

SNAPPY HOLIDAY!

by Amy Willis

MY HAND is resting on the tail of a 5ft-long Nile crocodile and I'm posing, somewhat inadvisably, for a selfie. Two feet behind me are nine more gargantuan reptiles, jaws open and teeth poised ready to snap shut.

The sign by the plant-covered pond reads: 'Do not touch any crocodile without the advice of the pool guide'.

This is the sacred Kachikally crocodile pool in The Gambia, and this is probably the most exhilarating tourist snap I've ever taken.

Charlie is a 70-year-old 'friendly' crocodile lazing away under a 300-year-old banyan tree in the blistering 35C heat. The ridges of his skin are unnervingly cool.

Witchdoctors claim laying a palm on these creatures can promote healing and cure infertility, but I'm breaking out in a cold sweat.

We were delivered to the town of Bakau, eight miles west of the Gambian capital Banjul, by ex-military safari truck, having arrived in this English-speaking enclave — known as the 'gateway to Africa' — on a six-hour charter flight.

This tiny 295-mile-long country, sandwiched around the mighty River Gambia, overlooks the Atlantic in west Africa and is in the same time zone as Britain.

One of the first things that hits you is the heat. It smacks you in the face as you disembark the plane.

The second thing is the vibrancy. Everything here feels so alive. Bright green banyan trees spring from red ochre soil, women in flamboyant fuchsia dresses barter in buzzing markets and men in tie-dye shirts play marbles as donkey-carts roll by.

Our five-star hotel, the Ngala Lodge, is idyllic. My ocean-view room has its own private plunge pool though it is only a stone's throw from the hotel's serene infinity pool. But we are heading for the jungle, so it's back in the bouncy open-top 4x4.

WE ARRIVE at the 1,000-acre Makasutu rainforest to the sound of dozens of ginger-backed guinea baboons noisily swinging through-palms and bickering with each other on the forest floor.

Hooded vultures circle overhead and, in the distance, the call of a colobus monkey sounds.

Within minutes of walking into the forest, we are forced to come to a halt as a family of baboons zips past rather closer than expected. I catch the eye of one larger animal as he strides fearlessly towards our group.

'That's the leader. Don't look him in the eye,' warns our guide, Muki. 'He isn't scared of humans.' I consider diving behind a nearby termite

hill for cover, but he wanders past without incident.

'Come!' Muki beckons us towards the end of the trail, where dug-out canoes, called pirogues, are waiting to take us down the river.

Red mangroves surround us and dozens of The Gambia's 600 species of bird can be seen weaving in and out of the sprawling roots as we float downstream to the throaty click of mudskippers.

Within five minutes, we spot a blue-breasted kingfisher dancing over the brackish water and two red bishops. This is a twitcher's utopia.

The river leads to a five-star jungle hideaway, the riverside Mandina Lodges, where guests can stay in stilted mahogany eco-huts, with outdoor showers and glitzy four-poster beds. A

local shaman, known as a griot, is playing an African kora, a 21-stringed instrument made from a calabash gourd.

The next day I am juggling market produce — casabas and scotch bonnets — wearing a fantastically flamboyant yellow and brown leopard print dress plus matching headdress. The outfit would give Hyacinth Bucket — a big star with Gambians — something to snort about.

I am in Ida Cham Njai's home cooking school in Brikama, where guests not only learn how to cook a local dish called *benechin*, but do so while wearing traditional clothing.

'Now you are in The Gambia,' Ida jokes beside me, as she shows us how to boil huge chunks of John Dory fish with whole vegeta-

Wild encounter: Laterite Cliff on Fajara beach. **Right:** One of the local crocodiles. **Below:** Ida, who runs a flamboyant cooking school

bles in a spicy tomato sauce. Electricity is in short supply here, so most people cook al fresco.

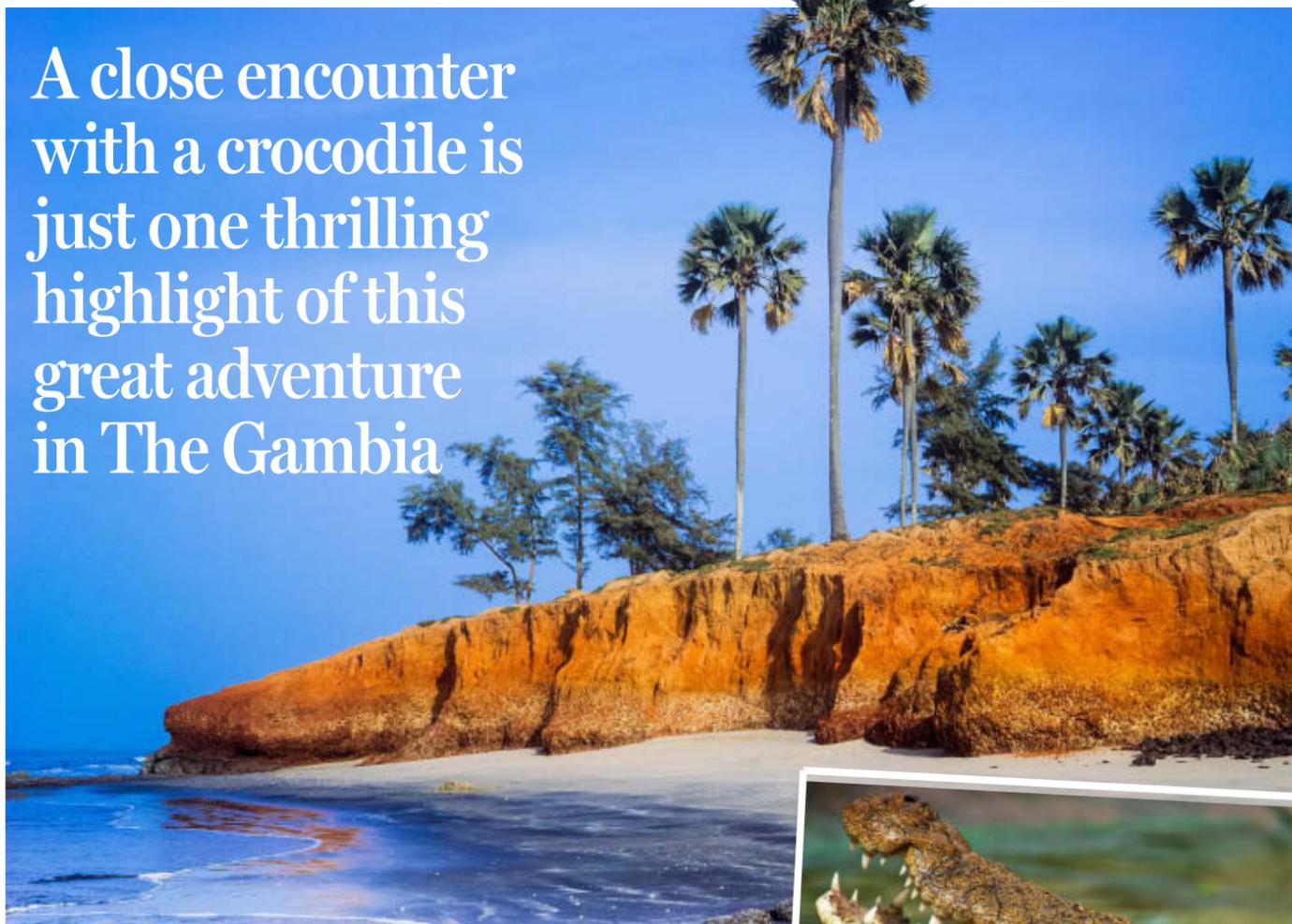
She tosses rice into the sauce, letting it soak up the juices to create a rich flavour unlike anything I have tried before.

As we sit in Ida's wooden hideaway eating with spoons rather than our hands, I'm struck by how deliciously rich everything is. I came to The Gambia for a taste of Africa — and it has served up course after course of delights.

TRAVEL FACTS

SEVEN nights at Ngala Lodge costs £949pp, including charter flights with Titan Airways, through The Gambia Experience (01489 866939, gambia.co.uk). Excursions including the Makasutu Rainforest, Katchikally crocodile pool, the home cooking school and the four-wheel drive cost from £35-£44.

A close encounter with a crocodile is just one thrilling highlight of this great adventure in The Gambia



Picture: ALAMY



LAPLAND IN BERKSHIRE? IT'S THE REAL SANTA DEAL



Santa's grotto: Freddy and Sandy in Lapland UK

THE last time we visited a Christmas 'Wonderland' — Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen's disastrous Magical Journey in Sutton Coldfield — it was not a success.

The elves and the fairy queen were heavily tattooed, Father Christmas was shy and my son Freddy was unimpressed by the very fake 'snow'.

'Mummy, it looks like litter!' It was expensive, disappointing and, well, rubbish.

This year, things couldn't be more different. Because, hot on the heels of Elton John (he loved it so much he came twice), Kirstie Allsopp and Peter Andre, we went to LaplandUK, deep in Berkshire's Whitmoor Forest, where Father Christmas and his elves are working round the clock to finish all the toys in time for Christmas.

Weeks ago my sons Freddy and Sandy each received a personal invitation

by Jane Fryer

from Father Christmas — sealed with his special wax 'FC' seal and delivered by reindeer post. Impressive.

But everything about LaplandUK is classy — the endless wooded walkways, glittering with snow and fairy lights, the smell of pine, the joyous elves and their teeny elf houses, the toy factory with the aerial conveyor belt whirling toys overhead, Mrs Christmas's gingerbread kitchen, the cheery reindeer, the sleigh.

Even the Christmas shopping village is stylish. The sweet shop smells of heaven. The cafes are good, the loos clean and the toy shop sells decent toys. There's a Post Office where you can write a letter to Father Christmas. Friendly elves are everywhere — giving their special elf waggly nose

'wave'. Ice-skating is included in the price — on real ice — around an enormous Christmas tree.

'I can't believe I'm skating!' says Freddy, eyes gleaming. 'It's magic. This is the best bit — this and the snow!'

Just when it can't get any better, we meet Father Christmas — big, fat, red cheeked, jolly and surprisingly well informed. He knows the boys' favourite toys, the names of their best friends, even the cat. And then rummages in his giant sack for two super soft husky dogs, for being so good.

LaplandUK is expensive — £94 a head at the weekend — but, for once, it's worth it. Like so many 'Winter Wonderlands', it promised we'd 'believe in the magic'. And this time, we did.

TRAVEL FACTS

Prices from £55 per person, 0871 620 7063, laplanduk.co.uk