

Africa's smallest country

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Situated on West Africa's Atlantic coast, The Gambia is Africa's smallest country, covering just 4,000 square miles extending eastward from the sea for some 300 miles along both banks of the River Gambia, with Senegal to either side. Near the mouth of the river, the country is around 30 miles wide but further upriver the width diminishes to 15 miles. The population is 1.7 million.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to visit the area in the mid-15th century, when it was part of the Mali-based Songhai empire.

During the late 17th and throughout the 18th century, Great Britain and France fought for control of the area, with the British finally taking control in 1857.

Up to three million slaves were shipped from the region during the three centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. In 1807, slave trading was abolished throughout the British Empire, and the British tried unsuccessfully to end the slave trade in The Gambia. Bathurst, now Banjul, already had a civilian population of 700 by 1818, the year that civil government was begun. An 1889 agreement with France established the present boundaries, and The Gambia became a British Crown Colony, divided for administrative purposes into the colony (Banjul and the surrounding area) and the remainder of the territory as a protectorate.

During the colonial period, The Gambia was one of the British Empire's more remote backwaters, although, like other West African countries, it contributed soldiers to the Allied cause in World War II, an experience that spurred demands for independence over the course of the following decades.

Following an election in 1962, The Gambia became independent in 1965, and five years later adopted a republican constitution, while opting to remain in the Commonwealth.

Until a military coup in July 1994, The Gambia was led by President Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, who was re-elected five times. In July 1994, the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) took power, and the then-Lieutenant Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, chairman of the AFPRC, became head of state.

The AFPRC announced a transition plan for return to democratic civilian government, establishing an independent electoral commission in 1996 that led to

legislative elections in September 1996 and January 1997, respectively. Retired Col. Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh was sworn into office as President in November 1996. In late 2001 and early 2002, The Gambia completed a full cycle of presidential, legislative, and local elections, which foreign observers deemed free, fair, and transparent. President Yahya Jammeh was elected to a fourth term in November 2011.

The Gambia plays an active regional role and in Islamic affairs, and within the Commonwealth. As a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), The Gambia has played an important role in resolving the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and contributed troops to the community's ceasefire monitoring group (ECOMOG) in 1990 and (ECOMIL) in 2003. It also has sought to mediate disputes in nearby Guinea-Bissau and the neighbouring Casamance region of Senegal. The country enjoys good relations with the UK, which is a major trading partner, as well as the source of many of the 70,000 tourists who visit the country each winter.

The Gambia's liberal, market-based economy is dominated by traditional subsistence agriculture, with groundnuts the main export crop. It has a re-export trade built up around its ocean port, low import duties, minimal administrative procedures, a fluctuating exchange rate with no exchange controls, and a significant tourism industry. Industry accounts for approximately 12 per cent of GDP and services about 59 per cent. The limited amount of manufacturing is primarily agricultural-based. Other manufacturing activities include soap, soft drinks, and clothing.

Looking to the future, President Jammeh – as he points out in our interview – sees The Gambia replicating the success of small countries like Dubai in creating a knowledge-based economy. His governments have invested in creating a sophisticated telecommunications system, and internet access will be boosted when the country is fully hooked up to the ACE submarine telecoms link to Europe later this year. The country's proximity to Europe – six hours flying time – also offers potential to develop the export of fresh vegetables as well as to develop year round tourism, with the emphasis on attracting higher spending, and niche activity visitors. **F**