

Weeks ending 14.11.09

I hope you will forgive me putting 2 weeks together but as it is half way through the following week (Weds 11.11) I thought there was little point in trying to write 2 pieces before the weekend. The backlog was caused by a culmination of Abigail's party and a sudden work overload – assessment week at College meant 150 test papers needed marking.

Whilst visiting the bookshop (last review) Bradley had picked up a book called *Rhinos who love to surf* which we read together for a bit of fun; it included a glossary of surfer's language which we were able to put to use the following Sunday afternoon as the surf was 'up' (best so far) at our local bit of beach. Needless, to say I was *totally amped* after numerous *awesome wipe outs* in the *rinse cycle*. I'm afraid I can't remember anymore of the superlatives but I think you get my drift – the body surfing was great and at times the waves unrelenting but too warm to drive you out of the water feeling miserable.

Back down to earth on Monday morning I commenced Trainee Teacher school observations with another lecturer; he noticed the kids shouting 'Toubab' [white person/foreigner] at me more than I did, I think with some embarrassment, but we have become acclimatised to it (I think I prefer it to the hustle from the taxi drivers assuming we're tourists, layabouts and resort 'workers' hustling for money etc). The lessons I witnessed would have failed with negative marks by any Ofsted inspector but the student teachers were at least trying with classes of 60; I'm told qualified teachers frequently sleep on the job! My return to college was delayed when the car got stuck in sand whilst trying to rejoin the main road; it was second nature for the locals to help push us out and send us on our way.

I attended the *Hash House Harriers* meeting again that evening and whilst welcomed developed serious reservations about my continued commitment. The running presented even less of a challenge this week; my running colleague of the previous week was waylaid by his wife's injury and the only other 'runner' needed to stop a couple of times – I found myself chasing gellehs to keep interested. I joined the after run drink but encountered an inactive member who proudly spends her time 'running a farm on Facebook' and boasts of numerous consequential worldwide 'friends' - if this amounts to expat community then I know it has nothing remotely in common with VSO(the devil makes work for... also springs to mind). However, if someone has something good to say to defend the community that attend the *Hash House Harriers* I am receptive – some would appear to be better than *Facebook Farmers* – and might continue an association at arm's length. This alienation feeling was further emphasised when we were told we could not join the local sports club at a reduced 'volunteer' entry fee.

To cap the day on Monday the fridge stopped working. The timing couldn't have been worse as Denise was beginning preparations for Abigail's party and I knew how much ice would be needed to get the beers cold for the event. The first job on Tuesday was, therefore, to visit the VSO office to request a replacement fridge. Fortunately they had a spare; the need for replacements is recurrent here due to the variable power supply. Ebrima, our VSO Logistics Manager, definitely saved the day. At college I was able to collect my 'pay' for the month; a wad of notes from a large suitcase(the payroll) mainly worth just over 50p each but totalling around £70 (I forget,

it seemed to disappear so quickly on Abi's party preparation which included new kitchen equipment).

The rest of my working week seemed to be filled with lectures that were again rescheduled earlier than timetabled; the reason this week was that the lecturers were completing observations. Instead of fitting them in around their timetable over the next 6 weeks many decided to complete them immediately; I am not professionally impressed and having read the following quote in the *Gaurdian Weekly* thought it had more serious undertones to the general malaise of middle mandarins also:

“Africa must own up to and challenge the role its morally bankrupt elite is playing in the continent's underdevelopment.”

I am beginning to understand why the college has the reputation it has, despite the best intentions of the Head of the school of Education.

As I was administering assessments I became aware of an enigma that applies to these Africans – in amongst the ramshackle makeshift world (viz, a car on its side to allow repairs[see Denise's blogsite], herds of cattle crossing the equivalent of the M1, THE main road for taxi use to a central terminus equivalent to King's Cross is so poorly maintained a 4WD would struggle) given a piece of written work intense detail, to the extent of anally retentive, is applied even in rough. Students, when asked to copy a table, planned it to millimetre precision to practise before submitting another final version or an insistent use of tippex rather than crossing out. They also have a habit of sharing, or supporting each other, so many papers carry the same silly mistakes that have been copied around the room; no matter how vigilant the invigilation. On another educational aside, having acquired a class list for a class of 69 I have discovered that 24 share the same first name – I had 3 Jordans last year and that seemed tricky.

Abigail's party went well; the newly acquired volunteer aunts and uncles enjoyed a party, different to the norm out here, playing kids games. Denise put on a good spread; my drinks management included a huge watermelon – about the size of two basketballs. We were joined later on by the kid's biggest fan, Adama, a craftsman from the beach who has given so much to us that he stayed long after the majority left. He is a really genuine type who has shown us how Gambians can treat each other with kindness, instead of seeing us a potential meal ticket.

Our plans to celebrate another friend's birthday at Sanyang beach on the Saturday were curtailed by a rash Bradley had developed on the Thursday. Drugs prescribed by the clinic failed to work, steroids prescribed by a volunteer paediatrician likewise so we thought it best to avoid a day of exposure to the sun and arrived late. We arrived in time to watch the sun set; nothing spectacular in terms of coloured atmospherics but more amazing the speed at which one moment it touched the horizon but was gone within 3-4 minutes. The reassuring news from home was that the temperature had dropped to 5° there; sorry to gloat, snigger, etc but it was overdue. Here the trees are losing their leaves – because they're dehydrated through lack of rain; I'm perversely tempted to let you know if the temperature drops – below 25° that is! The heat, however, wasn't good for Bradley's rash and we returned to the clinic on Sunday to be given a referral letter to the 'Medical Research Council' outpatients department when blood tests suggested anaemia.

An early start on Monday saw Bradley and myself at the gates of the MRC to be told at 7am that all the tickets to see a doctor had been given out for the day! (2-3 hours too late!) I produced the referral letter and was allowed in. We were seen by a doctor within 2 ½ hours who requested more tests; Bradley suggested he could supply a required stool

almost straight away so we visited the toilet – fortunately it was a false alarm and we didn't get our hands dirty as there was no soap, toilet paper, hand towels, etc and while that is not uncommon here it is worth comparing with the MRSA aversion we face in NHS hospitals in the UK. His rash did clear up through Monday and allowed him to return to school on Tuesday to his dissatisfaction; I managed to attend college despite sending a message to cancel my appointments in anticipation of an even longer wait at the MRC. I did manage to start to clear the backlog of herculean test marking (150) – achieved with regular naps.

During my weekly listen to the local sports programme I learnt of a forthcoming marathon run in The Gambia. I am tempted to partake and have interested my co-volunteer at the College; we will have to consider the climatic conditions before committing ourselves but may look to raise funds through our participation. I also learnt that the *Commonwealth torch* is due to visit the country next month and we'll have it longer than any other country in Africa because it was made to feel so welcome last time, so do look out for us.

The week has finished with its recurrent speed. Bradley's return to the MRC suggested that the clinic's diagnosis of anaemia was inaccurate but he has been given a course of de-worming tablets; we will have to follow suit in 3 months time. Denise felt the headache and sweats she had been suffering for a week needed addressing; a blood test was negative for malaria but she was given the malarial drugs anyway and they have cleared the symptoms. We have also learnt that another British family have moved into the neighbourhood with children the same ages as Bradley & Abigail. It will be great if they attend the same school to at least provide some moral support.

If I am to run the Brufut marathon I thought I should increase my running distance whilst conscious of family time so decided to run 10-11 km mid afternoon to ensure we could go out for a meal to celebrate Abigail's birthday (she's been wanting to go out for a meal for months now – holiday habits die hard!). For the first time in my athletic career I did carry water to go for a run using my *camel back*; it proved it's worth. For a while I ran alongside a Gambian Army cadet officer (Sandhurst trained) on a bicycle, who knew how the *camelback* worked as he had invested in one through his training in the UK but has since lost it (more likely nicked by a fellow soldier) but he couldn't keep up. I managed to run for an hour, with 10 minute water intakes, before the heat got to me but hope I have at least extended my capabilities if I am able to join the marathon. I returned to allow us to go out for a Chinese meal to end Abi's birthday celebrations; an enjoyable treat meal with the bonus of wonderful crunchy fried vegetables that the Chinese food creators of the UK seem to overcook.

The downside to these weeks has been the receipt of costings for the proposed buildings on my *field of dreams* at Brikama. The simple construction of environmentally 'green' earthbrick buildings maybe to expensive for my plans, or mean more work with different agencies to raise the necessary funds. I did at least view the, broken, water borehole that could save on the long term maintenance costs of a playable pitch; as they say here "tanka-tanka" / "doman-doman" = slowly-slowly. Tomorrow I will have been here three months, and while it might sound like I am counting down the days, I am more aware of VSO volunteers that were trained with me that had only six month placements (retired head teachers mainly) who would be half way through their projects in my shoes. Next week I will be almost "solo", veteran volunteer Anne Cassidy heads "up country" leaving Amy and myself without an old head to turn to.