

Mystical Dragons Residing in Gambia River: Empowering Communities through Storytelling and Crafts

- *TUI Care Foundation launches TUI Colourful Cultures project in The Gambia*
- *Traditional Ninki Nanka folklore preserved through competitions, training and creative products*
- *Project establishes storytelling and crafts incubator directly supporting more than 500 community members*
- *Initiative creates impact for 12,000 community members along the River Gambia through new tourism experiences and income opportunities*

Berlin, 27 August 2026. *The Gambia River communities hold a treasure of cultural heritage in the folklore of the Ninki Nanka - a mystical dragon said to reside in the creeks of the Gambia River. However, as traditional storytelling declines amongst younger generations, this rich heritage risks being lost forever. Meanwhile, rural communities along the river remain excluded from the tourism benefits concentrated in coastal areas. To preserve this endangered folklore and create sustainable livelihoods, the TUI Care Foundation, in partnership with Ninki Nanka Encounters Foundation, is launching a three-year cultural heritage project that empowers local people to share their traditions authentically. TUI Colourful Cultures Gambia establishes a storytelling, crafts and creatives incubator in Kotu, supporting community members including cultural groups, women's groups, artists, artisans and tour guides across six communities along the Ninki Nanka Trail.*

With tourism accounting for approximately 15% of the national GDP, The Gambia recognises the sector's economic importance. However, its benefits are currently concentrated in coastal regions offering traditional beach holidays. The National Development Plan emphasises diversifying tourism products to include culture-centred experiences that benefit rural communities. River communities possess valuable cultural assets such as Ninki Nanka folklore, which could form the basis for authentic tourism experiences that generate sustainable livelihoods whilst safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

The Ninki Nanka folklore represents a significant yet underutilised cultural asset. This mystical creature representing a mysterious dragon which is said to inhabit the river's creeks. It features in stories, music and traditions across The Gambia and neighbouring West African countries. As modern influences reshape community life and traditional storytelling evolves, safeguarding this heritage becomes increasingly important. Yet local entrepreneurs often lack the skills, capacity and market access to develop cultural products for tourism, missing opportunities to control their cultural narrative and grow their income. TUI Colourful Cultures Gambia addresses these challenges by responsibly capturing, developing and integrating Ninki Nanka and other cultural content into tourism experiences, handicrafts and educational materials.

The project establishes the Ninki Nanka Centre in Kotu as a dedicated space for cultural preservation and enterprise development. The centre includes a visitor information

centre, training facilities for the crafts and creatives incubator, a shop selling locally produced handicrafts and branded merchandise, volunteer accommodation, and a rooftop performance space. It will serve as a hub for developing the Ninki Nanka Trail and for providing technical support, mentoring and market access for local entrepreneurs.

Story collection activities will document Ninki Nanka folklore through participatory research and audio-visual recording. Four competitions in storytelling, craft, writing and performing arts will encourage community participation. Collected stories will be preserved in the Gambian National Archives for future generations. Training programmes aim to build capacity in storytelling, guiding, performing arts and experience design for cultural groups, artists and tour guides. The project will develop Ninki Nanka performances, music and theatrical productions for trail itineraries and local audiences, as well as providing up to 10 Gambian writers with mentoring in travel writing about their cultural heritage.

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The project will also develop handicrafts and branded merchandise featuring Ninki Nanka designs using wood, recycled materials, glass art, cloth, beads, leather and basketry. A children's storybook, showcasing collected folklore and local artwork, will be produced and sold through multiple distribution channels with profits reinvested into project activities. Six tourist experiences combining workshops and storytelling will be developed to engage 1,350 international tourists yearly. The centre will also host educational visits for local students.

The project will directly benefit more than 500 people, including cultural groups at community-based tourism villages, women's groups, creatives, artists, craft producers and tour guides. It will also engage with 12,000 community members along the Ninki Nanka Trail. Cross-border collaboration will extend the project's impact through partnerships between The Gambia, neighbouring countries, and international partners, laying the groundwork for potential regional expansion of the Ninki Nanka concept.

TUI Colourful Cultures Gambia is part of the international TUI Colourful Cultures Programme that preserves cultural heritage and supports creative communities in tourism destinations around the world.

About the TUI Care Foundation

Building on the potential of tourism as a force for good, the TUI Care Foundation supports and initiates projects which create new opportunities and contribute to thriving communities in tourism destinations all over the world. Connecting holidaymakers to good causes, it supports education and training opportunities for young people; drives the protection of natural habitats and the marine environment; and helps local communities to thrive sustainably and benefit from tourism. The TUI Care Foundation builds on strong partnerships with local and international organisations to create meaningful and long-lasting impact. The independent charitable organisation was founded by TUI, one of the world's leading tourism businesses, and is based in the Netherlands.

About Ninki Nanka Encounters Foundation

Ninki Nanka Encounters Foundation is a Gambian charitable organisation that brings people together to work towards the responsible development of the Ninki Nanka Trail to harness the untapped potential of the River Gambia for the benefit of local people. The foundation facilitates local tourism businesses, government and communities to implement a responsible approach to developing the River as a tourist destination and deliver inspiring tourism products and experiences. Ninki Nanka Encounters aims to ensure empowerment and a fair deal for communities while creating extraordinary, mutually beneficial encounters between tourists and local people.

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