

Heading up the River Gambia

By LAWRENCE WILLIAMS

MANAGING DIRECTOR, MAKASUTU & MANDINA RIVER LODGE



LAWRENCE WILLIAMS gained an honours degree from Kingston University in three dimensional structural design as well as a post graduate diploma in film and television set design. He founded Makasutu in his final year at university and, as soon as he graduated, drove across the Sahara in his Land Rover to purchase the land and develop the property.

I originally came to The Gambia in 1992 as a tourist, with my uncle James. It was not my first trip to Africa, I had spent 6 months the previous year hitch hiking from Tanzania to Cape Town, and had found a piece of land on the north coast of Zanzibar where I planned to build a surf camp for back packers.

James had been living and travelling to Africa for 40 years, as well as travelling to nearly every country in the world, and when he told me he was looking for land in The Gambia to start a business I was surprised at his choice of location. In my mind 'REAL' Africa was East or South, the big 5 roaming the plains, not this tiny country in West Africa that I knew little about, other than you could get package tours here from Europe.

All that changed when I stepped off the plane at Banjul International Airport and came face to face with something that I had not anticipated. The people. Before I had even left the airport I was hooked, and knew instinctively that The Gambia was the place for me. Gambian's are some of the friendliest most welcoming people on the planet. Two weeks later after travelling the whole country, North and South banks, I arrived back at the airport owning four acres of land on the banks of the river, and a new business partner in the shape of my uncle. Destiny had called.

Four acres of land turned in to one thousand acres over the next few years, as we tried to stop the

deforestation of the Makasutu forest. Then came the tree planting to help the forest regenerate. In 1999 we opened Makasutu Culture Forest as a day visitor centre, where tourists can learn about Gambian culture and experience the environment. The Mandina River Lodge as part of Makasutu was opened at the end of 2002, and went on to win The British Guild Of Travel Writers Award in 2004 for Best Overseas Development.

People always ask me how difficult is it to run a business in Africa? The answer for The Gambia is simple. Foreign investors are welcomed with open arms, and from my experience I have only ever had support and encouragement from the village level, the local government level, the Ministry level and right up to His Excellency President Jammeh. The infrastructure that has been put in to the country over the last 16 or so years is incredible. The roads are better than the ones in Surrey where I originally come from. Street lighting, drainage, electricity, hospitals, banking and a soon to be had fibre optic Internet and telephone network are revolutionising living and running a business in Africa.

Tourism in The Gambia is still relatively untouched. The potential for adventure and upcountry tourism as a holiday and investment potential means that the country and the tourism industry as a whole still has decades of further development. Talking to my guests that stay at the lodge, I hear over and over that they had originally just wanted some winter sun, and the fact that The Gambia is only 6 hours flight from Europe, no jet lag involved and a guaranteed 8 months of fantastic weather made them choose to come here on holiday. Once they experience the smiling coast, they find themselves comparing other holidays to their time in The Gambia, and finding that other more established destinations just don't live up to the experience that they have here.

Twenty years later I am still living in the forest with all the enthusiasm and energy for this amazing country that I had since day one. James is no longer with us, he lost a very short battle with cancer last September, but I am here still working on our shared dream and keeping his memory alive. Whether it is a new holiday destination you are looking for, or a development opportunity in a growing country and economy where you will be welcomed like an old friend, look no further than The Gambia.

