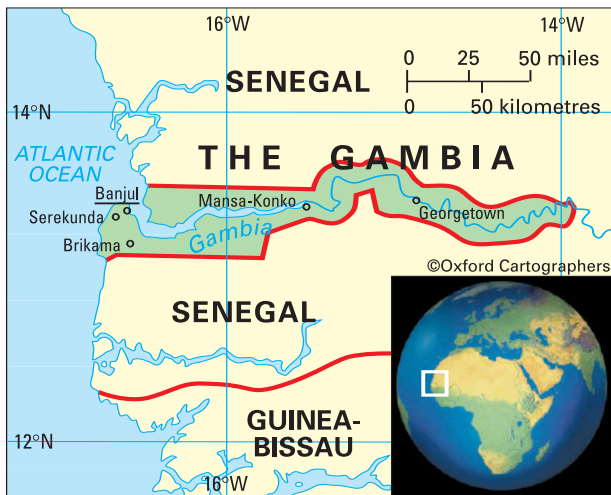


# The Gambia



## KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1965
Population:	1,705,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	0.6% p.a. 1990–2009
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 151
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT
Currency:	dalasi (D)

## Geography

Area:	11,295 sq km
Coastline:	80km
Capital:	Banjul

The Republic of The Gambia is the smallest country in West Africa. Apart from a stretch of coastline along the Atlantic Ocean, it is entirely surrounded by Senegal.

**Main towns:** Banjul (capital, pop. 33,400 in 2009), Serekunda (380,400), Brikama (93,200), Bakau (41,800), Farafenni (33,300), Lamin (33,000), Nema Kunku (30,400), Brufut (26,700), Basse Santa-Su (18,400), Sukuta (16,800) and Gunjur (17,500).

**Topography:** The Gambia consists of a long narrow ribbon of land on either side of the River Gambia, one of the major African waterways. At the estuary, the northern and southern boundaries are 45km apart, but the belt of land narrows to about 20km inland. The terrain is generally flat and low-lying; the island capital Banjul (formerly Bathurst) is situated only one metre above sea level. Away from the coast the country rises to a low plateau with flat-topped hills in a few places. From Georgetown to the eastern boundary the area is enclosed by rocky hills. The coast has sand cliffs and 50km of unspoilt silver-sand beaches.

**Climate:** The climate is tropical with distinct dry and rainy seasons. The dry season at the coast, coinciding with the cooler weather, runs from mid-November to mid-May; the hot rainy season is June to October. The weather is hot and humid inland, with mid-day temperatures up to 38°C in March–June. The harmattan blows from the Sahara in January–March, bringing dust and haze.

**Environment:** The most significant environmental issues are deforestation, desertification, and the prevalence of water-borne diseases. Erosion of the coastal sand cliffs, caused both by the sea and by sand mining for the construction industry, is a dangerous possibility.

**Vegetation:** There are mangrove swamps along the river and its creeks. Tropical forest and bamboo grow on the red ironstone banks of the lower river. Away from the river there is savannah; mahogany, rosewood, oil palm and rubber cover large areas. Forest

## did you know?

A Gambian citizen, Abdoulie Janneh, was the Regional Director for Africa of the United Nations Development Programme 2000–05, and from 2005 became Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

The country hosts a national chapter of the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council.

covers 48% of the land area, having increased at 0.4% p.a. 2000–07. Arable land comprises 35% of the total land area.

**Wildlife:** The Gambian wildlife is rich and impressive, including hippos, small game and many small mammals. Concern for wildlife led to the Banjul Declaration of 1977 which aims to conserve and protect as wide a spectrum as possible of the remaining fauna and flora. The Gambia also has an exotic and varied birdlife and the country is becoming an increasingly popular paradise for bird-watchers. There are more than 280 different species, including the rare Egyptian plover. With the River Gambia a dominant feature of the country, fish are plentiful.

**Transport:** There are 3,740km of roads, 19% paved. Roads in and around Banjul are mostly bituminised; unsealed roads can be impassable in the rainy season. There is no railway.

The River Gambia extends, east–west, the entire length of the country, providing a vital communications link for cargo and passengers. The river is navigable by ocean-going vessels up to Kuntaur (240km upstream) and by shallow draught vessels up to Basse Santa Su (418km). Exports (mostly groundnuts) are carried down the river to Banjul. The principal port is at Banjul, serving the international and river trade.

Banjul International Airport is situated at Yundum, 29km south-west of the city.

## Society

### KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 151  
Life expectancy: 56 years  
Net primary enrolment: 61%

**Population:** 1,705,000 (2009); 57% lives in urban areas; growth 3.4% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 36 per 1,000 people (49 in 1970); life expectancy 56 years (36 in 1970).

Mandinka people constitute 42% of total population, followed (in descending order of population) by Fula (18%), Wolof (16%), Jola (10%) and Sarahuli (9%, 2003 census). There is also a community of Akus (Creoles), descended mainly from Africans freed from slavery in the early 19th century.

**Language:** English is the official language. Local languages are Mandinka (widely spoken in the provinces), Fula, Wolof (widely spoken in Banjul), Jola and Sarahuli.

**Religion:** Muslims about 90%, the rest mostly Christians. Traditional animist religions are often practised alongside both of these religions.

**Media:** Newspapers are in English and include *Daily Observer*, *Foroyaa*, *The Independent* and *The Point*.

The national radio station, Radio Gambia, broadcasts in English and Gambian languages. Gambia Television is the public television station. Privately-owned radio stations and satellite TV compete with the public services.

Some 12% of households have TV sets (2006). There are 35 personal computers (2007) and 76 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

**Education:** There are nine years of primary education – comprising cycles of six and three years – and five years of secondary – three and two years. Some 70% of pupils complete primary school (2007). The school year starts in September.

Technical and vocational training are provided at The Gambia Technical Training Institute and higher education at the University of The Gambia. Literacy among people aged 15–24 is 64% (2008).

**Health:** The country relies partially on expatriate doctors: when Chinese doctors working in the country were recalled in 1995, Cuban doctors replaced them. There are hospitals at Banjul, Bansang and a new one at Farafenni opened in 1998. In addition there are health centres and dispensaries. Traditional healers and midwives are well established in rural areas. There is a leprosy control programme. 92% of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 67% have adequate sanitation facilities (2009). Infant mortality was 78 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (207 in 1960). In 2009, 2.0% of people aged 15–49 were HIV positive.

**Communications:** Country code 220; internet domain '.gm'. Mobile phone coverage is patchy in the rural areas. Main towns have internet cafes and post offices.

There are 29 main telephone lines and 840 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

**Public holidays:** New Year's Day, Independence Day (18 February), Labour Day (1 May), Revolution Day (22 July). Assumption (15 August) and Christmas Day.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Prophet's Birthday, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Koriteh (End of Ramadan), Tabaski (Feast of the Sacrifice) and Al-Hijra (Islamic New Year).

## Economy

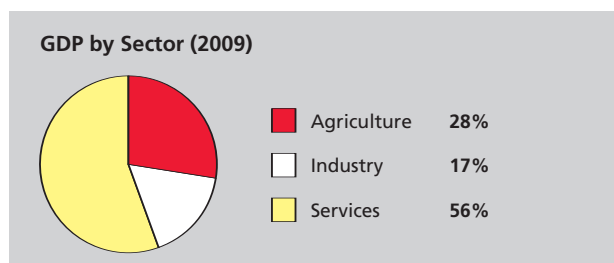
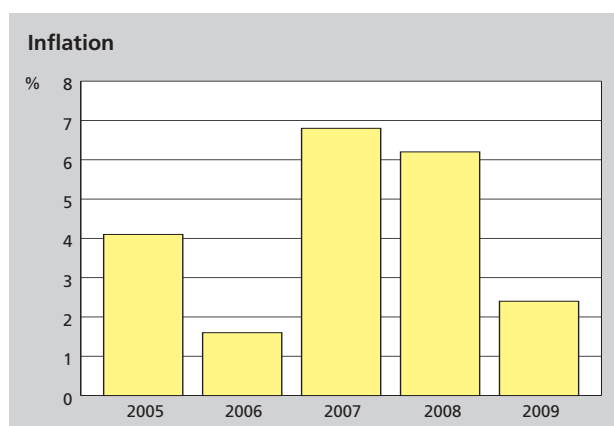
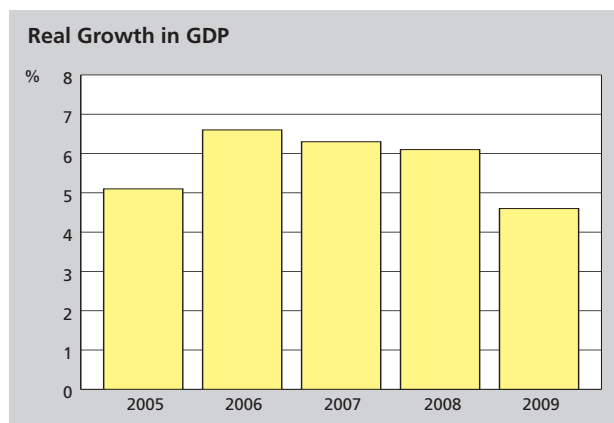
### KEY FACTS 2009

GNI: US\$743m  
GNI p.c.: US\$440  
GDP growth: 5.7% p.a. 2005–09  
Inflation: 4.2% p.a. 2005–09

**Overview:** The Gambia, with its command of an important river system, has considerable potential in trade – depending on development of the hinterland. It is an economically disadvantaged country, hampered by its small size, lack of mineral or other natural resources, and rudimentary infrastructure. The economy rests on agriculture (especially on groundnut production) and tourism, though there is a small-scale processing industry.

Agricultural production suffered during the droughts of the last two decades, although The Gambia is less vulnerable than its Sahel neighbours. Tourism, the most important source of foreign exchange revenue, flagged in the wake of an abortive coup in 1981 and again after the successful coup of 1994. However, tourism revenue recovered in 1996, and by 1998 the number of tourist arrivals had overtaken pre-coup levels.

Foreign aid has been vital in developing the infrastructure. From 1985, policy was focused on economic reforms backed by the IMF, leading to a long period of sustained growth with relatively low inflation. The reforms were continued after the 1994 coup,



including some privatisation. In 2000, South African electricity company Eskom purchased a 50% stake in electricity and water utility NAWEC.

The good growth continued into the 2000s and was interrupted only by a dip into recession in 2002, continuing vigorously in 2005–09. This impressive growth was sustained by the construction, tourism and telecommunications sectors, and a steady flow of foreign investment. The country's stock of external debt fell from 110% to 50% of GDP after completion of the IMF/World Bank Heavily Indebted Poor Countries and Multilateral Debt Relief Initiatives at the end of 2007. Growth was sustained during 2008 (6.1%) and 2009 (4.6%), despite the extremely adverse economic climate due to the global recession.

**Trade:** Exports of goods and services account for 30% of GDP (2008). Exports other than re-exports are groundnuts and groundnut products, fruit, vegetables, and fish and fish products, but the largest trading activity by far has been the re-export of imported goods to neighbouring countries (Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal).

## Constitution

**Status:** Republic with executive president  
**Legislature:** National Assembly of The Gambia  
**Independence:** 18 February 1965

The 1997 constitution provides for a unitary republican democracy, with the president, vice-president and secretaries of state responsible to parliament. The unicameral parliament, the National Assembly, has a five-year term. Five members are nominated by the president, 48 directly elected under universal suffrage. The president is also elected by direct universal suffrage for a five-year term, and there is no limit on the number of terms he may serve. Executive power resides in the president, vice-president and cabinet, both of whom are appointed by the president. The voting age is 18; there is an ombudsman. The constitution provides for an independent judiciary and allows for declaration of a state of emergency, and for special courts to try cases of corruption. A two-thirds majority in parliament is required to change the constitution.

## Politics

**Last elections:** September 2006 (presidential), January 2007 (parliamentary)  
**Next elections:** 2011 (presidential), 2012 (parliamentary)  
**Head of state:** President Sheikh Alhaji Dr Yahya Jammeh  
**Head of government:** the president  
**Ruling party:** Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction

After re-election on five occasions (the country retaining multiparty democracy under his 29-year leadership), President Dawda Jawara was deposed in a bloodless coup by junior army officers in July 1994. Captain Yahya Jammeh then set up the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council, which pledged a return to democratic civilian government.

An 11-member constitutional commission, chaired by a Ghanaian judge and including British, American and Malawian lawyers, prepared a draft new constitution in 1995. A national referendum on the draft constitution was held in August 1996, and the ban on political activity lifted in the same month (although ex-President Jawara and the leaders of the three main opposition parties were barred). The presidential election was held in September, and won by Jammeh, with 55% of the votes. Three days after this election, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) raised serious doubts about the credibility of the poll.

In January 1997, parliamentary elections were contested by Jammeh's party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), the United Democratic Party (UDP) led by Ousainou Darboe, the People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS), the National Reconciliation Party (NRP) and five independents. The UDP agreed to take part on condition political detainees were released and the army and security forces did not interfere in the electoral process. The APRC was the only party able to contest every seat; it was popular with traditional leaders and youth, and won with a more than two-thirds majority – gaining 33 seats. The UDP won seven, the NRP two and the PDOIS one. CMAG concluded that these were

conducted in a freer atmosphere than the presidential election in September 1996.

The National Assembly was inaugurated in January 1997, and adopted the new constitution. Political prisoners, including ministers of the Jawara government and UDP supporters arrested before the elections, were released in February and charges dropped. In April 1997, the restoration of a civilian government was completed when the four remaining regional military governors were replaced by civilians.

In the presidential election in October 2001, attended by Commonwealth observers, Jammeh decisively won a second term with 53% of the votes, Darboe of the UDP came second with 33% and Hammat Bah of the NRP third with 8%.

This was followed in January 2002 by parliamentary elections when Jammeh's APRC gained virtually all seats in the Assembly. The elections were boycotted by the UDP – claiming that the electoral roll had been manipulated – and the APRC was unopposed in 33 of the 48 seats. Because of the UDP boycott, the Commonwealth decided not to observe the elections.

Jammeh was returned for a third term with 67% of the votes in the presidential election of September 2006, which was again attended by Commonwealth observers. Darboe (UDP) received 27% of the votes and Halifa Sallah (National Alliance for Democracy and Development) 6%.

In the parliamentary elections that followed in January 2007 the APRC won 42 seats and the UDP four, and the turnout was 42%.

## International relations

The Gambia is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, African Union, Economic Community of West African States, Non-Aligned Movement, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

## Traveller information

**Local laws and conventions:** The Gambia is a predominantly Muslim country, and local customs and sensitivities should be respected at all times – especially outside the tourist areas and during the month of Ramadan.

Strong action is taken against anyone importing, exporting or in possession of drugs, and visitors must not accept any packages without inspecting the contents.

Photography of military and official installations is prohibited.

Visitors to the country must have some form of identification on them at all times.

Gambians greet each other by shaking hands. It is customary not to touch food with the left hand.

## History

Ancient stone circles on the banks of the River Gambia are evidence of an early population but little is known of it. From the fifth to eighth century the area that is now The Gambia was part of the empire of Ghana, ruled by the Serahuli. It later became part of the kingdom of Songhai; in that period Islam was introduced. The Mali empire, under the Mandinka and Susu, which established control during the 13th century, had declined by about 1500. In the late 18th century Fula invaders penetrated the area.

Europeans started to explore and settle the coast and river area from the 15th century. In 1455 and 1456, Portuguese-sponsored expeditions began exploring the river; the attractions were rumours of gold (in fact gold was shipped down the River Gambia from the interior) and the opportunities for slaving, with local business co-operation. From the 17th century up to and even after the trade became illegal in 1807 the river was a focus for the European slave-trade.

During the 17th century various English and French adventurers and semi-official expeditions came and went, on the trail of gold and slaves. There were Portuguese communities living on the river banks until the mid-18th century, and much intermarriage with local people. From the 18th century the French and the British struggled for control of the region. Between 1765 and 1783 The Gambia and Senegal were combined into the province of Senegambia, under French administration. The British settlement of James Island was recognised by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783.

In the early 19th century Britain established a military post on Banjul island (then called Bathurst) in order to suppress the slave

traffic on the River Gambia carried on by American and Spanish vessels. In 1823, MacCarthy Island (270km up-river) became a settlement for liberated slaves. In 1888, alarmed by French influence in Senegal, Britain seized the river and the land on both sides of it; thus The Gambia became a separate country, the downstream part of the country being a colony and the upstream part a protectorate, and a Gambian legislature was established. Previously, the much smaller territory had been administered from Sierra Leone. A legislative council gradually became more representative as progress towards independence was made.

During the 1950s political parties emerged. In 1960, in elections held under a new constitution, the People's Progressive Party established itself. After further constitutional changes, the country became internally self-governing in 1963 and achieved independence on 18 February 1965, with Queen Elizabeth II, represented by a governor-general, as head of state.

In 1970, following a referendum, a republican constitution was introduced. The 1970 constitution enshrined the strong traditional structures by giving a voice in the legislature to the chiefs.

The Gambia's location, enclosed by Senegal, has suggested the benefits of some form of union between the countries. The Senegambian Confederation, established in 1982 after Senegalese troops had intervened to help deal with an attempted coup, was a loose arrangement bringing benefits to both countries. The Confederation was dissolved in 1989, however, after Gambian resistance to closer union, but in May 1991 the two countries signed a treaty of friendship and co-operation.

Casual wear should be confined to the beach. Businessmen should wear jackets and ties, and businesswomen should ensure they dress modestly with shoulders covered and skirts (not trousers) below the knee. Business cards are appreciated. Business hours are Mon–Thur 0800–1600, Fri 0800–1230.

**Immigration and customs:** Those planning to travel to the country should check entry requirements. Passports must be valid for three months from the date of entry. Single parents travelling with children should carry documentation showing parental responsibility.

**Travel within the country:** Driving is on the right-hand side. Greater Banjul has a few local and international car hire firms, and an international driving permit will be accepted for up to three months. The best roads are found around Banjul; elsewhere, there is an ongoing programme of road-building and repair but driving outside Greater Banjul can be difficult.

Care must be taken when approaching security checkpoints, as they are not always well lit.

Bush taxis travel between towns and villages, and fares are fixed. Tourist taxis are green and licensed; local taxis are yellow and can be hailed in the street. Fares should be agreed before travelling.

There are many crossing points on the River Gambia either by boat or vehicle and passenger ferries. Tour operators run adventure and fishing trips on converted pirogues.

**Travel health:** Travellers are advised to have comprehensive medical insurance.

Malaria and water-borne diseases are widespread throughout November, and visitors will need to take insect repellent and loose-fitting clothing to prevent insect bites. Sunscreen and diarrhoea medicine should also be packed, as they may not be easily obtainable locally. Bilharzia is present, so swimming in fresh stagnant water must be avoided. Current vaccination recommendations for The Gambia should be checked before travelling.

It is safe to drink mains water in urban and resort areas, but in all other regions water for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice must be boiled. Powdered and tinned milk is recommended.

Travellers who need prescription medicines should bring them in a sealed container, clearly labelled to avoid misunderstandings.

**Money:** The Gambia is a cash economy and very few places accept credit cards. There are ATMs in Senegambia, a major tourist area, which accept Visa but not Mastercard. Travellers cheques or cash can be changed at bureaux de change. Banking hours are Mon–Thur 0800–1330, Fri 0800–1100 and Sat 0800–1300.

There were 142,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

## Further information

Republic of The Gambia State House Online:  
[www.statehouse.gm](http://www.statehouse.gm)

Commonwealth Secretariat: [www.thecommonwealth.org](http://www.thecommonwealth.org)

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