

Week ending 5.12.09

Sunday was a quiet day with a short local walk, which included a prolonged splash through a stream where Denise showed improved bravery in the presence of 2" leeches. Later, the kids and Denise joined the other girls at the wifi pool resort while I joined the 'lads' to watch the Liverpool derby. The evening was spent with me skyping Dale and Mum, and writing apologies to the aforementioned tourist Peter who had been waylaid for 2 hours by officious customs personnel. I had asked him to courier some seashells the kids had collected for Abigail's classmates back in Marske with a view to establishing a tangible "link," his tour operator promotes such actions here to subsidise school budgets with pencils but this is obviously not a reciprocal agreement for the tourism economy. I know that there are restrictions on exporting some marine life but did not anticipate a dozen small dead shells to present an issue when there are vendors on the beach selling shells five times the size, or craftsmen pushing the sale of 'ju-jus' (amulets including cowries) ten-a-penny. (Maybe they're part of a racket where the sellers are related to the customs officials).

The students were officially off college on Monday while we lecturers continued with workshops. I was given the forum to extend European teaching practices in Maths, as expected by VSO; the staff was presented with games of snap and dominoes but these are beyond the experience of most Gambians so the rules were compromised – but they got the message about enlivening the learning environment. I did, however, stamp some 'Western' expectations when the caterers decided to try and commandeer the floor by producing the lunch at an inopportune moment – despite a prior agreement that it wouldn't happen! I'm hopeful such a stand has a lasting impression of some form of professionalism even if the teaching practices aren't appreciated.

Further presentations followed over the successive days including a very lively dramatic display of 'teacher centred arm waving emphasis' and a Nigerian lecturer who became frustrated whilst leading, so opined "you Gambians are just so dumb!" Calm eventually returned but apparently such regional snobbery exists similar to the English and Irish, Americans and Canadians. The students gave up on the appearance of lecturers through this time so have ended up having a 2 week impromptu break; I tried to show a continued professional attendance but with most of my applicable lectures being held in the afternoon most students had given up and gone home by the time I was due to see them. This apathy then continued once the workshops reached their conclusion; on Thursday my 'A' class asked me to start early (at noon instead of 4.30) as no lecturers had appeared so far. I obliged only to be given the news at the mid way point that the 1.30 lecturer had appeared for once and if they didn't attend within 5 minutes she would leave; I thought it professionally prudent to show deference to the other lecturer and told the students I would meet them again in 2 hours time to finish off. Within an hour the other lecture had finished! The majority of students decided to give up on the day at that point; I couldn't facilitate them as I was committed to other administration, so was faced with a quarter of the class at the re-arranged time.

I was particularly disappointed as one of the students in the class had spoke with me at length some two days before during which he said "I need a white man to help me". I explained that the white men he sees enjoying themselves in his country work hard for their money to justify their holidays and that the only way to succeed in life is through similar application. I suggested that there are other Gambians who work really hard at their studies and as a consequence gain scholarships to overseas universities which in turn provides opportunities for greater wealth on graduation and that maybe he might need to be a little more selfish in his attitude to looking after himself before paying heed to the financial begging of his cousins/ family 'obligations'. Anyhow the "get your head down and work hard" message was not what he wanted, as he was one of the many who skipped the remainder of the Thursday lecture.

I am left with a cynical view on the week. “The white man giveth” appears to be the aspiration for too many here; I came to give my time not money but I sometimes wonder whether coming for a two week holiday to spend money in the local economy without giving up my career years would have satisfied the Gambian people more so. There are some very genuine Gambians I have encountered that I might consider trying to support on my return, if circumstances allow; but they are not the ones that are asking for help.

Coming on holiday would also have meant not having to become frustrated on the local attitude to time and organisation. I say this as I have still not been able to commit myself to the marathon I mentioned a few weeks ago as I have no idea what time of the day it will be held; cool of the morning is acceptable – afternoon heat a non-starter. The radio article at that time had said registration needed to be completed at a local newspaper office but they knew nothing about it when I went, I asked at the VSO office where I was given a telephone number to contact to which I got no answer on 4 attempts. The organiser of the race was then on the radio again on Monday talking the race up, despite having lost the major sponsor (a company building ‘Spanish’ retirement villas for expats), he tediously mentioned everything but the time and gave further registration offices including his own workplace, a Brikama radio station. I visited the radio station, he was out but nobody else could tell me anything, including the person they phoned on my phone. I visited the newspaper office again but still nothing to tell so I texted the organiser ‘big Sam’ the following sentiment;

Locals tell me life in the Gambia is hard; it is harder to find out the time of your proposed marathon. So far I have spent more time trying to find out what time it will start than it will take me to run the race. Please call me with details or leave information at Brikama college so that we might enter a College team.

Has he responded? No. Registration closes in 5 days!

VSO volunteers were sent an email from the Gambian office giving a week’s notice for an International Volunteers day march and a request that we put together a five a side football team for a competition over the weekend. Similarly, no timings were given so I took the ‘professional’ European attitude that if it was important the detail would be included but that being European I had made plans some weeks before and that those took precedence. Other volunteers took the same approach and hopefully the message for development will get across. Incidentally, the march started near our home and a 9am start didn’t actually move off until 10.50. We’re supposed to accept a lackadaisical attitude to time; but why? If it continues then nothing will develop – potential investors will go elsewhere. There is no excuse in the circumstances; children get to school for 8 o’clock but their parents don’t apply the same discipline. The President turns up for ceremonial functions around the time he says (even if he does have the road closed 2 hours before). The settlements are surrounded by mosques with 5 time calls to keep prayers organised so in between more could be achieved.

This rant has continued long enough; high to the week was an invitation to attend cocktails at the British High Commissioner’s residence. Posh card with official crest (also on the envelope) to attend a reception for the Royal Gibraltar regiment; the previous challenge to drink his bar dry was not possible as we were plied with too much rich food! Needless to say it was an enjoyable evening and maybe the closest I will ever get to a Queen’s garden party; the view here, though, is probably better without walls - he overlooks a secluded beach (where I chased the small shark in week 4?). One of the volunteers did over imbibe and mislaid his mobile, when somebody tried to phone to enquire about its whereabouts some quick witted Gambian security officer pretended to be the local police station.

Two weeks left to the Christmas break but I have to rack up the work, rather than wind down, with all the downtime that has passed.