

# Banjul



It's hard to imagine a more unlikely, more consistently ignored capital city than the sleepy seaport of Banjul. People aren't flocking here, no new buildings are rising to the skies and the old ones are gradually crumbling to dust.

Just 30 minutes from the thriving tourist zones of the Atlantic coast, Banjul sits on its island like a sulking little sister who's stopped vying for attention. But despite the shadow of abandon that haunts its sand-blown streets, Banjul is truly worth a visit. Lively Albert Market, at the heart of the city, is one of Gambia's best places to snare a souvenir bargain and soak up the atmosphere of eager buying, selling and bartering that makes the narrow alleyways and ramshackle stalls hum with excitement. Down the road from the market, Banjul's hectic harbour is another vibrant slice of inner-city Africa. This is where Gambia's main ferry – a rusty old metal tub – chugs back and forth between the north and south banks of the river, heaving huge trucks, traders bearing wares, hustlers and travellers across the mouth of the Gambia River. The constant comings and goings and the bustle that accompanies the urban ritual are worth taking in, especially from one of the makeshift roadside cafés.

Banjul's 'old town', a mile of fading colonial structures, is imbued with a sense of history that the plush seaside resorts are lacking, and the National Museum, a charming institution with dusty exhibits, reinforces this atmosphere of a precious, though slightly neglected, past.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up history and gritty reality wandering through the backstreets of Banjul's **old town** (p94)
- Find everything from spices to souvenirs in the colourful, chaotic **Albert Market** (p96)
- Check out what's changed in the city with a look at the dusty photos in the **National Museum** (p94)
- Enjoy the views across the capital, the ocean and the Gambia River from the massive construction that is **Arch 22** (p94)



■ POPULATION: 50,000

## HISTORY

Founded in 1816 by Captain Alexander Grant, Banjul was initially named Bathurst, after Henry Bathurst, the secretary of the British Colonial Office. Like many other colonial settlements, including Saint-Louis in Senegal, the town was strategically placed on an island (Banjul Island). However, while most of these seaports were built to facilitate the slave trade, Banjul was founded as an operational base from which to prevent the traffic of humans, after the British Abolition Act of 1807 prohibited the trading of slaves (at least on paper).

The town's regular street pattern was also laid down during this time and grew over the years from the area of today's State House and the old town, to the area it covers today. This is where you can still find examples of 19th-century architecture, the so-called Krio- or Aku-style houses, reminiscent of the adaptations of early Victorian architecture found in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

When Gambia achieved independence in 1965, Bathurst was granted city status, and became the capital of the young nation. It wasn't renamed Banjul (the Mandinka word for 'bamboo' and the island's original name) until 1973.

With the growth of Gambia's coastal towns into major tourist areas, Banjul experienced a strong decline, reflected in a shrinking population and the move of major businesses towards the coast. Today it's mainly an administrative centre, while a capital-worthy lifestyle is found in the resort zones.

## ORIENTATION

Located on an island, Banjul is one of those cities that doesn't really have space to expand. Not that the town is attempting to grow – in fact, the capital continues to lose many of its offices, restaurants and shops to the flourishing coastal area. And so the city remains small enough to walk around without too much trouble. The centre is July 22 Sq, an unkempt public park from which several main streets run south, including Russell St, which leads past the bustling Albert Market into Liberation St. West of the October 17 Roundabout is the old part of Banjul – a maze of narrow streets and ramshackle houses rarely visited by tourists.

July 22 Dr runs northwest from July 22 Sq, becoming the main road out of Banjul. On the edge of the city it goes under the vast structure of Arch 22 and turns into a dual carriageway that after about 3km west crosses Oyster Creek on Denton Bridge to reach the mainland proper. Remember: only the president is allowed to drive under Arch 22 – everyone else must go around it.

Another 2km further west, the road splits: the right fork goes to Bakau, Fajara and the other Atlantic coast resorts; straight on it leads to Serekunda, the airport, and everywhere else along the southern bank of the Gambia River.

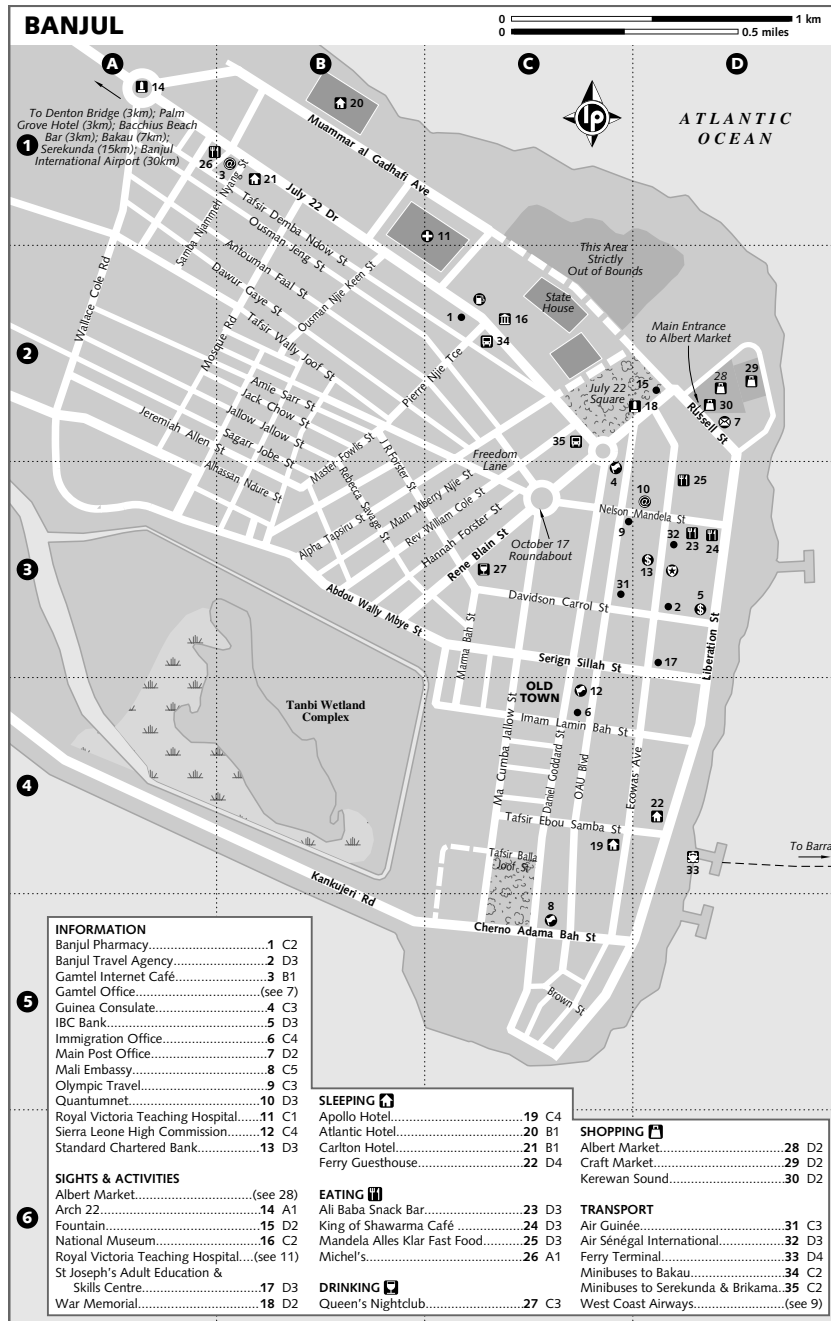
## Maps

We didn't come across any maps whatsoever while there, and no-one seemed to know of any that were available.

## STREET NAME CHANGES

The town's streets, first named after the English heroes of the Battle of Waterloo, were given new designations in the late 1990s. They now carry the names of Gambia's heroes of independence. However, most people (including taxi drivers) are still more familiar with the old names, so you'll usually get a more reliable answer if you ask for directions using the old street names. We've included a list of some of the streets and their old names, but if you're still stuck, look for the addresses painted on the front of shops and businesses.

Old name	New name
Bund Rd	Kankujeri Rd
Clarkson St	Rene Blain St
Cotton St	Cherno Adamah Bah St
Dobson St	Ma Cumba Jallow St
Grant St	Rev William Cole St
Hagan St	Daniel Goddard St
Hill St	Imam Lamin Bah St
Hope St	Jallow Jallow St
Independence Dr	July 22 Dr
MacCarthy Sq	July 22 Sq
Marina Pde	Muammar al Gadhafi Ave
Orange St	Tafsir Ebou Samba St
Picton St	Davidson Carrol St
Wellington St	Liberation St



**INFORMATION**  
**Internet Access**

**Gamtel Internet Café** (July 22 Dr; per hr D30; ☎ 8am-midnight)  
**Quantumnet** (Nelson Mandela St; per hr D30; ☎ 9am-10pm)

**Medical Services**

**Banjul Pharmacy** (☎ 4227470; ☎ 9am-8.30pm)  
Across the road from the hospital.

**Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital** (☎ 4228223; July 22 Dr) Though renovated in 1993, its quality still lags behind that of the private establishment on the Atlantic coast, which is better for treating minor illnesses and injuries and doing malaria tests (see p99). The RVTH has an Accidents & Emergencies (A&E) department.

**Money**

Banks in Banjul city are open from 8am to 1.30pm Monday to Thursday, and from 8am to 11am Friday. These banks change travellers cheques and have ATMs that accept Visa cards:

**IBC Bank** (☎ 4428145; Liberation St)  
**Standard Chartered Bank** (☎ 4222081; Ecowas Ave)

**Post**

**Main post office** (Russell St; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat)  
Near Albert Market. You can buy postcards, paper or envelopes from the hawkers outside.

**Telephone**

**Gamtel Office** (Russell St; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) Next door to the post office.

**Travel Agencies**

Most of the main travel agencies have decamped to Fajara, Kotu or Kololi (see p102). Among the remaining ones, these seem to be the most efficient:

**Banjul Travel Agency** (☎ 4228813; bta@qanet.gm; Ecowas Ave)  
**Olympic Travel** (☎ 4223370; Nelson Mandela St)

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Violent crime is rare in Banjul, but there are plenty of pickpockets. Their favourite hunting ground is the Barra ferry, but you should also be vigilant around the ferry terminal and Albert Market.

Banjul turns its lights off after 8pm, and most streets in the centre drown in darkness, making the place feel quite unsafe. However, it's not armed bandits that represent nocturnal danger, but the

**SUSPICIOUS SOCIETY**

Be aware that just because you're excited about being in Gambia, the authorities may not be. Our experience was that there was a climate of distrust in the country – perhaps linked to the imminent electoral campaign, or perhaps a more permanent feature of Gambian society. Bear the power of the state in mind: too many questions, in particular about politically sensitive topics, may arouse suspicion, and obviously using maps may not only alert tricksters to your ignorance about the place, but present an excuse to a government official to hassle you with the powerful backing of the state.

maze of open sewers that crisscross the streets.

Don't enter the area behind the State House (marked 'Strictly Out of Bounds' on the map), or you risk difficulties with the military and police.

This researcher was asked to leave town by secret-service agents, who didn't like the sight of a map-wielding, question-asking visitor. If you experience similar hassles from the top, remain calm and polite, without giving in to any dubious requests too readily.

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Banjul feels more like a very large village than a national capital, and this sleepy atmosphere has a quaint kind of charm. If you've come to The Gambia to experience Africa, rather than a slice of Europe laid down on a tropical beach, you might enjoy a day here more than at the nearby Atlantic coast resorts. The city's attraction lies not in grand sights but in intimate details – best taken in on a casual stroll around town.

**Ferry Terminal**

The terminal for the ferry to Barra, with its endless queues of lorries, the industrious hum of cargo being loaded and discharged, passengers boarding and disembarking and the continuous chatter of patiently waiting customers, is worth experiencing. Directly opposite, the warehouses, clothes stalls and grocery wholesalers that line Liberation St resound with animated bartering that mingles with the clamour.

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