

Week ending 20.2.10

After walking for the day on Saturday and wishing to go to watch the Italy v England match in the afternoon I thought I owed the kids some time on Sunday morning. So I started the day chopping down a tree for the landlady. The removal of the orange tree cleared the middle of an old gnarled plum tree which has allowed the children to climb the remaining tree. Abigail had suggested she would like a den in the garden so using some of the boughs of the hacked down tree I was able to oblige. Abigail ended the morning saying “this was the best day ever”, as I had created a climbing frame in the tree and made her a den; objective achieved I thought – all the time enjoying myself with local tools (machete and hand hoe) in hand. I had also earned ‘brownie points’ with the landlady.

My walk to watch the rugby was awful; patriotically I had put on my 2003 replica England navy shirt and set off to walk the most direct route to an expat bar – across the golf course and Kotu stream mudbank. Unfortunately high tide meant I couldn’t cut across the stream so I had to detour through the tourist resort area. Local bumsters, too stupid to think otherwise, then persistently plagued me with fake cockney accents “Hey Arsenal”, “the gunners are good man”, etc because the shirt bore an O2 emblem. Obviously O2 have done their job as these bums weren’t clever enough to recognise that Arsenal never wear navy and don’t have a red rose for a logo and have failed to consider the latest advert on the gunner’s shirts. Wearing the shirt was definitely not a source of pride, and hardened my resolve to take a stance against the moronic Gambian hustle of tourists.

The start of the week will be remembered for transport experiences. Monday’s gelleh trip ended at a police checkpoint when the vehicle was ordered off the highway for a faulty tyre. I saw it when it had been removed and thanked my luck; the metal wires were visible though about 20% of the wall of the tyre. On Tuesday I needed to take the car back to the mechanic to rectify an oil leak on a route, through Serrekunda, I usually avoid due to the traffic congestion. On this occasion I thought I had avoided the usual hold up by latching onto the tail of a vehicle that had flashed me to get out of his way, a black van (like some of the President’s entourage) which bore the words ‘Banjul Funeral Services’ on the side. I’m sure anyone who has been held up by a funeral procession would have done the same to take advantage of this opposite to our norm! Good while it lasted; I was so focussed I missed my turn and had to double back!

The teaching was ‘routine’ at the start of the week but on Wednesday I nearly had to suspend teaching for a smoke filled classroom. It is the time of the year when the ‘brush’ is burnt back, before it re grows in the rains. A fire on the University Chancery (boo!) grounds got out of control and entered the ‘block’ where I was teaching; flames licked the outside wall sending smoke into the room. Fortunately, the stuff burns so quickly when it is so dry than the air soon cleared, after I had shed a tear or two!

The journey home was eventful; I became aware of armed soldiers loitering in fields around a check point where we were diverted to the opposite carriageway – quite common when the president ‘is travelling’ and the people have to suffer the inconvenience of their arterial road reduced to a crawl for a 3-4 hour window of opportunity. There were also schoolchildren outside their schools on the verges, and more armed soldiers in the wetlands. The gelleh driver took a diversion through some back streets south of Serrekunda which caused no end of consternation amongst some of the passengers(I was reminded of the bus driver in *Liverbirds* who used to detour his bus for family members) before we rejoined the highway. When I reached my connecting junction I found the main commercial avenue, of the Gambia, was also closed in anticipation and so no transport was available for the last 3-4km. I had to walk along the crowd lined road exchanging pleasantries with more AK47 slinging soldiers through more schoolchildren in uniforms and female Madrassa students in birkas. The purpose of this was to

celebrate 45 years of independence on the subsequent day; somehow, I didn't feel I was in an independent country. The most positive thought I can make is the adornment of lampposts with the flags of neighbouring countries did smarten the place up for a bit- they'll soon be well tatty and dusty.

We did take advantage of the public holiday for a day trip out. Denise and I had been wondering whether keeping the car as a viable option given the restrictions, taxing complications and the mechanical bills. We feel the 'freedom' a car allows doesn't really apply here: we aren't allowed to drive South due to VSO restrictions on Casamance; West is the ocean; East along the south bank of the river isn't recommended because of the road condition and along the north bank requires a ferry crossing (and potential 6 hour wait at the docks). The car's value is therefore questionable but I wanted to see how far travel on the south bank was feasible. The tarmac disappeared 50-60 miles from home and we then had a bumpy ride on the old laterite for another hour before we felt we had experienced enough. We did experience the wonder of rural Africa through villages with enthusiastic waving children until we reached a 'rough and ready' but beautiful riverside lodge. We aim to return to probably stay in one of the rooms, stilted in the river among the mangroves; the kids were wowed by a swarm of fruit bats roosting in the swamp so they also look forward to another visit. The car struggled on the homeward journey – we hope it is just an afternoon thing when Remy is asked to drive in 3rd gear for sustained periods in dusty conditions; the roadside trees were coated in thick red dust. She also 'lost' an indicator/ side light - rattled away through the rough ride she was given.

I had been warned not to expect much from college on Friday following the holiday so waited at home for Anne & Amy, the VSO volunteers living in Brikama, to report on the state of play. When Anne couldn't find any students of the class I was timetabled to teach I thought a two hour commute would be a fruitless endeavour. The kids are off on their half term break so more could be achieved at home; so I suppose it is fair to comment that February 'duvet days' can apply here but I was up and about fixing the den, cracking open coconuts, picking grapefruit – and planning my teaching.

Next week will be different, Anne and Amy are both on up country observations so I'll have the college office to myself – I fear for the students with their repeated requests for stationery supplies; I'm not as accommodating as the ladies. At the end of the week I'm expecting to support some visiting Junior RFU coaches from a Kent club so will look to try to contribute further to the game, whilst not wishing to over commit before the arrival of Mum and Mike.

STOP PRESS. I don't usually do this as I usually think through the week and sleep on it before despatching but I thought I would share an incident on the way to the wifi café; it might help your breakfast go down! I walked further along the back lane than usual passing two boys sat with empty burnt catering size food cans with a lid contraption – they showed their catch and offered them as food; 8-9 inch rats! Denise has seen bigger!