

Welcome to the Smiling Coast on its way to Los Angeles **New documentary on tourism in the Gambia receives world premiere at PAFF**

The documentary *Welcome to the Smiling Coast: Living in the Gambia Ghetto* is selected for the Pan African Film Festival (PAFF), the largest black film festival in the United States. The film by director Bas Ackermann and producer Emiel Martens will receive its world premiere at the festival, that will be held from February 4-15 in Los Angeles.

Welcome to the Smiling Coast offers a rare insight into the daily lives of fifteen youngsters who are struggling to make ends meet in the margins of the Gambian tourism industry. Although the smallest country on the Africa mainland, the Gambia has become a popular holiday destination for European tourists in search of sun, sea and sex. Since 2005 the country typically receives over 100.000 visitors each year, earning its reputation for being Africa's Costa del Sol.

The luxury enjoyed by the tourists often stands in sharp contrast with the immobilities experienced by the local inhabitants, who often reside in poor neighborhoods, not seldom only a few steps away from the tourist hotels and beaches. With this lure of a better future just around the corner, many Gambian youngsters are thinking of taking the 'back way', the illegal crossing to Europe across deserts and high seas. Adopting a light (and musical) but critical tone, *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* shows the alternative and often creative strategies these youngsters employ to secure their livelihood. While being in their own living and working environment, they candidly share their struggles, hopes and dreams. Do they eventually try their luck abroad or find their peace at home?

Welcome to the Smiling Coast is the first feature-length documentary made by Dutch film duo Bas Ackermann and Emiel Martens. Ackermann is a filmmaker from The Hague who creates audiovisual productions under the name Upperrunder. Martens is a film scholar from Amsterdam who advises, produces and promotes independent film projects through his foundation Caribbean Creativity and company Dudes in your Face. Together they made *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* with a minimum budget, financed out of their own pockets and without any form of subsidy.

Ackermann: 'The idea of the film originated about eight years ago, when I was in Gambia setting up State of Mic, an audiovisual centre for youngsters with the aim to train them as media professionals. Some of them have worked as crew members on *Welcome to the Smiling Coast*, such as Alhagie Manka, now one of the leading producers of his country.' Martens: 'In times of much negative imaging, particularly around the current refugee crisis, we try to give a more humane and positive face of Africa and Africans. We also want to place a critical note about the impact of western tourism in non-western countries. We are very honored that our film will have its world premiere at PAFF, the festival that was founded in the 1990s by Hollywood actor Danny Glover and has grown into one of the world's most prominent festivals of black films.'

The premiere screening of *Welcome to the Smiling Coast* will take place on Thursday, February 11th at 6.40pm. The film will be shown again on Saturday, February 13th at 2.35pm. The complete program of the festival can be found at www.paff.org. For more information on the film, including all future screening venues and dates, see www.welcometothesmilingcoast.com.