

Week ending 26.12.09

'Clean the nation' had been bought forward a week to avoid clashing with Christmas bank holidays. We got up early and did some cleaning before rushing to the beach to pose as tourists and avoid the 'lock down'. Before leaving we had spoke to the visiting Wilsons, they revealed the joy of sleeping on a 'proper' mattress instead of standard issue VSO foam (very sweaty in the rains and guaranteed to create body troughs). I was unaware that such a luxury existed so close to home and immediately made a mental note to ask John on his return if we would be able to inherit it when he leaves his placement in the Spring. Whilst messing in the surf one of the volunteers who had intended to return to the UK for Christmas appeared on the beach; their flight had been delayed for 24 hours following a bad landing by the arriving pilot. Mental note became an inspired light bulb and I sprinted to the hotel, where the delayed passengers had been accommodated, to get in my request for the aforesaid mattress; criticism for such a mercenary attitude I accept but my appearance at the hotel did lift the spirits of the waylaid passengers.

Our time at the beach was curtailed by a 'duty' appearance at Denise's place of work for their open day. The children had been warned that the gates would be locked at 1 o'clock so they mustn't be late. We were; but I still had time for a sleep waiting for proceedings to begin. This was probably my most boring experience of 'time ignorance' so far; things sort of got going 2 ½ hours after the scheduled time.

Later in the afternoon we attended a joint birthday party at a beach bar but arrived early to go for a nature walk. Just when we thought we were not going to see anything new for Abi's bird spotting guide we spotted a wild crocodile basking on a bank then saw another lurking with nostrils and eyes at water level – no wonder the birds were absent. This was adjacent to a public beach so demonstrates how close to nature we really are here. The party was a novelty as the venue has no electrical supply, we started in daylight but when the candles on the cake were blown out and the usual cry of "lights" was made we were very much in the dark.

Sunday's highlight was a Christmas party at the gift shop where we have sourced the children's Christmas gifts. *Wishes* imports European toys, and adult novelties, and is a real Aladdin's cave (*Toys r us* without the attitude or IT section). The store is run by a British/Indian couple, and their required 'Gambian partner,' so was well organised with the help of a German 'elf'. The kids got to sit in Father Christmas's grotto, played on bouncy castles and trampolines and walked away with more gifts than the entry ticket had cost (surplus stock offloaded) – it was the sort of treat we adults had enjoyed at the British Commissioners and the Diwali night.

A Tuesday morning walk in 'the forest' was waylaid until the afternoon by a policeman who flagged me down for using a mobile phone whilst driving. I admitted my ignorance claiming that the police, in our training, had never told us it was an offence and I had seen so many Gambians driving and talking on their phone that I had assumed it wasn't legislation yet. Front seat seatbelt legislation is less than 2 years old and mobiles have only been in the Gambia within 5-6 years so I was shocked to hear the legislation carried such a high fine (≈£50). I explained the reason for my ignorance but the policeman was persistent suggesting we would have to visit Serrekunda police station to pay the mandatory fine; we offered to go to Kotu nearby but that was not appropriate. I was invited out of the car to go and discuss matters away from Denise, where I continued to plead my case and he complained about how Europeans were allowed to come and go in Africa whereas he needed a visa. A 4 x 4 passed with the driver using his mobile phone who then pulled into the compound opposite; I challenged his lack of follow up compared to myself – he phoned his station to log the offence but recorded the wrong registration. I advised him of his mistake - expecting some gratitude – but it was to no avail; I pointed this out when he asked how I could help him and

also stated my cause through VSO. We were discussing some family matters when Denise joined us demanding to know what was happening and whether she should take the kids home instead of waiting; this was oil on troubled waters as he could see the help he required wasn't going to be forthcoming as Denise demanded I visit the station to resolve the issue. Denise left us and when I couldn't offer him 'help' (I had covered my back, I thought, by saying that I hoped I could offer help without getting myself into further trouble). I returned to the car to obtain our map of the area to find Denise on the phone to the VSO office; she was checking on the going rate for the offence I had committed; I spoke with Nuha and he committed to coming to mediate. I returned to the policeman and taught him how to use a map to direct me to the Serrekunda station and told him my boss was coming; he told me he was going for his breakfast and my boss should meet him over the road; I questioned him leaving his post. At this point a taxi driver offered to mediate; his proposal was a 'fine' of £10 but I had been thinking about our discussion and wondered whether I had missed the clue that he needed a visa to visit Europe so I asked whether the help he needed was with visa applications. He admitted he wished to study law at Cambridge, (I was thinking Criminology at Teesside) but I said I had no contacts so it was a short interchange. Nuha arrived, I advised him on proceedings quite pleased with myself that I might have got the fine down (adapting to local ways I thought!) but he told me that VSO could not be seen acceding to corruption (they'll pay a workshop attendee a *per deim* even if they turn up 3 hours late or use ex volunteer equipment for themselves instead of recycling but not this type!). Nuha sat down to negotiate in Mandinka so I was excluded from proceedings but body language looked like I was being let off but then the conversation continued on and on such that I thought we would have to visit the station - but it was the Gambian way of checking heritage. A previous boss of the copper had known Nuha so a tenuous link had been made but still he continued. Eventually my driving licence was returned (no receipt had been given) and I was let off with a ticking off for my, and Denise's attitude (N.B. it's an Islamic country so her voice is not appreciated) and my pointing out of the crime of another (the 4 x 4 driver). I think the copper had seen it as an opportunity to get one over on the white man. As I shook his hand to leave I smiled and pointed out that if he did come to the UK the act of tossing away his sandwich wrapper, which he had done while lecturing Nuha, would incur a £50 fine. Nuha complained about the amount of dross he had to listen to as we walked away.

An event on Thursday evening has convinced me that the Police are obviously indoctrinated in training to give the white man a hard time. Approaching a police controlled junction on the main carriageway after a delay the policeman made a quick hand gesture to direct the main flow through, so I set off not expecting him to mean one vehicle only, so he got upset when he made the halt sign and directed the side road traffic to join as I passed. He directed me off the road for a talking to. Tom Wilson, in the passenger seat, suggested I do like other Gambians and drive off but I thought I would practise the obeisance demanded by Nuha. As the interview started Tom tried to defend me (what do you expect? he is an ex Head teacher) but received an 'official' warning that it is an offence for any passenger to interfere with such discussions so he had to sit quietly and watch bemused. (In contradiction of this practice, I have heard of an errant Gambian driver, carrying a white passenger, where the Police demanded the passenger comment because he remained silent!). I got the lecture about how the law is applied equally to Gambians and foreigners alike and that Europeans can't assume they can drive how they like in other countries; I agreed and had to "swear by your almighty god" that I had not seen the halt signal(great gesticulation of a finger pointing skywards at this point!). He finally backed down when I told him I had a residential permit. Biting my lip in these circumstances is proving a tougher test than I had anticipated, and following Nuha's involvement previously he issued an email to all volunteers stating that we must not point out, to the Police, errors in the way they are applying the law no matter how iniquitous.

I had managed to bleed some of my frustration on Thursday morning with some fruit tree 'loping'. In a concession to UK life, I always used to treat apple trees to a pruning through my Christmas break so had offered to do the same for the landlady of our compound. I had borrowed a saw from the VSO office but found it fairly ineffective so resorted to African methods and found it incredibly rewarding. Health and Safety executives would have been aghast at a barefooted man wielding a machete clambering about the plum and orange trees. We found time for a trip to the beach in the afternoon – perfect wind down for Christmas.

Christmas Day might have been more frugal than in the recent past but I know the children have not been wanting and Denise and I thought that we didn't have a low feeling after the 'hype' on Christmas night. That maybe because the weather meant 'it didn't really feel like Christmas' or that we were away from the months of marketing we experience in the UK or even the semi-military operation required to produce a Christmas dinner (hence my proposed 'alternative' anti-organisation BBQ!). Either way I really enjoyed feeling stuffed with food on Christmas afternoon, not slouched in a chair fighting off sleep in front of the television, but stood with beer in hand, Santa hat on head, ankle deep in the ocean watching the kids splashing in the surf. We'd had time as a family in the morning before heading to the beach to meet with the other volunteers to have a barbeque (that included an Aussie, our age, who admitted it was her first Christmas Day Barbie too). The surf was high quality too, the lifeguards warned us about the situation; they were on alert for the body of a tourist washed off the beach 4-5 kilometres south on the previous day!

Boxing Day was quiet and spent locally, after skyping Christmas wishes we spent time with the children enjoying their gifts. Our up country visitors, the Wilsons, had bought the kids a plastic petanque/boules set as they are quite keen players themselves. Denise wanted to learn too so had a lesson from Tom and Lynn; I had stood back and busied myself with other things but was then challenged by Tom. I thought, considering the differing recent practice levels, I had done reasonably well to avoid a "fanny" (nil points) when he only needed a point to win and he let slip that he had represented the UK in international petanque competitions – I'm glad I hadn't known that sooner. So while English sports men were struggling to take to the field back home because of weather conditions I was testing myself against the auld enemy at international level!

Overall, it's been a good week to spend time with the kids in this environment without doing too much (brushes with the law aside). The irony of the difficulties with Police was brought home with the arrival of a copy of Teesside's local paper, *The Evening Gazette*, which had the article about our settling into a new life here, from November 4th, the journalist had asked about culture shocks for the family – I had listed them individually, Denise's was included but my observation about the lack of integrity in the local police had been omitted. Being able to read a 'local' newspaper was great even if the news was grim, and the morale boost of parcels and letters just before Christmas was better.

I've also received warming Islamic blessings for Christmas, and the New Year (both of them; Ashura & 1.1.10) from students and beach acquaintances which I feel appropriate to share if only I can do them justice:

A Happy New Year and I hope that we may witness many more.