, from the biggest hotel owner to the souvenir-selling hustler, wants their share in this, the country's largest industry. The debate about the woes and wonders of tourism is eagerly pursued. It brings more hard currency into the country – great. It threatens to transform tranquil fishing villages into busy holiday parks – not so great. It gives youngsters a chance to find work, yet might also turn them into beach-roaming 'bumsters'.

Upcountry, away from the beehive activity of the coast, conversations are more likely to revolve around feelings of 'benign neglect' rather than excitement about the latest hotel opening. According to the latest government plans, tourism is going to remain a beach-bound business that only makes a few sideward glances upriver towards sleepy Jangjangbureh and Basse.

And yet it's inland, in the slightly more remote regions, that Gambia's most beautiful national parks lie, as well as a steadily growing number of community-managed forest parks. These forest parks are areas of protected woodland that are looked after by a small number of dedicated people, keen to promote their impressive range of wildlife and protect those fragile areas from deforestation – one of the major environmental problems Gambia faces.

Try to get any in-depth information on these issues, or on the troubles of tourist enterprises – even on things like music festivals and other cultural

FAST FACTS

Population:	1.6 million
Population under 15:	45%
Size:	11,300 sq km
Waterways:	1300 sq km
GDP per capita:	US\$1900
Inflation rate:	8.8%
Economic ranking:	188 out of 231 countries

events – and you might find that such curiosity doesn't necessarily lead to answers, but more often to feelings of suspicion from those you speak to.

Gambia is a country that has lived with restrictions to civil liberties for a long time, and it's a country where conversations are conducted with care – you just never know who might be listening. And if talks are somewhat hushed, so is the media.

Gambia's press is something of a journalistic equivalent of the 'Smiling Coast' – it cushions critical frowns carefully between column inches of confident celebration. For 'real news', for a deeper sense of national concerns, you usually have to read between the lines, to learn to listen to what isn't said out loud.

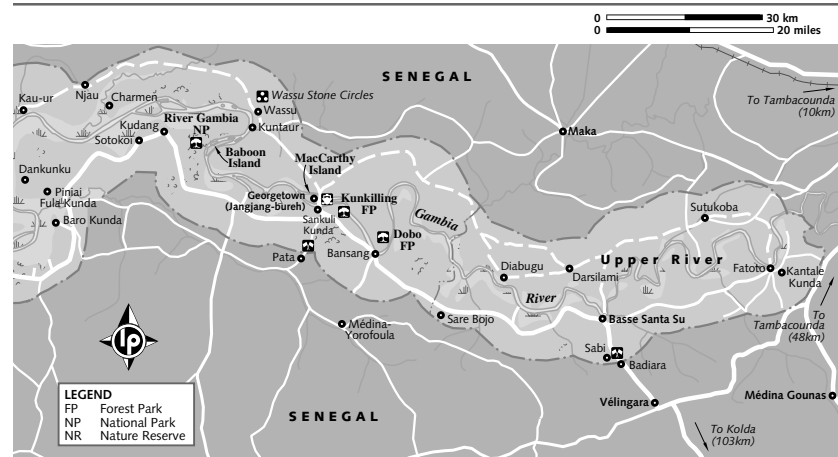
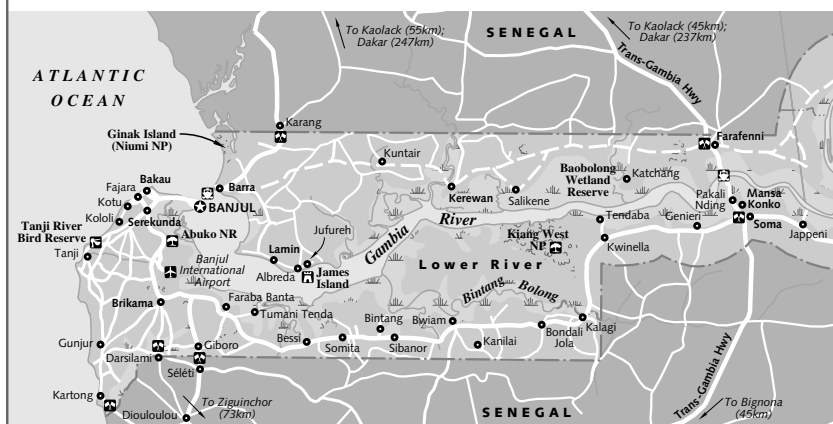
Gambia has never exactly been a haven for freedom of speech or press, but in recent years things have taken a turn for the worse.

They reached a tragic climax when in December 2004, the country's most prominent journalist, Deyda Hydara, was shot by unnamed assassins while driving home in his car. It later emerged that the distinguished reporter had been under surveillance by secret-service agents at the time of the shooting, and while this should have prompted the government to give an explanation – or at least launch an investigation – the answer from the head of state was increased pressure on, and barely veiled threats to, any potential voices of dissent.

When we visited Gambia in 2006, the country was preparing for elections. Few people had any doubt that current president Yahya Jammeh will once again emerge victorious, with most believing the elections to be little more than a token sign of democracy in an authoritarian state.

The government's already-firm grip on the country is getting even tighter, and it remains to be seen which direction Africa's tiniest nation will take.

THE GAMBIA



Snapshot Senegal

Dakar's battered *cars rapides* (a form of bush taxi, often decrepit), animated bars and packed restaurants buzz with eager conversation on the latest political developments. The Senegalese love nothing better than a political debate, weighing up the pros and cons of governmental policies and gauging the future direction of their country. And they certainly don't hold back with any criticisms of the current regime. When current president Abdoulaye Wade won what were perhaps the calmest and least disputed democratic elections in any African country and moved his party, the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS; Senegalese Democratic Party), into the strongest political position, the country was dizzy with hope for a new era. Wade had promised *sopi* (change; p34), an end to corruption, transparency in politics and economic progress.

In 2006, the country is still waiting for many of his ambitious goals to materialise, and patience is beginning to wear thin. An estimated 48% of the population is still without work, trying to make a living in the vast sprawl that is the informal employment sector – the hazy money channels of the *baol baol* (small traders).

To make matters worse, large parts of the population felt their high hopes in democratic change betrayed when Idrissa Seck (p34), former prime minister and potential rival of the 80-year-old Wade, was put behind bars in July 2005, accused of embezzling substantial public funds while working as mayor of Thiès – though he was released some seven months later and the charges dropped in February 2006, and both he and the president went to great lengths to portray an image of reconciliation, probably to unite their now deeply divided party in the light of looming 2007 presidential elections of president and parliament.

There weren't any straightforward predictions of the outcome – certainly the sign of a functioning democracy – but one thing was certain: the most likely winner will be the one who succeeds in uniting the country's real forces of influence behind him, the powerful marabouts of Senegal's Sufi brotherhoods. Idrissa Seck's prominent participation in the 2006 Grand Magal, a religious pilgrimage attracting over two million believers, indicates the importance of rallying the spiritual leaders, particularly the caliph of the Mouride *confrérie* (brotherhood) in support. In 2005 the caliph of the Mouridiya determined a date for the Muslim Ramadan fast that differed from the official announcement made in Mecca by a day, and large parts of Muslim Senegal's population chose to ignore the Mecca declaration, following their marabouts instead – an indication of the enormous influence these religious leaders enjoy.

The mighty marabouts have also financed several construction and transport projects, adding to the sense of relentless motion that characterises Senegal in the first decade of the 21st century.

President Abdoulaye Wade has coined the phrase of the land, '*en chantier*' (building site), and the feverish construction won't escape any visitor, not least because of the traffic congestion all this intense activity creates, particularly in Dakar. A new airport is being planned, and there's even talk of moving the entire capital in order to allow the expansion it can't enjoy within the confines of the narrow Cap Vert peninsula.

And thus the first impression that Dakar is likely to present you with is that of a booming capital, a place where opportunities are up for grabs.

FAST FACTS

Population: 11.1 million

Number of Senegalese living abroad: 3 million

Population of greater Dakar: 3 million

Population under 15: 42%

Size: 196,190 sq km

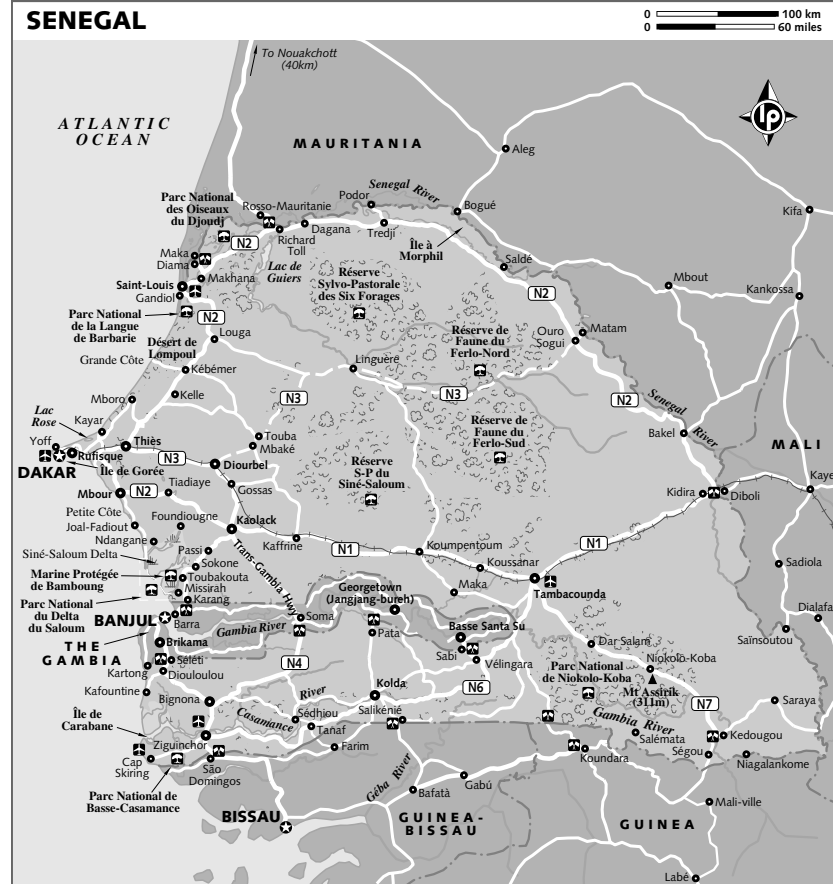
GDP per capita: US\$1800

Literacy rate: 35%

Life expectancy: 51 years

Inflation rate: 1.7%

Economic ranking: 188th out of 231 countries



Senegal's creative scenes aren't missing any chances. In Dakar hardly a week goes by without a music festival, a fashion show by another upcoming designer or a major exhibition.

And even in the rural areas, a major celebration seems never far away. The lively carnival celebrations of Ziguinchor and Kafountine are part of a thriving regional arts scene – but they're more than that. They also point to a new time of hope for lasting peace in the Casamance – a peace that took its cautious first steps in 2004, and in 2006 was still showing promising signs of lasting.

It is this sense that is gradually drawing many of the three million Senegalese emigrants back into the country.

The Author



KATHARINA KANE

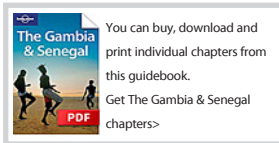
When Katharina heard the haunting sound of a Fula flute during a London concert, her fate was sealed. She headed straight to Guinea in West Africa, where she ended up studying the instrument for a year before writing a PhD on its origins. She then decamped to Senegal, a country that she'd fallen in love with during one of her many travels to West Africa in her role as a music journalist. Katharina has worked on other Lonely Planet titles, writes for various world-music magazines including *fRoots* and *Songlines*, and produces world-music features for radio stations including the BBC and WDR. She currently divides her time between Dakar, Cologne and London.

My Favourite Trip

Travelling for me has always been about music – which explains why I've settled in Senegal, one of West Africa's most buzzing music scenes. Dakar, with its dazzling live-music scene (p161), is hard to leave if you love music. Only in May does the northern town of Saint-Louis rival Dakar's nightlife with its spectacular jazz festival (p206). Podor (p217) in the north is the place to hear Fula music, perhaps during Baaba Maal's Festival du Fleuve. For the really rootsy stuff, Salémata (p226), with its vibrant Bassari culture, and Kartong (p119), site of a bustling festival, are my destinations of choice, while Ziguinchor in Casamance is best visited during its carnival (p235), and Abéné (p250) during its reggae-fuelled New Year's festival. And for a gentle comedown, Brikama is the place to indulge in some masterful kora playing (p124).



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