

Banjul



It's hard to imagine a more unlikely, more consistently ignored capital city than the sleepy seaport of Banjul. People aren't flocking here, no new buildings are rising to the skies and the old ones are gradually crumbling to dust.

Just 30 minutes from the thriving tourist zones of the Atlantic coast, Banjul sits on its island like a sulking little sister who's stopped vying for attention. But despite the shadow of abandon that haunts its sand-blown streets, Banjul is truly worth a visit. Lively Albert Market, at the heart of the city, is one of Gambia's best places to snare a souvenir bargain and soak up the atmosphere of eager buying, selling and bartering that makes the narrow alleyways and ramshackle stalls hum with excitement. Down the road from the market, Banjul's hectic harbour is another vibrant slice of inner-city Africa. This is where Gambia's main ferry – a rusty old metal tub – chugs back and forth between the north and south banks of the river, heaving huge trucks, traders bearing wares, hustlers and travellers across the mouth of the Gambia River. The constant comings and goings and the bustle that accompanies the urban ritual are worth taking in, especially from one of the makeshift roadside cafés.

Banjul's 'old town', a mile of fading colonial structures, is imbued with a sense of history that the plush seaside resorts are lacking, and the National Museum, a charming institution with dusty exhibits, reinforces this atmosphere of a precious, though slightly neglected, past.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up history and gritty reality wandering through the backstreets of Banjul's **old town** (p94)
- Find everything from spices to souvenirs in the colourful, chaotic **Albert Market** (p96)
- Check out what's changed in the city with a look at the dusty photos in the **National Museum** (p94)
- Enjoy the views across the capital, the ocean and the Gambia River from the massive construction that is **Arch 22** (p94)



■ POPULATION: 50,000

HISTORY

Founded in 1816 by Captain Alexander Grant, Banjul was initially named Bathurst, after Henry Bathurst, the secretary of the British Colonial Office. Like many other colonial settlements, including Saint-Louis in Senegal, the town was strategically placed on an island (Banjul Island). However, while most of these seaports were built to facilitate the slave trade, Banjul was founded as an operational base from which to prevent the traffic of humans, after the British Abolition Act of 1807 prohibited the trading of slaves (at least on paper).

The town's regular street pattern was also laid down during this time and grew over the years from the area of today's State House and the old town, to the area it covers today. This is where you can still find examples of 19th-century architecture, the so-called Krio- or Aku-style houses, reminiscent of the adaptations of early Victorian architecture found in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

When Gambia achieved independence in 1965, Bathurst was granted city status, and became the capital of the young nation. It wasn't renamed Banjul (the Mandinka word for 'bamboo' and the island's original name) until 1973.

With the growth of Gambia's coastal towns into major tourist areas, Banjul experienced a strong decline, reflected in a shrinking population and the move of major businesses towards the coast. Today it's mainly an administrative centre, while a capital-worthy lifestyle is found in the resort zones.

ORIENTATION

Located on an island, Banjul is one of those cities that doesn't really have space to expand. Not that the town is attempting to grow – in fact, the capital continues to lose many of its offices, restaurants and shops to the flourishing coastal area. And so the city remains small enough to walk around without too much trouble. The centre is July 22 Sq, an unkempt public park from which several main streets run south, including Russell St, which leads past the bustling Albert Market into Liberation St. West of the October 17 Roundabout is the old part of Banjul – a maze of narrow streets and ramshackle houses rarely visited by tourists.

July 22 Dr runs northwest from July 22 Sq, becoming the main road out of Banjul. On the edge of the city it goes under the vast structure of Arch 22 and turns into a dual carriageway that after about 3km west crosses Oyster Creek on Denton Bridge to reach the mainland proper. Remember: only the president is allowed to drive under Arch 22 – everyone else must go around it.

Another 2km further west, the road splits: the right fork goes to Bakau, Fajara and the other Atlantic coast resorts; straight on it leads to Serekunda, the airport, and everywhere else along the southern bank of the Gambia River.

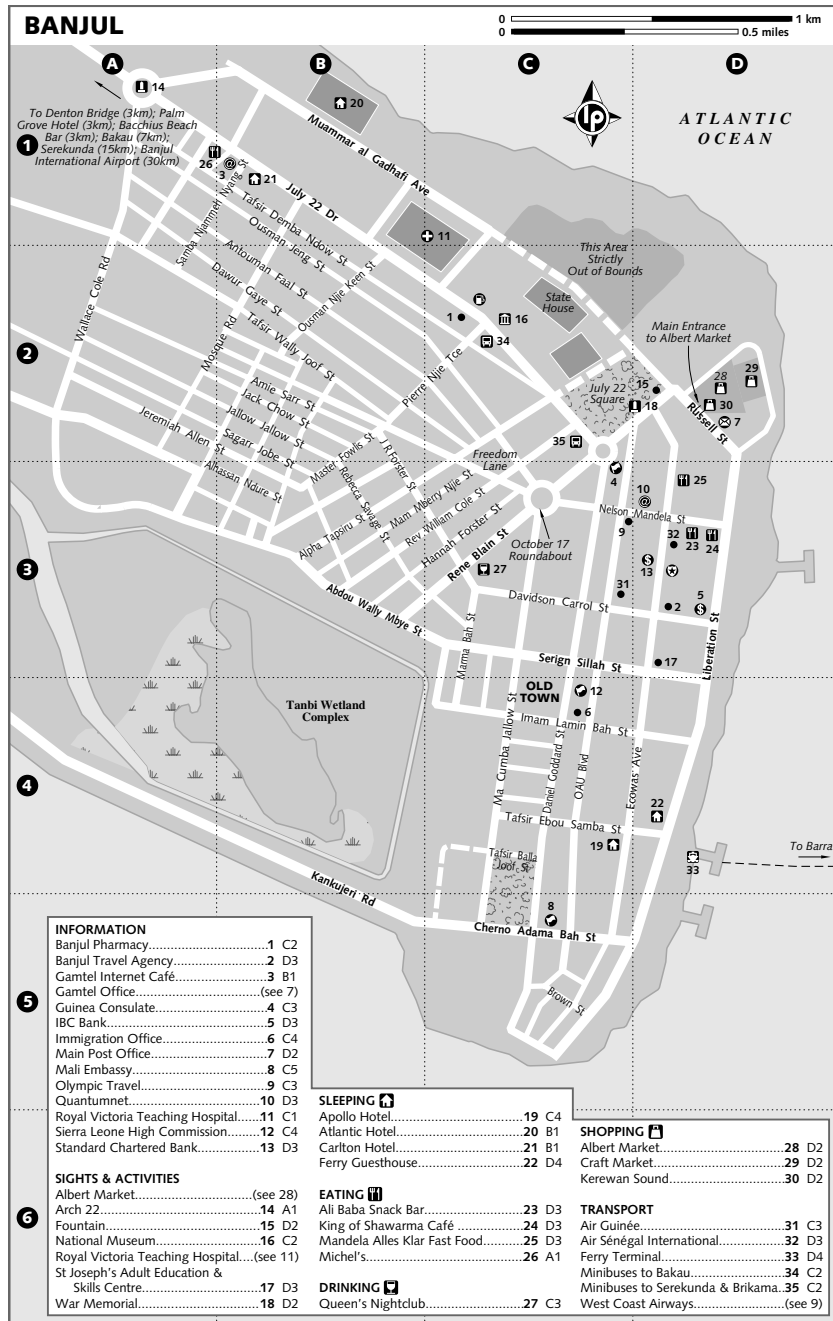
Maps

We didn't come across any maps whatsoever while there, and no-one seemed to know of any that were available.

STREET NAME CHANGES

The town's streets, first named after the English heroes of the Battle of Waterloo, were given new designations in the late 1990s. They now carry the names of Gambia's heroes of independence. However, most people (including taxi drivers) are still more familiar with the old names, so you'll usually get a more reliable answer if you ask for directions using the old street names. We've included a list of some of the streets and their old names, but if you're still stuck, look for the addresses painted on the front of shops and businesses.

Old name	New name
Bund Rd	Kankujeri Rd
Clarkson St	Rene Blain St
Cotton St	Cherno Adamah Bah St
Dobson St	Ma Cumba Jallow St
Grant St	Rev William Cole St
Hagan St	Daniel Goddard St
Hill St	Imam Lamin Bah St
Hope St	Jallow Jallow St
Independence Dr	July 22 Dr
MacCarthy Sq	July 22 Sq
Marina Pde	Muammar al Gadhafi Ave
Orange St	Tafsir Ebou Samba St
Picton St	Davidson Carrol St
Wellington St	Liberation St



INFORMATION

Internet Access

Gamtel Internet Café (July 22 Dr; per hr D30; ☎ 8am-midnight)

Quantumnet (Nelson Mandela St; per hr D30; ☎ 9am-10pm)

Medical Services

Banjul Pharmacy (☎ 4227470; ☎ 9am-8.30pm)
Across the road from the hospital.

Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital (☎ 4228223; July 22 Dr) Though renovated in 1993, its quality still lags behind that of the private establishment on the Atlantic coast, which is better for treating minor illnesses and injuries and doing malaria tests (see p99). The RVTH has an Accidents & Emergencies (A&E) department.

Money

Banks in Banjul city are open from 8am to 1.30pm Monday to Thursday, and from 8am to 11am Friday. These banks change travellers cheques and have ATMs that accept Visa cards:

IBC Bank (☎ 4428145; Liberation St)

Standard Chartered Bank (☎ 4222081; Ecowas Ave)

Post

Main post office (Russell St; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat)
Near Albert Market. You can buy postcards, paper or envelopes from the hawkers outside.

Telephone

Gamtel Office (Russell St; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) Next door to the post office.

Travel Agencies

Most of the main travel agencies have decamped to Fajara, Kotu or Kololi (see p102). Among the remaining ones, these seem to be the most efficient:

Banjul Travel Agency (☎ 4228813; bta@qanet.gm; Ecowas Ave)

Olympic Travel (☎ 4223370; Nelson Mandela St)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Violent crime is rare in Banjul, but there are plenty of pickpockets. Their favourite hunting ground is the Barra ferry, but you should also be vigilant around the ferry terminal and Albert Market.

Banjul turns its lights off after 8pm, and most streets in the centre drown in darkness, making the place feel quite unsafe. However, it's not armed bandits that represent nocturnal danger, but the

SUSPICIOUS SOCIETY

Be aware that just because you're excited about being in Gambia, the authorities may not be. Our experience was that there was a climate of distrust in the country – perhaps linked to the imminent electoral campaign, or perhaps a more permanent feature of Gambian society. Bear the power of the state in mind: too many questions, in particular about politically sensitive topics, may arouse suspicion, and obviously using maps may not only alert tricksters to your ignorance about the place, but present an excuse to a government official to hassle you with the powerful backing of the state.

maze of open sewers that crisscross the streets.

Don't enter the area behind the State House (marked 'Strictly Out of Bounds' on the map), or you risk difficulties with the military and police.

This researcher was asked to leave town by secret-service agents, who didn't like the sight of a map-wielding, question-asking visitor. If you experience similar hassles from the top, remain calm and polite, without giving in to any dubious requests too readily.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Banjul feels more like a very large village than a national capital, and this sleepy atmosphere has a quaint kind of charm. If you've come to The Gambia to experience Africa, rather than a slice of Europe laid down on a tropical beach, you might enjoy a day here more than at the nearby Atlantic coast resorts. The city's attraction lies not in grand sights but in intimate details – best taken in on a casual stroll around town.

Ferry Terminal

The terminal for the ferry to Barra, with its endless queues of lorries, the industrious hum of cargo being loaded and discharged, passengers boarding and disembarking and the continuous chatter of patiently waiting customers, is worth experiencing. Directly opposite, the warehouses, clothes stalls and grocery wholesalers that line Liberation St resound with animated bartering that mingles with the clamour.

BANJUL IN ONE DAY

Thanks to Banjul's manageable size, you can take in the town's sights in a relaxed one-day visit.

Get your energy levels up with a freshly pressed fruit juice at the **King of Shawarma Café** (p96), then head south for a visit to the inspirational, peaceful **St Joseph's Adult Education & Skills Centre** (opposite).

Change tempo by diving into the feverish bustle of **Albert Market** (below), then stroll past **July 22 Square** (p93), taking in the **War Memorial** and **fountain**. Walk along July 22 Dr and put in a stop at the **National Museum** (right) to enjoy the curious collection of historical artefacts.

Participate in a tour of the **Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital** (right), then head towards the gigantic **Arch 22** (right) to take in the sight of the city from above.

Weave your way back through the rarely visited backstreets of Banjul's pleasant **old town** (below), and finish your day with a meal and a drink at **Michel's** (p96).

Old Town

Head west from the ferry terminal, towards the wide Ma Cumba Jallow St (Dobson St) and beyond, and explore the **old town**, a chaotic assembly of decrepit colonial buildings and Krio-style clapboard houses – steep-roofed structures with wrought-iron balconies and corrugated roofs (see the boxed text, p44). It's no coincidence that they resemble the inner-city architecture of Freetown, Sierra Leone, as many of them still belong to families who came to Banjul from Freetown, some as early as the 1820s.

Albert Market

Since its creation in the mid-19th century, this **market**, an area of frenzied buying, bartering and bargaining, has been Banjul's hub of activity. From shimmering fabrics and false plaits, fresh fruits and dried fish to tourist-tempting souvenirs at the Craft Market, you can find almost anything here and then some.

Give yourself a good couple of hours to wander around Albert Market; long enough to take in the smells, sounds and sights, and get your haggling skills up to scratch. There are several drinks stalls and *chop shops* (basic

eateries) in the market to pacify shopped-out bellies. Albert Market is never a calm spot, but if you want to avoid the keenest hours, come early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

July 22 Square

A recently greened colonial creation, **July 22 Square** (MacCarthy Sq) was once the site of cricket matches but is now mainly used for governmental pomp and public celebrations. Look out for the **War Memorial** and the (now dried-up) **fountain** 'erected by public subscription' to commemorate the coronation of King George VI of Britain in 1937.

National Museum

The **National Museum** (July 22 Dr; admission D25; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Thu, to 1pm Fri & Sat) has some dog-eared and dated exhibits (including, rather bizarrely, the dress worn by Miss Gambia in 1984) that are still worth a look. Explanations are generally good, and there's a fascinating, if dusty, display of photos, maps and historical papers.

Arch 22

Designed by the Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby, **Arch 22** (July 22 Dr; admission D35; ☎ 9am-11pm) is an enormous gateway built to celebrate the military coup of 22 July 1994 (p33). At 35m high, it's by far the tallest building in The Gambia, and its publicly accessible balcony grants excellent views over the city and coast. There's also a cosy café, a souvenir shop and a small museum that enlightens visitors about the coup d'état.

Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital

Gambia's main health facility, the **Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital** (☎ 4226152; www.rvth.dosh.gm; July 22 Dr) not only offers emergency treatment, but also conducts tours of its complex of late-19th-century and modern buildings. This might indicate how wholly the country is devoted to and dependent upon the tourist dollar, or how ingenious even the health sector has to be in order to maintain public services. A hospital visit might not sound like a seductive holiday idea, but the daily two-hour tours (free, though donations are welcome) are surprisingly interesting. This offers

excellent explanations of the hospital's international teaching programmes and research projects into malaria and hepatitis, and a worthwhile, though painful, insight into the dire situation medical services face in The Gambia.

St Joseph's Adult Education & Skills Centre

Tucked away in an ancient Portuguese building, **St Joseph's Adult Education & Skills Centre** (☎ 4228836; stjskills@qanet.com; Ecowas Ave; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Thu, to noon Fri) has provided training to disadvantaged women for the last 20 years. Visitors can take a free tour of sewing, crafts and tie-dye classes, and purchase reasonably priced items such as patchwork products, embroidered purses and cute children's clothes at the on-site boutique.

Pirogue Trips

The quiet, mangrove-lined waterways of Oyster Creek, the main waterway separating Banjul Island from the mainland, and its minor tributaries are brilliant for bird-watching, sport fishing and wonderfully lazy afternoons relaxing in a pirogue to the sound of the waves. Most hotels organise pirogue trips, though you can also book your tour independently at the Sportsfishing Centre (p103) at **Denton Bridge**, which crosses Oyster Creek some 3km west from Banjul city centre.

To reach Denton Bridge by public transport, take any minibus running between Banjul and Bakau or Serekunda and ask the driver to let you off at the bridge. The Sportsfishing Centre is well signposted. It's best to phone first and explain which activity you're interested in, though you can probably also be put in touch with a pirogue or boat owner on the spot.

Tanbi Wetland Complex

If you like bird-watching but don't fancy travelling by pirogue, Kankujeri Rd might be more your scene.

The stretch of mangrove on either side of the road forms part of the Tanbi Wetland Complex, a large wetland area that stretches all the way to Oyster Creek and Lamin. The Banjul part of this wetland is commonly known as 'Bund Road', the former name of Kankujeri Road. It's something of a classic

on the Gambian bird-watching map, due to its accessibility and the large number of birds that can be observed here.

SLEEPING

Not many tourists stay in Banjul city, preferring instead the beach and comforts of the Atlantic coast. However, if you want a more African environment you're more likely to find it here. None of the budget options take credit cards.

Budget & Midrange

Ferry Guesthouse (Ami's Guesthouse; ☎ 4222028; 28 Liberation St; s/d/tr D350/500/610; ☎) Above a busy shop and up some gloomy stairs, this guesthouse is surprisingly acceptable. It's not glamorous, but it is your best budget bet, and the balcony is great for watching the busy trading stalls and ferry terminal. Single-room prices double if you want air-con.

Apollo Hotel (☎ 4228184; Tafsir Ebou Samba St; s/d with fan D450/550, with air-con D750/1000; ☎) Room prices in this shoddy guesthouse have doubled while standards have slipped towards the grimy bottom end. You want to pay a lot for very little? This is your place.

Carlton Hotel (☎ 228670; fax 4227214; 25 July 22 Dr; s/d D500/550, with air-con D800/850; ☎) This is a little more upmarket than the basic guesthouse lot, with luxuries such as running water and indoor toilets. A good-value option.

Top End

Atlantic Hotel (☎ 4228601; www.corinthiahotels.com; Muammar al-Gadhafi Ave; s/d D3007/3937; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This vast, plush resort hotel has numerous bars, restaurants and plenty of leisure facilities, including a nightclub, massage centre and a garden created by ornithologist Clive Barlow to please the bird-watchers. Rooms are bright and pleasant, with modern, unobtrusive décor and all the facilities you want to make you entirely comfortable, including minibar and satellite TV.

Palm Grove Hotel (☎ 4201620; www.gambia-palm-grovehotel.com; s/d with breakfast D1150/1840; ☎ ☎) About 3km out of Banjul towards Serekunda, this hotel is smaller, more personal and better value than the Atlantic. It has a decent swimming beach and all the usual activities you'd expect from a resort, including wind-surfing, canoeing and tennis.

EATING

The shift from Banjul to the coast has taken with it most of Banjul's decent eateries. Only a couple of the remaining places could reasonably be described as restaurants, most of the rest being fast-food joints. Around Albert Market and the north end of Liberation St are several cheap *chop shops* and streets stalls where plates of rice and sauce start at about D25. Breakfast at the ferry terminal – skewered beef on fresh bread rolls with sweet coffee – is highly recommended.

Ali Baba Snack Bar (☎ 4224055; Nelson Mandela St; ☎ 9am-5pm) More than just a kebab shop, this place is an institution with a deserved reputation for the best *shwarmas* (sliced, grilled meat and salad in pita bread) and falafel sandwiches in the country.

Michel's (☎ 4223108; 29 July 22 Dr; ☎ 8am-11pm) This is about the only restaurant in town that can be called classy. From the breakfast menu through to after-dinner drinks, this place offers excellent choices at decent rates.

Mandela Alles Klar Fast Food (Ecowas Ave; ☎ 10am-10pm) The name is as great as the food is greasy. But sometimes nothing but a grilled burger will do, right?

King of Shawarma Café (☎ 4229799; Nelson Mandela St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This friendly place serves excellent Lebanese food, both the wrapped-up and sit-down varieties, and what's even better, large glasses of freshly squeezed fruit juice.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

The best places to drink in style are the bars at the Atlantic Hotel, Palm Grove Hotel and Michel's.

Bacchius Beach Bar (☎ 4227948; ☎ 10am-8pm) Next to the Palm Grove Hotel, this busy little beach bar is a great place to while away a day or an evening, sipping a drink and digging into a platter of grilled fish.

Queen's Nightclub (Rene Blain St; admission from D35; ☎ 9pm-2am) If you want a night out moving to an African beat, this is the only regularly operating option in the capital. This is a pretty raw scene, where women without male company are very likely to feel leering looks lingering on them. It gets busy after midnight.

Golden Palace (☎ 9925087; 10A Nelson Mandela St; ☎ 11am-1am) If you feel like gambling your holiday budget away, try this place. It gets

pretty sleazy at times, as seems to be the nature with these jackpot places.

SHOPPING

In Banjul, the best place to go shopping is Albert Market, which is also a sight in itself. If you enter via the main entrance you'll pass stalls stacked with shimmering fabrics, hair extensions, shoes, household and electrical wares and just about everything else you can imagine. Keep going and you'll reach the myriad colours and flavours of the fruit and vegetable market. Beyond here is the area usually called the Craft Market, with stalls selling tourist-tempting souvenirs (see p271 for information about the sorts of items you're likely to find here).

Near the main entrance, you'll also find **Kerewan Sound** (Russell St), Gambia's best place to buy CDs and cassettes, and one of the very few places that sells recordings by Gambian artists.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For details of international flights to/from Banjul see p279. To confirm reservations on a flight you've already booked, it's easiest to deal directly with the airline offices.

Air Guinée (☎ 4223296; 72 OAU Blvd)

Air Sénégal International (☎ 4472095; Ecowas Ave)

SN Brussels Airlines (Map pp100-1; ☎ 4496301/2; www.brussels-airlines.com; Badala Park Way, Fajara)

West Coast Airways (☎ 4201954; 7 Nelson Mandela St)

Boat

Ferries (☎ 4228205; Liberation St) run between Banjul and Barra, on the northern bank of the river. Two boats chug slowly back and forth, and though they are supposed to run every one to two hours, officially from 7am until 7pm, delays are frequent. The trip is supposed to take 45 minutes, but can take more than an hour if the tide is strong. Passengers pay D10, while cars cost D150 to D200.

The ferries take vehicles, but car space is limited so you might have to wait for a couple of hours (if it's any consolation, trucks can sometimes be there for days). You buy your ticket before going through to the waiting area and keep it until you get off; it will be checked on the other side. If you're coming from the north side by car, you need to purchase your ticket at the office

near the border (just after the junction where the northbank road to Farafenni turns off), about 3km northeast from Barra.

There are open seating areas upstairs from which you get a good view over the river. Dolphins are occasionally spotted on the passage, so keep your camera handy (but safe – this is a pickpocketing hot spot).

If the wait for the ferry is too long, you could also jump onto one of the large pirogues that do the same journey (D50 for a seat on a public pirogue or around D600 if you hire the whole boat). Be warned though: they can get dangerously overloaded. Fares rise sharply after dark (as does the risk) and negotiating passage at this time will be the acutest test of your bargaining skills.

Bus

Gambia's once-exceptional bus network, the state-owned Gambia Public Transport Corporation (GPTC), has almost completely vanished in recent years. Most vehicles have been worn out by the disastrous state of the upcountry roads, and the few remaining buses are in poor condition. Nor do they leave with any reliable regularity. You'll save yourself a lot of time and hassle by taking a bush taxi upcountry, and it doesn't cost much more either.

Bush Taxi

Yellow taxis and minibuses to Brikama and upcountry towns, as well as to places in southern Senegal, all go from the Serekunda garage near the market (see p113). For details about bush taxis to Senegal, see p287.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Arriving at the airport, you'll find green tourist taxis waiting – the yellow ones aren't allowed a place in the queue. A tourist taxi from Banjul International Airport to Banjul, Serekunda, Kairaba Ave or the Atlantic coast resorts (Bakau, Fajara, Kotu and Kololi) costs around D300 to D400.

There is a cheaper way, though. Fend off the tourist-taxi drivers (no mean feat) and walk

straight ahead out of the terminal. Beyond the initial row of cars is a secondary car park and you'll probably find a few yellow taxis parked here. These drivers are not allowed in or even near the terminal, but they are allowed to take passengers if you seek them out. With a bit of bargaining you should be able to hitch a ride for D150 to D200.

Fares are the same whether you come from or head towards the airport.

Minibus & Shared Taxi

Minibuses run between Banjul, Serekunda and the other coastal towns, while shared taxis run between Serekunda, Fajara and Bakau. Both shared taxis and minibuses serve the route between Serekunda, Kotu and Kololi.

From Banjul, minibuses to Bakau (D6) leave from the stand diagonally opposite the Shell station on July 22 Dr. If you're going to Fajara, take a minibus to Bakau and either walk from there (30 minutes) or take an onward shared taxi to Serekunda and hop off in Fajara. Minibuses to Serekunda (D6) and Brikama (D15) leave from a roadside corner one block northwest of July 22 Sq. Add a further D2 for baggage. For more details see p114.

Private Taxi

A short ride across Banjul city centre (known as a 'town trip') in a private taxi will cost about D50, though you'll need to negotiate to get this. From Banjul it costs about D150 to D200 to go to Bakau, Serekunda, Fajara, Kotu or Kololi. Check the price with the driver before getting in.

Hiring a taxi for the day costs around D1000 to D1500, although this only applies for tours around Banjul and the coastal resorts. For a tour out of the city most drivers charge by the destination – the worse the roads they'll have to drive on, the steeper the price.

Private taxis are plentiful during the day but difficult to find at night in Banjul. The best place to find one is at the Atlantic Hotel.

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