

Week ending 2.1.10

Well I got to Thursday this week and thought I would have so little to report then “Africa” happened all in one day. Sunday had been a further ‘play with the new toys’ day. Monday saw an early morning start to visit a small tract of tropical forest to the south, where we also stumbled on a very cultivated area. We were also looking for the river at one stage and needed help, (whilst driving through a number of Police checkpoints Tom Wilson had commented on a similarly punctuated journey in Russia where he had been perturbed by 16-17 yr old soldiers with AK47s) we found ourselves following three youths wielding machetes off into the bush without a thought for our safety – they were great and local knowledge was ideal. (I also got to drive up a hill! A first in my driving experience out here - to have a horizon above eye level. I reported back to other volunteers who were tempted to go and experience it for themselves!) Tuesday was supposed to be ‘catch up with Dale on skype’ day but with everyone returning to work the skype system was overloaded here and communication impossible; we decided to plan a night away as a treat to ourselves to return in time for New Year in the Kombos- that failed, the resort we wanted to visit wasn’t open on Wednesday but was available Thursday so we booked anyway. Wednesday’s highlight was getting smashed by the outer surf at the local beach – it was good surf for the kid’s body boards closer to the shore. I did help the lifeguard retrieve the stern of a pirogue that had obviously been broken by the sea.

So Thursday’s big adventure started earlier than usual, we drove into Banjul early to beat the mass commute and had bought a ferry ticket, printed at 7.59am, to join the queue to transfer the car and us to the North bank of the River Gambia. The woman in the ticket office suggested we would be on the boat in 20 minutes. When nothing had happened by 9 o’clock a security guard informed me that the ferry had been delayed because it needed cleaning. Fair enough, thought I, but then a 4x4 cut in front of me in the queue, I challenged him and he produced an official letter from a state department requesting unhindered passage to Senegal. I acceded, then tried to manoeuvre behind him to get to the dockside but got to the front of the ‘barrier’ queue but then saw other vehicles invited through ahead of us. 30 minutes later we cleared the barrier, so that another 4x4 could get through, but found ourselves 50 metres further on at another closed gate...and there we stayed for ...about 3 hours. One of the three ferries had broken down. We witnessed heated arguments caused by the succession of more ‘official’ queue jumping (people trying to help said it was useful to know somebody at the port). I asked an official gentleman, who seemed very pleased to make my acquaintance as the assistant manager of the terminal, who said I should not have waited as long as I had and that he would get us onto the next ferry. He then let 3 more 4x4s through (justifying them as i) needing to catch a flight from Dakar, ii) attending a funeral, iii) no justifiable reason). Denise was in tears and the kids bickering. We shortly made it to the front of the loading queue to give us ringside seats for the unloading of an African ferry; wheelbarrow boys/ porters, families with large holdalls carried between them, women with three, or more 10 litre tubs balanced on their heads, and babies tied to their backs, goats & cattle before the vehicles – over laden minibus taxis, motorbikes, garishly decorated open backed wagons topped with passengers, American style school bus with as many sanding as seated and shiny air conditioned 4x4s; a real sight to behold (apart from the 4x4s). I decided to make a run for the gangway in true African impatient style only to be shouted back by an official, “what’s your problem?” “ 6 hours of waiting!”, “hey, we have a problem with one of our ferries”, “yeah, but your friends have been all right, haven’t they?” I retorted. We embarked (behind some 4x4s suddenly called forward and a bus from the street) and set off; got 30 metres then went back because a man with a briefcase and smart clothes needed to get on! The 2 mile sailing went smoothly, I spoke with a well educated fireman(including Avon Fire Service) who suggested we should take him with us (and pay!) to visit Jinack Island as he had never been there, despite his home village being approximately 10km away.

We alighted and found our way onto the Senegal road, but missed our turning as the authorities had failed to signpost the appropriate village, let alone supply a direction sign for the island. Our guide book said it was possible to traverse the 10 km track without 4wd in the dry season; we got stuck in soft sand after a couple of kilometres, I managed to reverse away but again got stuck and couldn't move backwards or forwards. As the sense of doom threatened a Landrover appeared from the opposite direction; I directed him to a side track, which he ignored but then he got stuck in my first trap – doom reappeared. The driver did recover, and then his passengers helped us out of our predicament, he then took the wheel to drive through the undergrowth to clear the soft sand area. One of his passengers (Alpha=Alf!) offered to show us the correct way to our destination; I wasn't going to let this opportunity pass, in case we needed pushing again. He was a great navigator as I followed his instructions on need for acceleration and we hurtled along the sand track 'rallying' between trees and round blind corners, because we were so low sand was coming through the pedal holes and building up around my feet and eventually we reached a riverside clearing and I pulled up to a halt on a slope. I tried to straighten up my parking but the accelerator/ carburettor had packed up and the clutch pedal wouldn't allow me to engage any gear – oh dear; it had been like the last ride of Black Bess! Alf got a local to have a quick look at matters so that he could relay information to the driver of the Landover, who had helped us out of the sand, who was a mechanic. It had taken such an effort to reach the island I was not prepared to do anything else that afternoon and thought that things could only be done the following day – even if it meant a tow back to the port; it would be dark in a couple of hours. We then had to negotiate the crossing of the river to the 'island' from the mainland; a canoe was the only thing available for the 50m river – a return trip was agreed at 200 Dalasi (the car ferry return was 310 dalasi)- but it's a sellers market(but Alf travelled free!). The paddlers did then act as porters for the walk to the beachside resort; one of them tried to suggest I needed to return to park my car properly such was his angle on a hustle. When the same one carried Bradley on his shoulders through a swamp area, Bradley could not control his urge to pass water and did so; I was acutely embarrassed at the time but on reflection it was probably a fair comment on the extortion/ scam that had been suggested. Alf accompanied us so we bought him a drink on arrival and made an informal arrangement to meet the following morning to sort the car with his mechanic friend, the ferrymen also promised to meet us the following day. The 'island' has a history/folklore of 'spirits' and taboos such that officialdom stays away – as a result the main crop on the island is marijuana (grown quite unashamedly); I was offered some for the evening and declined. Our accommodation was an idyllic reed walled hut with ensuite open air drain for a bucket bath/ urination but no electricity whatsoever. The 'modern' chalets have become derelict due to coastal erosion (or it might be the number of flip-flops that have bombarded the coast as jetsam) – which has also destroyed the jetty that used to receive visitors to the resort; so sad to see but commonplace within the Gambian tourist industry. There were only three other guests in the resort; one of whom had a telescope for bird watching which was used to watch a partial eclipse of the moon. On a celestial note I checked my GPS, it suggested we were less than 13 miles from home; but it had taken 10 hours to travel. Our dinner was delayed – the Gambian chef had asked the tourist couple to help teach him to swim – he had stood on a weaver fish, we believe, so the spines had to be removed. What else could slow down our day we thought? (On the swimming front, consider this; Gambia's borders are allegedly based on the distance a cannonball could be fired from a ship in the middle of the river that dissects the country from its seaboard. Few Gambians can swim despite their proximity to deep water.)

We stayed up to see in the New Year by watching firework displays over the resorts and capital to the South of us. It was reassuring to see the European tourist hotel resorts having displays that spanned the time either side of midnight; the official state party(boom box started around 6pm and continued until 5 am) paid for by the President didn't start fireworks

until 10 past 12! We just imagined the shouting and blaming that was going on about who had forgotten the matches!

So that was the end of the year, and just so African – the frustration, inefficiency and corruption of the ports organisation; the vitality of the lifeblood that flows from the only real public transport; the thrill of negotiating the poor road conditions that had driven the car to its limit and the appearance of a man from nowhere that had some fixit knowledge; and facing tourist exploitation to end up in basic but beautiful lodges with the ocean to lull you to sleep, along with ndagga baseline drums from the magnificently beneficent Presidential Party.

It was hard to wake up and fully enjoy the resort for its simplistic beauty with the thought of a complex return journey. I had contemplated sending Denise and the kids home by taxi while I stayed with the car overnight awaiting my friendly mechanic from Serrekunda. We saw an amazing amount of beautiful birds while waiting for Alf to return - he was late so we delayed our sorting of the car until after lunch. We took a dip in the ocean, then Abigail trod on a washed up sea urchin acquiring a dozen spines in her foot; lunch was delayed while we operated with safety pins and finger nails; Alf proved his value in a subjective way that I think I would have failed in with the pained pleadings of my little girl. As we walked across the island to leave it was agreed we would try the car before calling for help. Misfortune plagued us again, stepping out of the canoe into deep water my mobile phone took a dousing rendering it inoperable = no Serrekunda mechanic and the car had a flat tyre (Alf suspected another scam afoot) but fortunately I had included a pump at the last minute before we left on Thursday. The car started, the accelerator worked and I was able to engage my forward gears- the sense of relief was amazing - Remy got us through the switchback ride return to the main highway. When we were clear of the sand we visited the Batik factory/community project which is Alf's livelihood; he had suggested the visit the previous afternoon and it was impossible to refuse considering the loyalty and help he had shown us. His comrades appreciated the time we spent there and gave the children gifts, Denise indulged in some shopping. We left Alf behind, despite his offer to help us get through the port with his contacts, and were amazed to be the last car onto the waiting ferry. It took an hour from ticket purchase to arrival on the south bank. If you add that hour to Thursday's 7 and divided by 2, you would have to be happy with 3 ½ hours each way; well we were in the circumstances. The car has endeared herself to us with her spirit and the break has uplifted us and restored our faith in the Gambia; though we will strongly reconsider taking her on the ferry- it may be easier to travel as foot passengers and arrange transport on the far shore. I also guess we were 'due a break' in our luck.

I hope life can return to 'routine' with the new term next week and the narrative reduced. I think I have a feel for the challenges ahead of me and have done some reflective thinking of my role and aims for the coming year; I must be grateful for that when uncertainty looms for so many.