

Week ending 12.12.09

I thought this week would be unable to match last week's for insight but I have yet again faced interesting challenges. We had visited Sanyang to celebrate a birthday last weekend; the resort is uncommercial and rated as the best beach in The Gambia. It can be busy with bush safaris through the day but at *Happy Hour* most tourists leave and we drink 40p beers. Whilst there are a few bumsters the hustle is minimal; though a man who had been helping Bradley to build a sandcastle called Jimmy Fixit offered me the chance to 'skin up' on Saturday evening and in my naivety I asked him what he meant before declining the offer – Denise and James scoffed at my ignorance. So while you were keeping warm indoors, either watching or avoiding the voting stages of *Pop Idol*, we were sat on the beach around our own camp fire (built by resort staff) watching the stars. Our early Sunday morning walk allowed a different bird watching environment opportunity, and an undisturbed view of the fishermen's discard amongst the beach pirogues; small sharks, conches and varied crabs.

On my return from work on Monday I resolved to make one last effort to enquire about the marathon at the local newspaper office; I met with one of the assistant directors of the race, a Mr. Seedy Bojang (great name for a journalist, hey!) who was very keen to register me. 'Hold on', I said and explained that I could not commit until I knew timings as an unclimatised *toubab*. Eight o'clock he advised, so I agreed to join. Later that evening I heard on the radio that registration began at eight so the men's race could start at 9.30 (women's 9.15 seven km down the road); the delay I was prepared to accept for administrative purposes.

The start was 100m from our compound so I turned up to register around 8.30; nothing was happening at first so while I was looking for something official a bumster tried to help direct me. When I told him what I was looking for he knew nothing of the marathon but continued to 'try' to be the local expert; I gave him short thrift repeatedly for trying to waste my time so persistently – I told VSO at my interview I don't suffer fools gladly so I suppose I can excuse myself. A jeep arrived and I registered by collecting my T-shirt with a number written on the shoulder then went home for further hydration.

I returned at 9.20 where the runners were warming up; I completed my extended stretches explaining to the young competitors that the old man needed to do more then waited. Some others commented that the sun was getting hot when the time moved onto 9.40; I waited until 9.55 before asking when we were starting to be told that we were waiting for a bus that had arrived at the women's start. The bus duly arrived, the radio programme had suggested it was bringing runners from its greatest catchment area, but about half a dozen athletes/cyclists alighted. The bus then took bikes for the runners to use at the finish line, a police motorcyclist outrider then led off the cyclists so we runners started stretching off again. When nothing happened I returned to the organisers to ask why the delay continued; they explained we needed to wait for another escort; I suggested it wasn't really necessary as we had trained without an escort, we could use the jeep and that I needed to run before the heat of the day. Rumours then spread that the women's race had finished so the ambulance escort would return to us.

At 10.55 I went to the organiser I had been speaking to previously and asked for my entry fee in return for my removed T-shirt; he refused claiming the fault was not theirs but the Police's for not supplying the required escort (I had already pointed out that their major sponsor had withdrawn this year probably because of the lack of organisation associated with the race). I suggested that if they knew they only had one escort it should have been shared quite easily by setting off the men with the ambulance, and, when we were within a short distance of the women's start they could be started to run ahead with a 'back-up'. Men and Women can't run together I was told, showing, I felt, some diplomacy I asked why, suggesting it was a dictate of Islam but this was denied suggesting there were too many physical weaknesses so I persisted stating it perfectly normal in Europe for men and women

to run together. This point bit harder, “this is Africa, you cannot compare Africa and Europe”, “why not? How can you say that? It is what you aspire to. Why do more men wear football shirts from Europe than anything else? Surely this shows European aspirations?” I was told that Europe was different because we had new cars and that Africa got our 2-3 year old hand me downs, I agreed but pointed out the fact that new cars do exist in the Gambia, he admitted there were a few. I then justified my withdrawal using his argument that Europe and Africa were so different and that I could not compete against Africans in the heat. He conceded, stating he was only driving the vehicle to help out, but pointed me to the main organiser. (I was aware at this stage of some other dispute starting to arise, but I must distance myself from that - despite my critics who know what a tenacious *agent provocateur* I can be!)

Bare-chested, still, at this stage I tried to approach him but he was seriously engaged in some other discourse so I spoke to the Policeman behind him explaining my predicament claiming I had been defrauded of money by the organisers; he refused to help. I then learnt the reason for the dispute as other runners started removing their T-shirts with disgust; previous races and adverts had cash prizes for the first 10 places but this was now reduced to first three. A mutiny was breaking out! My grumble was suddenly very small fry for the organiser; he made phone calls and managed to upgrade the prizes to bags of rice for the first ten but this was still not satisfactory to many of the professionals. TV cameras turned up; potential loss of face was great on all parts; I heard two Gambians use the ‘F’ word (unheard of normally) they were so outraged and I was still the silent protestor. My opinion, I did share with one Gambian that pursuit of prizes was not what sport was about, and I felt maybe I should still run despite my previous grievance. An impasse seemed to be reached where any not prepared to run could get their fee returned in exchange for their T-shirts, I looked at my watch, 11.50 and still no start was imminent and I knew I had other things planned for noon and after so at the third request I took my money and ran. Well actually walked though ‘no-mans land’ into the line of protesting runners, who were blocking the path of those prepared to run whatever, to say goodbye to those that had kept me informed of the dispute. The race still couldn’t start as they were then waiting for security forces to ensure the runners could get through the cordon!

So I have suffered a marathon of sorts but have no blisters or T-shirt to prove it.

The radio show that had advertised the marathon also highlighted the arrival of the Queen’s baton, as part of a relay to Dehli around the world for the Commonwealth Games (check it out www.cwgdehli2010.org). The baton is a super hi-tech gadget with audio-visual recording devices and the schedule was planned as an opportunity to showcase the tourism industry of the Gambia in the main hotel resort area on Saturday also. I spoke with the Sierra Leone relay team during their wait for its arrival but the schedule dragged and I suspect it never made it to the beach before nightfall so the opportunity was lost with true Gambian style. I suspect it wasn’t helped by the President choosing to travel in the opposite direction late afternoon which caused the usual road closures! I did see an Indian relay team take it back up Karaiba Avenue on Sunday morning while skyping home.

What other comment can I make on the Gambia other than I did have an intellectual conversation with an older University lecturer about the lack of development since independence in the 1960s. He had experienced schooling in pre-independence days and made me feel very uncomfortable recounting the lesson he had learnt about Africans being considered sub-human and inferior to their white masters. In times of ‘spin’ manufactured political apologies (Japan on POWs, US on Hiroshima, Blair on Potato Famine, Brown imminently on ‘deporting’ orphans to the Commonwealth last century) I suppose the work of VSO through its government support is a similar statement.

I did also take something of a 'hissy fit' with a fellow lecturer who had failed to turn up for his class on Monday morning (said I don't suffer fools gladly) despite his previous insistence that we should set an assignment to complete the term. I should add that he had left the devising of the assignment to me as he had 'another appointment' which he had reconvened on the morning of the lecture. In fairness to his students I had started to administer the assignment so that they had something to do while waiting for him; he had arrived at college 45 minutes late and rather than checking if his class was still there he went and found something else to do; meanwhile I had been teaching a topic he had failed to cover. While this may sound like me blowing my own trumpet it was more my concern for these students to ensure they have the best of opportunities for the Gambians of tomorrow and to get the assignment completed. Despite me expressing my disappointment in no uncertain terms "I'm too angry to talk about it now, I need my lunch"... in true Gambian style - they don't know when to tactfully withdraw- he persisted to hear more of my criticism. We have cracked a joke since.

I spent two days observing trainee teachers in schools. The refreshing thing is that the Head teachers are so positive about the students from the college that they are given. Sadly, the children are not necessarily given the best of learning environment – I witnessed Grade 8 (Kevin & Perry aged teenagers!) homework projects of a wooden carved relief map of the slave trade triangle of Africa, America and Europe – beat that for GCSE coursework but such application is not rewarded with any enjoyment, just submissive discipline.

One of Saturday's appointments, and reason for withdrawing from the marathon, was to have the car taken away by the mechanic with a list of 5 repairs. A choked up carburettor from the dusty conditions has meant the starter motor has expired through over use. The heat has i) rendered the silicon seal between tyre and hub useless and new inner tubes are needed, ii) meant the radiator has developed a leak. I was going to get it checked over anyway as the steering had developed a judder at cruising speed. Hopefully, I'll have it back on the road for our holidays.

Good news this week is that Denise started a job as a teaching assistant; the bad news is that she thinks she's been promoted to teacher already and as she isn't trained she'll be leaning on me to guide her. The extra money will be welcome.

We had our VSO Christmas party on Saturday; a joint effort of cooking mince pies, imported Christmas cake supplemented the BBQ. I didn't feel festive before but do more so now. We have borrowed a Christmas Tree and have received some cards and card decorations from the UK this week; all we need now is for the temperature to drop 25° and rain/snow just like you're enjoying!