

## Gambia January 2020

The Gambia River stretches back 700 miles from the West African coast into Senegal and then to its source in Northern Guinea. As mainland Africa's smallest country The Gambia's life and landscape is shaped by the river. The people of the Gambia are deeply connected to the river, for food, washing, transport, trade and tourism. The river here is wide and has a tidal flow. Even though the rainy season can make the water levels rise, it is not known for its whitewater.

The Gambia River has seen full descents and an expedition on this would certainly lead you into some wild and remote territory. The biggest danger on the river is the wildlife, especially the hippos. Encountering a hippo was a real possibility for us, but we were assured with absolute certainty by everyone we met, that all the hippos in Gambia were friendly!





In February [Darren Sherwood](#) and I got the opportunity to head to The Gambia to work on a project training local young people to be able to work on the river as kayak guides to support the rise of adventure tourism businesses in the town of Janjanbureh. The guide training was organised by [Youth Empowerment Project Gambia](#) and was funded by the United Nations.

Janjanbureh is about 300 km inland from the country's capital Banjul on the coast. The town is working hard to develop sustainable tourism activities. Up until recently the opportunity to paddle here has been limited by lack of equipment and trained guides. The message from the local young people was, 'We want to be able to take people kayaking!'

We were to run two five day programmes, so the young trainees could take small groups safely out onto the river in sit-on-top kayaks. We would be teaching basic kayak skills and rescues, and also customer care, environmental knowledge and practical guiding skills that help to make a great trip for everyone. Virtually all of the aspirant guides had very limited experience in a kayak and some had only recently learnt to swim.

Below is my short diary from the trip:

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## Day one

We are in Janjanbureh training local people to be guides on the river, for some it was their first time in a kayak! It's great to have a super enthusiastic group who want to explore their local water and create their own business taking tours on the river. No sign of hippos or crocs yet, but apparently it's only a matter of time ...





## Day two

The team are learning so quickly, it's hard to believe some of them got in a kayak for the first time yesterday. With a focus on leadership, positioning and understanding the impact of the tide, these guys love taking the lead on the water and are really getting to grips with all their roles and responsibilities of a kayak guide. All throughout we are encouraging them to tell us about their environment and the culture and wildlife. One of the team told us about a seed pod that they use to make flip flops, but also can be used to scrub pans. He was really surprised how interested we were by something so normal to him!



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## Day three

The team members are really getting to grips with things. They are sizing up equipment, giving safety briefings and introducing basic skills every time we get out to paddle. During the rescue training yesterday, one of the team asked, 'What if someone has a big rice barrel and can't get back in their kayak?' and pointed to his belly! We gave them a few ideas of how to solve this but I loved the way he asked the question.



Then the guys showed us a place where hippos get in and out of the river. We went over to the riverbank to look at the footprints and heard a rustling in the bushes. Safe to say we have never paddled backwards so quickly!



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## Day four

Another incredible day! We arranged for an ornithologist to show the team some of the local birds. It was great to see them start to recognise vultures, bee eaters, egrets and, the best spot of the day, a broad billed roller! Gambia really does have some incredible bird life. The team also completed their personal skills and rescue assessment, passing with flying colours. Tomorrow they will be taking out real clients, to say they are excited is an understatement. Even though the weather is super hot out here, after a few rescues one of the team was shivering and asked me if I had a coat he could borrow!



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## Day five

The first phase of our training programme is complete with seven guides successfully going through the training. The final part of their assessment was to deliver a short tour on the river to the next group of guides who will be starting their training tomorrow.

Once the celebrations were complete Darren and I took the opportunity to explore a bit further down the river, paddling away from Janjanbureh heading about six kilometres downstream. The amount of wildlife at the side of (and potentially in) the river is incredible and, yes you guessed it, we had a hippo encounter!

On our way back from our paddle we found a small creek at the side of the river that looked like it looped round to join the main flow a few kilometres further upstream. With this section much narrower than the main river, we were definitely in the thick of it. About a third of the way round Darren looks to his left and points out a large 'grey boulder' at the side of the river and says, 'I'm pretty sure that's a hippo. Yes that's a hippo!' At that point we were about five metres away from it and it looked at us and slid into the river. My heart was pounding (mainly because I was at the back and would have been first in the queue to be chomped on) and we paddled to as fast as we could but without splashing to escape the creek!



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## Day six

We have started the next phase of our training programme, with a new cohort of fifteen guide trainees all excited to get going on the river. To make this project more



sustainable for the local community we are also training trainers. This will mean that the local guides of the future will be trained by local people. We have three team members who are stepping up; Sheriff, Ousman and Ebrima who are taking on board a new challenge as Gambian guide trainers! It has been a privilege to feel so immersed in the community here in The Gambia and everyone we meet has helped us feel so welcome. It is also really special when someone who has lived next to the river for all of their life, finally gets to go kayaking says, 'that was the best thing I have ever done!'



## Day seven

We are in full swing on our second programme with our new trainers contributing lots to the sessions and providing demonstrations and explanations. One of the challenges the guides will face is crossing the river and which does require some thought. There are motorised boats travelling on the river, strong tidal flow and yesterday we had to also deal with particularly strong wind. Once again the team proved that they are able to overcome any task that is set and they take it in their stride. We closed yesterday with some tandem rescues. I think we are going to need to start awarding points for stylish dismounts as headfirst into the water seems the way out here!



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## Day eight

Our new set of guide trainees are working really well and making fast progress. They are learning all of the elements of delivering a safe and effective tour. This involves some basic skills to their clients, which is certainly tricky if English isn't your first language. For many of the guides yesterday was the first time that they gave training and instruction to their peers. Even through the occasional nervous giggles, it's great to see them step up to this challenge. The wet end of the day once again included the 'rice belly rescue'. This is something I'm definitely going to be including in my future rescue training courses back home in the UK!



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## Day nine

Time has flown and we are approaching the end of the second phase of the training. Yesterday the team had a blast out in the canoes and looked at what to do in the event of a capsize with clients. The team also took their first guest out, with everyone taking the lead for a small part of the tour. All throughout the training we have been encouraging the team to be on time, be prepared and to start and close the tour professionally. They certainly showed us how to do it Gambia style when they closed with songs, drums and dancing!



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## Day ten

The project is complete! Twenty-one guides trained to deliver kayaking experiences on the river with three of the team going through additional training to help continue the support of new guides out here. We were even joined by a reporter and cameraman from a TV station to interview us and the team about our time on the river. One of the highlights of yesterday was the presentation where they were awarded with their



certificates and guide ropes. At the end we recognised the three trainers by passing on our PFDs and safety equipment to them, their faces were priceless.



A huge thank you to goes to everyone who helped us during the project and made all of the logistics happen: Amelia Diaz from YEP, and Dave Adams from [Fairplay Gambia](#).