

# The Gambia Experience – A very prophetic name for a tour company.

27<sup>th</sup> March – 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2018.

I had heard a lot of good things about The Gambia and, having some time off in March I decided to give it a try. I first tried Naturetrek but they seemed to want too much money for the remaining vacancy. I don't recall the details but it put me off but as it happened I could get the same accommodation for the following week by booking direct with "The Gambia Experience". So made a phone call and got the invoice and paid it.

Unfortunately the plane left from Gatwick but EZyJet fly to LGW from home so that was not an issue but the times were such that I needed an overnight outbound and on the way back. I tried some private room about 5 miles from the airport. It made such an impression on me that I cannot even remember the name. I also worked out that for the return night the taxi cost was going to negate any saving by not sleeping in more expensive place on the airport so I booked Premier Inn instead.

Due to the enforced layover I arranged with Chris to do a bit of local Surrey birding and by and large that worked out fine and after a day down near Pulborough he dropped me off at my digs.

And so "The Gambia Experience" began next morning when, after a struggle finding the incorrectly posted Zone I checked in to the airline and then had breakfast in their private lounge. LGW was its usual awful self with uncontrolled kids and uncaring teachers. The flight took off on time at 7.55 and was comfortable enough once I had evicted a dozy woman from my seat. Shame folks get that old and are still innumerate. A – F is not that hard surely? We landed at Banjul airport at 13.25 and having been re-united with my modest luggage I found the appropriate minibus to take me to my digs. This was not without some pain as of course such things need to be organised and that ability appeared to be lacking. So off we went for the 20km or so drive to Mandina Lodges which was to be my home for the next 7 nights. Situated out in a tidal mangrove swamp and used by Chris Packham, and Naturetrek this was sure to be good. Not for me it wasn't!!

But of course this was a package tour and before I could gain the sanctuary of my floating bed I had to endure the usual introductory talk and sales pitch of the Lodge Manageress detailing things and items in which I had no interest whatsoever. I had pre-booked a bird guide and had my own itinerary and had no intention of going on cultural tours or shopping for tourist tat. BUT I sat their pining for a cold beer and my bed having been up since Sparrowfart. Eventually I got my release, but not the promised Mango juice, and headed to my floating chalet to change into cooler clothes and have a shave and a snooze before dinner.

My Floating lodge was accessed via board walks over the tidal flats with a hinged final ramp to allow for the tides. Quite a nice place and at least there should be little intrusive noise other than birds and



the slop of the water. The inside was well furnished and quite large enough for a couple so certainly fine for me. Washroom was 'out back' much as in Safari tents, there was a safe and ample storage for clothes etc.,



Outside was a nice seating area that was reasonably safe and secure if one did not lean too hard on the fencing. Bird sounds were encouraging too. I won't give a day by day diary of routine events as it was much the same each day. I had an allocated Bird Guide "AJ" who doubled as canoeist and fixit person.

One thing that did come across as 'wrong' was the apparent unwillingness of TBW the manageress to let us go where we pleased. She seemed to think we should stay in camp, take canoe trips or walk

but not to visit any outlying nature reserves such as Rice fields and Abuko Forest. I told her I was paying for a dedicated guide and if transport was required I would also pay for that. That worked as I did get to the 'Rice fields' and to Abuko Forest but the lady was not happy.

Neither was I when on one morning canoe trip AJ was phoned to hurry up back "as two late risers had asked for a canoe ride" and there was nobody around to take them. So much for my 'dedicated' bird guide. I had more words with TBW on my return and also told her that charging for bottled water was unacceptable in a quality lodge such as this was meant to be. I reckon she was pocketing it.

Fortunately the trip was not a disaster despite all her best efforts. If you can't shift em, go round em! AJ and I got on fine, he was a good and willing guide but I was conscious that he had to get on with this camp after I had gone.

Birding from my 'Houseboat' and the lodge grounds was productive with Giant Kingfisher on the boat and Blue-breasted Kingfisher in the bushes just behind. The mangroves at low tide often had a resident Western Reef Egret either fishing or just roosting and preening.



Away from the water there were lot of good birds to be seen in the grounds such as Snowy-crowned Robin Chat and Yellow-crowned Gonalek. Of



course we did take several canoe trips up and down the river depending on the tide and often landed at remote villages where we walked around looking for whatever came into view. AJ had certain birds in mind for each location and would prompt me to keep a sharp lookout for his targets.



However even he got several surprises with what turned up and it was very interesting to me to see such a variation in eco systems all hidden within what was in effect a large riverine environment. This Yellow-billed Shrike was most unexpected being a bird of the open savannah and not the semi cultivated 'fields' around the Gambia river's tidal estuary. This report is getting a little too bird orientated but honestly I was so restricted by the Lodge's attitude there was little else of interest for me to do. My brief forays into the hinterland did not provide





much in the way of opportunity to meet or interact with local people who whilst friendly did tend to shy away from us. I remember landing at one place where crayfish were being prepared and also some variety of fruit was being dried but AJ ignored folks and they ignored him.

Some bush birds seen were the strange Bearded Barbet and a Lizard Buzzard plus one of my target birds having missed it in Ghana, the beautiful Blue-bellied Roller, but I am not going to just keep adding birds to make the report longer.



So I will just put up a few more and leave it at that.



These are Green Turaco, Purple Turaco and extreme right White-faced Scops Owl.

I did count in excess of 160 species including 18 lifers so that part of the trip was a success but as a package trip "The Gambia Experience" left a lot to be desired. All down to poor local management who was more interested in her bloody cats than guests and their problems.

I almost want another trip just to see if it is any different elsewhere.