

Banjul



It's hard to imagine a more unlikely, more consistently ignored capital city than the sleepy seaport of Banjul. Just 30 minutes from the thriving tourist zones of the Atlantic coast, the city sits on its island like a sulking little sister who's stopped vying for attention. But despite the shadow of abandonment that haunts its sand-blown streets, Banjul is a fascinating destination.

Lively Albert Market, at the heart of the city, is one of Gambia's best places to snap up 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 chugs back and forth, 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 cafes.

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.

Perhaps the most curious and enticing aspect of the capital is that its urban developments are walking distance from the wildlife-boasting wilderness of the Tanbi Wetland Complex. It's a neat countryside escape, and you don't even have to leave town to take it in.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Stir your pirogue through the thick **Tanbi Wetland Complex** (p94), Banjul's magical front yard
- Imagine family histories as you wander the streets of the **old town** (p93)
- Smell the spices and drown in colour among the rickety stalls of **Albert Market** (p93)
- Travel back in time on a visit to the **National Museum** (p92)
- Climb the giant structure of **Arch 22** (p92) to get a view over The Gambia's forgotten capital



HISTORY

Flat, swampy and plagued by malarial mosquitoes, Banjul (the Mandinka word for bamboo) was an unremarkable little island. Few people chose to live there, but for Captain Alexander Grant, mission leader for the British Crown, the spot was a dream location. In 1816 he was on the lookout for a strategic spot from which the British could enforce the observance of the Slavery Abolition Act (1807) by other European powers, as well as strengthen their advantage over the interior of the country. He arranged payment of a few iron bars to the local King of Kombo and put up a new nameplate, calling his newly acquired bit of flood zone Bathurst, after Henry Bathurst, the secretary of the British Colonial Office. Many soldiers lost their lives through tropical disease and overly strenuous work during the construction of army barracks, the building of Albert Market and the laying down of MacCarthy Sq (today's July 22 Sq) with its government buildings. The colonial outpost kept growing in strength: it soon stretched over a handful of distinctive neighbourhoods and the number of inhabitants multiplied rapidly. The population swelled particularly in the 1830s, when freed slaves from Sierra Leone were settled here. The crumbling remains of the houses they built, reminiscent of the Victorian architecture adaptations typical of Freetown, Sierra Leone, indicate where they first settled.

When Gambia achieved independence in 1965, Bathurst was granted city status and became the capital of the young nation. Eight years later it shed its colonial name, and re-invented itself once again as Banjul – the bamboo island.

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

Banjul is small, and certainly not expanding. You can explore the city in an easy walk. The centre is July 22 Sq, a small public park from which several main streets run south, including Russell St, which leads past the bustling Albert Market into Liberation St. South of the October 17 roundabout is the

old part of Banjul – a maze of narrow streets and ramshackle houses.

Independence Dr runs northwest from July 22 Sq, becoming the main road out of Banjul. It passes the imposing structure of Arch 22 (note that only the president is allowed to drive under it – everyone else goes around!), then turns into a dual carriageway that crosses Oyster Creek after 3km, reaching the mainland.

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

INFORMATION

Internet Access

Gamtel Internet Café (Independence Dr; per hr D30;

☎ 8am-midnight)

Quantumnet (Nelson Mandela St; per hr D30;

☎ 9am-10pm)

Medical Services

Banjul Pharmacy (☎ 4227470; Independence Dr;

☎ 9am-8.30pm) Across the road from the hospital.

Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital (☎ 4228223; Independence Dr) The RVTH has an accidents and emergencies department; for minor illnesses and malaria tests, the clinics on the Atlantic coast are better (see p98).

Money

Banks in Banjul are open from 8am to 4pm Monday to Thursday, and from 8am to 1.30pm Friday. They should change travellers cheques and have ATMs that accept Visa cards.

PHB Bank (☎ 4428144; 11 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 de-camped to Fajara, Kotu or Kololi (see p99). Among the remaining ones, these seem to be the most efficient: