

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2009

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF COCO OCEAN RESORT

Game on in Gambia

A wave of chic new hotels, like the Coco Ocean Resort, is luring a younger crowd to the winter sun hotspot

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

As a rule, I avoid conversation on flights. Partly because diazepam makes me slur and partly because I was told never to talk to strangers. But, as it transpires, I am something of a novelty on this flight. I'm heading for Banjul, capital of Gambia, and all around me sturdy geriatric twitchers are sipping gin and tonics and popping antimalarials.

I am the flight's youngest passenger and small talk will be unavoidable. Queuing for the toilet an elderly man cracks a joke about blood pressure and offers me a pear drop. I steer the conversation to birds. "I've been coming here for 20 years," he tells me. "The coast is the place for bird-watching." I tell him that we, too, are staying by the sea. "Well, be warned: the lads aren't used to young girls. I'd pop that ring onto the other finger." He winks. Twenty years ago, removing the ring or indeed anything of vague worth would have been better advice.

Tourism is still in its early stages. But in recent years, thanks to low prices and a dramatic improvement in its hotels, Gambia is an increasingly popular winter sun destination, it is also — my fellow passengers notwithstanding — starting to lure a younger crowd.

The newest and most flashy hotel, the Coco Ocean Resort & Spa, opened just after Christmas. Here, twitchers and honeymooners alike check in in their droves beneath a sky that teems with life. On the hotel lawn, white cattle egrets will sidle up to your lounge while, above, vultures circle like predatory biplanes. There are so many birds that when asked which kind is eyeing up your breakfast, staff simply grunt "owl."

Laid out with no evident symmetry just off Bijilo beach, the Coco has 58 rooms and suites — all cleaned and bug-sprayed twice daily, and all on a colossal scale. A few of the rooms are in the main building; most are individual villas scattered throughout grounds so extensive they would take 25 minutes to traverse on foot. I count three loungers per head and five waiters per diner. On each section of lawn — they're all surrounded by baobab trees — lurk further surplus members of staff, all resplendent in their palm-green-colored uniforms.

A tropical garden planned for the rear of the hotel will add another half hectare and another 14 gardeners. Towards the beach, the grounds are bordered on one side by a shabby cafe manned by an over-friendly body board vendor and on the other by the Bijilo Forest nature reserve, which, despite the hotel's high bougainvillea walls, sporadically expels Colobus monkeys from its canopy onto the hotel terrace. Dining here is a lazy, seven-star experience, with chipper waiters and hearty portions. Three dinners in, my body begins to protest at the extraordinary amount of seafood I am throwing at it and I debate leaving my claypot tuna under the table for the invaders, since feeding them bananas is prohibited by management.

The Coco Ocean's unique selling point is its spa, which is Gambia's first. Housed in a Moorish-style villa, with domed ceilings, stark white walls and marble floors, this place oozes opulence and can be as taxing as you want it to be. Guests can work up a sweat on a treadmill or fizzle the dead skin off their backs in the thalassotherapy pool. I ease myself into the grandeur with four treatments: a foot massage, followed by a facial and an Indonesian back massage with herbal compresses, and culminating on day five with a Moroccan hammam rub.

In the treatment rooms they switch off the piped music because the sea is so wonderfully booming, and by day two my feet, which have been cocooned in thermal socks for five months, feel reborn. On day three I fall fast asleep during the facial and awake shiny-cheeked ready for an equally faultless back massage that leaves me smelling of dead flowers. Day four brings my hammam treatment: steaming, washing, mud pasting and scrubbing. It isn't unpleasant. It merely offers a glimpse into my inevitable, incontinent future.

By day five I am incapable of brushing my own teeth and ill-prepared for what lies beyond the hotel's walls. Out here, the real Gambia is wild and stark. The sun is strong and the wind stronger. Markets swell with people, and roads are red dust and tarmac. Goats sniff at eggshells and the cattle look haggard but, according to our driver, make good steaks.

Even the coastline, rolling and white and palm-tree'd though it is, can be off limits to bathers. Every morning, just beyond the grassy knoll, the danger flag would be hoisted, red and ugly. There are two pools at the hotel, but in a fit of rebelliousness, I venture knee-deep

into the sea on day one and am ushered out by a steward.

Unlike in many Caribbean resorts the beaches of Gambia aren't private, so expect to see local men working out like it's Venice Beach. There is security, though, and how necessary this is becomes apparent when one guest has her bag snatched by a local "bumster" (the Bradt Guide has a whole chapter on these guys). I ask a steward whether this happens regularly. He shakes his head and says things are much improved since the 1980s. He tells me the bumsters are chancers, and I decide to regard the bag-snatching as just a stroke of bad luck. He advises me not to go on to the beach alone but when I do, carrying my digital camera, I am ignored.

For some people Gambia still comes with unpleasant connotations — malaria and sex tourism, not to mention the Fultons, the British couple recently sentenced to a year's hard labor for bad-mouthing the president. But these shouldn't be overstated. There was an outbreak of malaria among British tourists in December, but I am well-provided with malarone and Deet, and am not bitten once. The sex trade may still exist (Shirley Valentines were once common), but we see no clear evidence of it. And as for what happened to the Fultons, we simply avoid discussing the president with anyone.

Poverty remains widespread, of course, and some may find it hard to cope with the contrast between the smart resorts and what lies outside their walls. But for those looking for the African Caribbean, and affordable winter sun luxury, the Coco Ocean seems likely to prove a hit.

