

Banjul, The Gambia

Sunday 28 April, 2013

As the MS Expedition glided over the glassy surface of the Atlantic Ocean, bearing down on the main Gambian port of Banjul, the general atmosphere seemed cleaner, the smell was certainly less noticeable, but most importantly the stifling tropical temperature and humidity was absent.

And all of this was confirmed when we arrived. Under a wonderfully cool morning sun we were greeted by a troupe of Gambian drummers and dancers, with the addition this time of a local post card seller and money changers who actually provided a service that might have been useful everywhere we had landed.

The character of the music and dance was quite different here. Featured were pipes and djembe drums and an interesting selection of shakers that offered the first flavor of the western Sahel music tradition which has become extremely popular in world music and festival circles. Notwithstanding the fact that this was a Sunday, Banjul seemed remarkably free of human congestion, with the narrow dusty streets quite relaxed under the gradually warming sun. Absent too was the clogging trash the open sewers and powerful smell that had been a feature of Freetown. Banjul seemed slower, cleaner, and if a little dusty and dry, this hardly detracted from what seemed on the surface to be a very pleasant, safe and open city.

Our first stop was the Abuko Nature Reserve a few miles west of the city of Serekunda. Here we were all treated to a magnificent birding experience, guided and interpreted by Conrad and Steve. Abuko is a small reserve, totaling just over 105 acres, but it is without doubt the most important and accessible. It boasts over 500 bird species and a small number of antelope and primate species, with occasional sighting of crocodile, porcupine, bush baby among others.

A slight mishap in communication and navigation saw Conrad's group sidetracked, perhaps thanks to his customary bursts of enthusiasm, backed up as is usual with a great deal of relevant and finely articulated fact. Thank you Conrad. The lost group were found in due course, however, and made their way to the entrance where they were collected after 20 minutes or so for transport to the *Makasutu Cultural Forest*.

Makasuti is a sacred forest in the local Mandinka mythology, located not too far from the town of Brikama, and offering music and dance, a restaurant and bar, and of course a craft market, all nestled in the shade of a baobab grove reflecting very much the indigenous local ecology. We were treated to a selection of western Sahel tunes and rhythms before embarking on the busses for the return journey, and a visit to a fabric market in Serekunda, featuring batiks and tie-dye fabrics and clothing.

En route back to the ship we stopped in first at the local botanical gardens and medicinal gardens, with the main point of interest being birding, with a brief stop also at the Banjul central market for a browse and a few last minute purchases.

The general impressions of Gambia were positive. It appeared to enjoy a slower pace than other West African capitals visited, but with no less friendliness and hospitality on the part of the locals. A few of us enjoyed an evening on the town, which, reports indicate, was enjoyed by all.

Submitted by Peter Baxter, Lecturer

The Gambia

Monday 29 April, 2013



We all got up early to get up on deck to be part of the cruise in the M/S Expedition up The River Gambia! At breakfast there were jumping fish everywhere around the boat and a massive flock of lesser flamingoes flew along the impressive mangroves. The mangroves were the tallest any of us had ever seen and the birdlife was abundant. We saw terns, thick-knees, lapwings, darters, pelicans and parrots. Our mission was to explore these never-ending mangroves in search

of little inlets that would allow us access to the interior of the mangroves. We had hours of fun in the sun exploring on eleven zodiacs and will never forget the experience. Most of the zodiacs landed on the massive floodplains adjacent to the mangroves to have a closer look at the mud-skipper and millions upon millions of small crabs spread over huge muddy flats. A sight to behold...



The expedition returned to the ship for a lunch and cruise back down the river to James Island. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is situated about 30km from the mouth of the Gambia River and was renamed KuntaKunteh Island in 2011 in memory of a famous slave brought to the island. The remains of the fort and the surrounding baobabs were fascinating and the guides were very helpful in explaining the interesting history of the island. The massive guns left on the island were actually used to help end the slave trade in West Africa after the passing of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. The site was eventually abandoned in 1870 after massive erosion reduced the size of the island fivefold. An amazing last day on expedition was had by all...

Submitted by Steve Boyes, Naturalist
Photos: by S. Boyes