

# Unique in West Africa

By FARID BENSOUDA

DIRECTOR, COCO OCEAN



FARID BENSOUDA is of Gambian/Moroccan descent. He studied economics and design in New York and then returned to Europe in 1975 and was based in Frankfurt, where he started his own catering company, specializing in international trade fairs. This initiated his passion for food and personal service, resulting in him opening his renowned "Avocado" Restaurant which achieved many awards and catered for an elite clientele.

I was born in The Gambia but left when I was just six years old, and was brought up between North Africa and Senegal. Later on, I moved to Germany, where I stayed for the next 27 years, establishing a name for myself in the hotel and catering industry through Avocado, one of Frankfurt's most prestigious restaurants.

But at the back of my mind there was always the idea of returning to my homeland to set up a hotel. For many years the situation in the country was not conducive to investing the large sums involved in creating what I wanted: the best "new" hotel in the country. But finally the decision was made and in 1995 I returned, investing more than US\$12 million dollars to build my first hotel, The Coconut Residence.

The Coconut Residence quickly grew to establish itself as the number one hotel in the country for both tourists and the international business community. But growth was hampered by the size of the land available and the fact that the hotel was not situated directly on the beach. Having built 25 suites, there was really no further opportunity to expand, despite growing demand.

This prompted the bold decision to acquire land on the beach just five minutes away from The Coconut Residence with sufficient space to construct the hotel of my dreams.

This beautiful piece of land was ideal, but presented some problems, notably that it was located on a small cliff. Designing the hotel was a long and complicated process that eventually led to the solution of building on three separate levels. There were also environmental issues to be taken into account, as the land had many Baobabs, which are sacred trees in The Gambia, as well as palms and other endangered plants, as much of which as possible we were determined to maintain. So, in essence the hotel was constructed around the existing trees. Some of the rooms have trees still in situ growing through them!

Progress was slow, and it was not until December 2008 that the hotel opened for business, mostly with the locally trained staff that we had taken on. My approach to management is very much hands on, and I take pride in being available at any time, seven days a week, to help out my staff and guests.



Many of Coco Ocean's swimming pools overlook the ocean

I am proud to say that it is due to the dedication of my team that Coco Beach has grown to become the premier hotel in the country, and is now internationally known.

Of course none of this would have been possible without the support of His Excellency the President, The Minister of Tourism, The Gambia Tourist Board, and many other Gambians, all of whom were also proud to be part of a project that would have been considered a dream less than 15 years before.

Through an investment of more than US\$50 million, the hotel currently has 89 suites, including two Presidential Villas that set new standards of hospitality, particularly for visiting Heads of States, other dignitaries, and anybody wishing to experience five-star service in a developing country. Our staff of more than 300 locals means that the hotel reflects the warmth and good nature of the Gambian people, while giving them all and their families a belief in the hotel and its future.

Among the unique features of the hotel is our spa, the first of its kind in West Africa. The Spa takes a holistic approach, with treatments from all around the world: the Moroccan Hammam reflects my Moroccan roots. Covering more than 1,800 square meters, and with luxurious ocean view treatment rooms, The Spa is a haven of calm and tranquility.

The Moorish architecture of the hotel, characterized by impressive domes, arches, and courtyards, creates a stunning contrast with the forest around it. We have opted for simple, but elegant furnishings to create a relaxing ambience, all achieved in a short space of time thanks to my co-owner and co-director, Walter Loehn.

Less than 20 minutes from the international airport, Coco Beach provides a secure, peaceful environment from which to explore the immediate area around the hotel, whether that means a walk on the vast expanses of unspoiled beach, swimming or fishing in the Atlantic, or getting to know The Gambia's wildlife through its ancient tropical rainforests, which includes many rare birds. Nearby, the many islands of the mouth of the Gambia river are still largely unvisited. In short, it is hard to explain how such a small country can offer so much to the visitor.

The Gambia has a high return rate of visitors, with many coming back year after year, and involving themselves in community projects

such as building schools or wells in villages. Many make friends for life: this interaction can only be good for mutual understanding between very different cultures.

First-time visitors to The Gambia unsure of what to expect of this predominantly Muslim country are always pleasantly surprised to discover that there is absolutely no religious intolerance here, and that Gambians welcome all travelers.

Gambians would doubtless be able to welcome many more visitors if the country were better known internationally. For the moment, the main problem lies in attracting airlines to provide scheduled flights. At present, the main regional hub is Dakar. But the government is pursuing an active campaign to increase awareness of the country, and there is no reason why The Gambia cannot also benefit from additional air traffic. My belief is that once the tourist and business community have discovered the country, they will want to come again, so it is up to us to facilitate the right conditions for them and to continue to promote ourselves abroad.

Despite all the hard work, I have never once regretted my decision to "come home" and I will continue to do everything I can within my power to promote the country, the tourism industry and the raising of hotel standards within the country.

I have total belief that The Gambia will be one of the great countries of Africa in the future and I am proud to be part of it.

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Coco Ocean's spa is the first of its kind in West Africa

