

Week ending 13.2.10

As this saves as week 26 it must be 6 months down; the train journey from Redcar to Gatwick still seems so recent. The memories are more vivid as replacement volunteers arrive and they go through the training we experienced with a similar timetable and venues; VSO flex their muscle over our employers (well they do subsidise our wages 2:1) to expect us to take time to help with the induction process. On Saturday evening we attended their welcome party; same hotel as ours just a different bar but soft drink only – how can that be a party?

The fun for me was driving there. The venue was the *Senegambia* hotel = hub of the tourism industry such that when we walk through the taxi station at the end of our street every white person is called ‘hey, taxi, Senegambia’ usually with a ‘tsst’ to get your attention. The temptation was too great; we drove to the main rank of taxis, opened the window and I used the “tsst, taxi Senegambia,” “yeah,” two or three replied jumping to readiness. I savoured their disappointment as Remy coughed and spluttered out of the station.

A disturbed night followed; we were awoken around 1.30 by a crash – I walked down the hall to investigate in the dark aware of a strange glow in the air. An area of the ceiling had collapsed (it had been repaired last September and October when the rains were coming through, then recently an electrician had to remove a panel to amend the wiring so that we weren’t living off the landlady’s meter) bringing down with it a couple of years worth of sandy dust. I spent a good half an hour cleaning up the floor and surfaces, to ensure the children didn’t get up and coat themselves in the muck, and washing towels that had been beneath the ceiling. The remainder of the clean up continued on Sunday morning. The afternoon was spent opening coconuts; four fell through the morning – great to eat but wrecking my vegetable plot beneath them.

On with ‘life’ in the Gambia. My alien card has been updated, my residential permit is in processing so I thought it appropriate to sort the tax on the car. Ebrima, our VSO fixer, had said I needed to visit GRA(Revenues Authority) with my tax reference number and drew me a sketch map which directed me to its vicinity (landmark was ‘tree where the police sit and talk’). I walked in to find a static queue and checked that I couldn’t join it, I must be assigned a number to sit in another queue around the corner. My number came up so I was ushered into the room to show my TIIN (like an Nat Ins no/Tax ref) and insurance documents to one of the half a dozen clerks. I was then sent to join the lengthening queue outside to pay my tax(D500). We were told it was slow because only one cashier was available and another cashier was on training (at the busiest time of the year!). When another cashier did appear she had to audit a dozen different required receipt books before she could start (at which point cashier no.1 disappeared to powder her nose). I paid my money to return to the bored clerk who gave me a piece of paper to say my taxes were up to date and a disc for the windscreen. “Only one?” I asked, my windscreen had five before. “You now need to go to the Police Station,” was the explanation, I resolved to go to work as the station was in the opposite direction, I was finished at work earlier than planned - as student’s stipends were paid so they disappeared to join a queue, but still too late for the police licence office – “we open at 8” they said. Tuesday, 8.15, I arrived - to watch them dust and clean the office, get out their receipt books for an audit, sat under the picture of Colonel Gaddafi. The waiting bench was atop a munitions case. I was eventually seen and required to pay 50 dalasis for a receipt for an inspection fee and told I had to visit a testing station in Jeswang. I was suspicious that this was going beyond the instructions given by Ebrima so visited the VSO office to check it out; he did think that someone was trying to get some money out of me for nothing but said I could leave the paperwork and fee with them to resolve. On Wednesday, whilst on my way to complete a trainee teacher observation Ebrima phoned and said that I needed to attend an inspection “in person with the car” and I could join their planned attendance

of VSO vehicles at noon. I completed the observation then decided VSO support was probably the best way to get the car sorted and returned home to collect the car.

When we arrived at the testing station we were denied entry and told to park in various scattered places in the street outside and were advised that testing might be difficult because some officers had to attend a funeral. However, a smartly presented officer did start to process things quite soon – he was obviously very proud of his new reflective vest which he wore over his padded body warmer, police shirt and t-shirt(½ the holiday makers here find the t shirt too much in this ‘winter’ weather). We had arrived with 3 vehicles but receipts for 4 vehicles(1 VSO jeep was still in Banjul) so the officer walked out onto the street where we pointed to the three; he asked me if I had my warning triangles – I produced them from the boot and that was it! All 4 vehicles declared roadworthy! His office didn’t have pictures of Gaddafi but interestingly two different pictures of el prez; one titled ‘Captain YY Jammeh’ and the other ‘Colonel(retd) YY Jammeh’. I returned to the police station and received two further receipts from a clerk (the Gaddafi office with munitions case) to entitle me to tax discs for D1000 from an elder senior police officer with official crests on his epaulettes, and el prez on the wall. (I did feel sorry for him, thinking such a rank deserved less clerical work, but it wasn’t my place to question.)

On Thursday and Friday I administered tests at the college so had full attendance in my classes; it would appear that the course attracts some students who don’t really want to teach, but just a qualification as a means to an end, so they come out of the woodwork to complete the necessary paperwork. The problem with administering tests to Gambians is the real value of them, as they cheat unashamedly - justifying it as helping and supporting their brothers and sisters – but it is part of the process of education. It is also hard to control when they are forced to share desks. Some were more honest on this occasion, after my ‘ogre’ish outcries last time about maintaining the integrity of their qualifications, and I received the following plea on the back of one script.

“Sir I cannot do rest because of lack of understanding. God bless u give you long life peace & prosperity.”

The offending test had a high level of algebra, something I had covered really quite slowly to ensure all abilities had a chance of understanding it this time around, but whilst I was enthused and enjoying the extension beyond the Primary curriculum it was still too much for many; such is their education experience. Creative invention is one area where some succeed; keen to ensure their work is kept together lengths of cotton appear from hems, clips/ staples are fashioned from splinters from the desks and on this occasion a used cotton bud! Not only had it absorbed bodily fluids it had then spent some time on the floor acquiring dirt before one cotton wool ball had been removed to allow the student to create a ‘pin’! Lovely!

Commuting was hindered as the car made it to Brikama on Thursday morning but developed a valve puncture on arrival (on a tyre 6 weeks old, apparently it’s the effect of the heat here). I was unable to release the nuts to replace it so had to use a gelleh to get home; easier said than done as the first available vehicle was incredibly squashed for my frame; but they were insistent when I got off complaining there wasn’t enough space, and they found me a better seat. Five miles later the gelleh ran out of fuel so we were stranded on the highway. I did make it home eventually on what could have been an early finish.

The children had to return to school on Friday afternoon at 4pm to compete in the annual cross country. It was much better organised than the Sports day though the PE teacher/ coordinator did seem to think his most important role was to spoon out powdered glucose to runners when they had finished. Bradley was involved in the first race and won; a much better experience than the balancing race he had to complete at the stadium. But he had finished so confidently I suggested he ran in the subsequent race of older children; where he only managed to come third. We kept his success a secret from Abigail as she was less confident – she didn’t come last, by a

long way, but was running against some girls 3 years older than her, such is the schooling system here.

On Saturday I went for a training walk with James, husband of a co-volunteer. He enjoys walking so we have been contemplating walking the coast/ North-South width of the Gambia. When I had suggested this as a fund raising venture to Nuha he had suggested it was impossible (such is his 'typically' Gambian response to such exercise). We planned to check out the first 16-17 miles from Denton Bridge (outside Banjul, defensive bridgehead for protection of government on the island capital) to Tanji(decent gelleh station for return trip). The first challenge after 5-10 minutes was a river crossing through a mangrove swamp; good 'boys own' adventure with backpacks above our head into the water up to our chins, then strip off to wring out the undies on the other side all before 8.15 on a February morning! After that things went more smoothly - other than fending off the hustle of juice bar owners desperate for white custom. At lunch we did have a heated debate with one, who wouldn't leave when asked politely nor would he explain why we apparently have it 'easy' in England and we do less than the Dutch and Germans who sponsor more projects supposedly, it ended up with both sides accusing the other of racism. I am tempted to create a T-shirt with the logo "Hustle harms the Gambia" to wear on the beach; Adama advises against this as it will infuriate the bumsters – but I think it needs to be said even if 'the truth hurts' (many of them apparently gain Dutch courage from drugs before trying out their patter so I might have to be careful of that aspect). This education may also be going beyond my VSO role – I might need to check it out.

Whilst the aim of our walk is recreational we also feel it may be appropriate to do some fund raising for the purpose of supplying some materials to the college for sporting purposes. With sports in mind we had considered linking our challenge to *Sport Relief* in the UK; to make a closer association we are considering wearing *sport relief* socks throughout the challenge if we can acquire some; we can then auction them on Ebay upon completion. However, we can't do the *Sport Relief* weekend in March (it's Bradley's birthday and I will have just returned from my upcountry trek) - so it is likely to be in April. If you were going to contribute something to *Sport relief* could I ask you to consider our venture instead; whilst we don't have an official charity website, trustees etc. we will make sure that the money will go closer to the root of the problem than via a BBC call centre.