

The week has again been predominated by daily language lessons for as much as three and a half hours a day; I have learnt to say “I don’t know” in Mandinka - which I manage to say when I am stuck – and on more than one occasion that has been the right answer without me realising it! I have, however, been able to strike up conversations of greetings on my way to the VSO Office which has meant the journey becomes protracted as the friendliness continues. We have suffered more heavy rain which has leaked into our house and made our instructors late or meant them miss giving us lessons. The instructors have also been observing Ramadan which is very hard for them. I am left wondering why a religion creates such requirements in such a hot part of the world; going without water for 13 hours a day in this humidity leaves them listless at best.

I have been out trying to find a car so that I can drive to work instead of using Gelleh-gelleh bush taxis; it has not been easy trying to find one that will be right for the job. The brief I was given by an ex-volunteer and office manager suggested that the 2<sup>nd</sup> hand car market would provide a reasonable banger for £500; the market has changed and the first cars I viewed were 10 times that amount; further investigation found some Peugeot 405s for around £2500. I had also been told that the annual Plymouth – Banjul rally produced more reasonably priced cars but now some racketeers intercept vehicles mid journey for a mechanical overhaul that inflates the prices at auction. If you have an old left hand drive vehicle this is the place to bring it. I am hoping that the VSO accountant has a friend willing to sell a Renault – no idea how old – for a reasonable sum. It won’t be the Volkswagen beetle that I thought would be readily and reliably available after the Top Gear episode across Botswana.

I hit a low point on Tuesday when I tried to contact Dale at home using my Orange mobile SIM. I had assumed that I would be able to use the SIM card to connect to a local cellphone network to make a connection with home, to ensure the number didn’t die through lack of use; I was reassured when Orange had recently sent me a text stating that their coverage overseas had got better and I topped up my phone accordingly. I failed to check where they would cover West Africa and I’m now a bit stuck with some credit that will probably be incredibly difficult to resurrect when I return.

Apart from Mandinka lessons we have been briefed on;

Aids. The President’s professed cure didn’t have the desired effect so the UN commentator was deported. Can’t say anymore.

Gender issues. Very biased, no consideration was given to male issues by some, surprisingly married, doctor in education from America who would not be drawn on the “seat up or down issue” but said that households in the Gambia where no men were present were financially better off. She also told me to expect students with their babies(maybe still breast feeding) in my maths lectures at Gambia College!

Culture. Existing volunteers told us how to cope with cultures such as mobile phone conversations under tables during meetings and poor time keeping.

First Aid. Responding to snake bites, scorpion stings, maggot eggs under your skin, heat stroke, etc but nothing for paper cuts! Entertaining chap from the Peace Corps and I’ve volunteered to accompany them on one of their initiation marches (14km in 9hours) to show them how to do it with a British stiff upper lip; I might wait until the end of my time here as I suspect my kit would rot and fall apart soon after such a trek through deep swamps.

Child protection. The lack of awareness of the rights of children in the Gambia.

The highlight of these briefings was a visit to the British High Commission. We had quite an insight into the political situation and the help available to us. The Commissioner himself is a big rugby man, who played alongside Tony Neary (England player with Bill Beaumont in the Grand Slam of 1980) and was very affable. He did suggest he would invite us to a party in December, where he challenges VSO volunteers to drink his bar dry. But we're a bit worried that one of our gang referred to him in a less than respectful way when engaging in some football banter; he's a Manchester City fan and suggested that Hull City are out of their depth in the Premiership.

I sampled local draught beer on Thursday when Mum took us out for a farewell meal. It went down very well. The logo on the brand is a Gambian Kingfisher, which is either a cunning marketing ploy to emulate another international brand, or just a demonstration of pride for local fauna. Trying to discuss the issue with a native is fruitless; they can't understand why Europeans are interested in watching birds and recording their activities; I'm not ashamed to say that I pointed out the more eccentric nature of train spotting as a European 'hobby' to defend the twitchers.

Mum left us on Friday to return to a more comfortable cooler life. Her contribution out here has been immeasurable to us. She set routines for daily chores of sweeping, water purification and laundry that should keep us right in the absence of a washing machine and 'safe' drinking water (during the rains). She left with an aching hand after all the sewing of furniture covers and curtains. She also pestered the VSO logistics manager into getting jobs done in the new house that I would have felt were not of such a pressing nature, considering the role he has to cover; 6 mosquito meshes where 2 were on my list, electrics rewired where I had bought an extension lead to make do, a soil stack and windows were also replaced at her insistence, we might even get a redecoration too where others have been denied. Don't mess with the 'Kali Memsaab'.

I took the kids for a walk on Friday afternoon around the local golf course. I couldn't believe how empty a golf course could be on a Friday, especially when you consider everywhere closes officially at 1pm for Friday mosque prayers. We only saw 2 players, with Gambian caddies, but plenty of birdlife; local guides are available to take you on tours around the course to see the birds. We also saw the renowned palm oil tappers at work and stumbled across their 'ghetto' – no danger, just friendly Gambians wishing to exchange pleasantries.

We visited a local nature reserve, Abuko, on Saturday morning. Because of the rainy season it was very quiet, only 10 visitors including ourselves, and we couldn't get to the crocodile pool but we did get to see other creatures that would have been hiding if there were more noisy people around. We saw three varieties of monkey, chipmunks, monitor lizards and birds in their naturally wild habitat and caged hyenas, baboons, antelope, parrots and pelican. To complete the treat we ate out at McFadi's, a Lebanese pizza/burger shop opposite the American Embassy - we won't afford that very often if we live within my allowance.