

Week ending 6.3.10

On Sunday we had been invited to a *Holi* party, it's the Hindu festival of colours but we knew little about what to really expect – we had seen some photos of last year's event when we attended the Diwali party in October. It was superb fun - and a great relief from the day to day temperance and development conscience. For about 4 hours we were party to/ witnesses of a water fight which involved water bombs and food colourings, a swimming pool, gorgeous Indian food and free alcohol. These Hindus know how to party! The swimming pool started clear, such that if you fell in having been doused with a dye, an unpleasant yellow cloud appeared around you, but by the end of the afternoon the water was brown, and seeing your underwater tummy impossible. We tried to clean ourselves that evening but failed – the kids still have orange streaks in their blond hair. We did have a good chat with a South African woman who had played 'corporate wife' around Africa and she complained how the Gambia was one of the worst African experiences possible; her son shares a class with the president's daughter!

The change of diet for a day meant Denise was unable to go to work on Monday; I had an unusually early start, covering for a colleague on an up country observation trek. But my afternoon class was cancelled for the bereavement of a student's wife, who died through childbirth – fairly common here. Tuesday's work was 'standard' but getting home was important to welcome Mum and Mike. I was also greeted with the news that Bradley had been selected to represent the school in race at another school on Saturday – can you imagine it? Representative sports for the under 6! We were concerned it would interfere with our plans for getting out and about with our visitors. (Fortunately, the event was postponed on Thursday). Mum and Mike duly arrived and we met them on the tourist strip in Kotu.

I acted as local guide on Wednesday morning before listening in on the Thomas Cook welcome spiel provided as part of their package and learnt little other than we'd been ripped off back in September visiting a local crocodile park. I went to work late and while my life was uneventful Mum had slipped poolside and damaged her wrist. The following morning, while my work was again 'standard' Mum's injury had unfolded into revealing a fracture of her wrist bones – Mike decided to set her arm in a temporary plaster until she can return to the fracture clinic in North Devon. Some of my students, on Friday, suggested, quite earnestly, we would be better going to a local faith healer.

Friday proved frustrating; I visited a charitable organisation on my drive to work and found myself supporting them more than the contribution I had sought to beg from them. At college the internet was so slow I found myself late for my lecture. I needn't have bothered; the arrival of the stipends had been announced so students were preoccupied with getting their monthly 'grant'. I waited for an hour before cancelling and heading home. That proved onerous as the car let me down; it had been with the mechanic from Saturday evening until 10pm on Wednesday – run with no problems on Thursday but developed a fuel leak on Friday where the electricians tape had started to fall off the carburettor supply – as usually happens when coated in petrol. Mola had suggested an electrical problem on Wednesday; could that have been caused by fuel leaking all over the place? I have to accept that my car has been 'Gambianised' and these sort of things are par for the course.

I have a dilemma for the week; have I been an irresponsible parent? Last Friday a dead dog appeared at the end of our street; through the day it expanded as the internal gases heated. We missed any explosion but then have watched the vultures take it apart as we have walked to school this week. The smell isn't great – should we phone the council so the children don't have to witness such acts of life?

On Saturday we got up early to go on safari. Mum had liked the opportunity provided to go across the river Gambia to visit Senegal (we had the country later on our itinerary).

Unfortunately we couldn't relive the excitement of heading off in our own car as the 6 hour wait on New Year's Eve had made us think twice about the possibility of trying to do it for ourselves. Instead we had to pay for an excursion; we were delivered to the port where another vehicle, converted Bedford 4 ton, had been delivered at 4am was supposed to take us to the other side of the river, but it wasn't early enough for the 7 am ferry so we were transported as foot passengers. In Barra we had to visit a café to await the transport (about an hour later). In that time I was again accused of racism threatened to be 'stuck with a knife' because I tried to educate a Gambian (or maybe he was Jamaican as that is where I should fear for my life!). This unpleasant start to the morning happened because a hustler followed us into the café and tried to sell us some books and pencils to give to the roadside children on our way. I stated this was not a good way to treat the Gambian children as it encouraged unsustainable reliance on the good nature of Europeans, I am a development worker and that what he was suggesting I could not support as it was detrimental to the youth of the country. "Do not disturb me," he replied to which my obvious answer was "I'm not, you're the one who followed me and has insisted on talking to me. If the children need these things give them to the children yourself." He became abusive, I asked him not to swear in front of my children, and before the accusations and threats he admitted he needed to make a profit! His colleague suggested they leave; fortunately they did, without any sales.

On arrival at the Senegalese border the truck had developed an oil leak, which impeded our progress 5 kms from the game reserve. It was decided we should continue and use another vehicle at the reserve. We did, and got half way around the reserve when the third vehicle of the morning developed a double puncture; but this was discovered at the site of a buffalo herd – one of Africa's grumpiest animals; they were sufficiently spooked by our presence and left us alone. We were fed at the park with a 'bring/make your own sandwich option'; Europe meets West Africa compromise as Gambians eat a breakfast baguette sandwich around 11am and lunch (rice) around 3pm- this was between 1.30 and 2. On our return we stopped to look into a mud brick house family compound to witness rural life before visiting a community project at a village called Kanuma. This is the home/ workplace of Alpha/Alf (our hero from our New Year excursion) so it was a fortunate meeting. We were able to collect the batik we had paid a deposit for and witness the entertainment he had previously described; okay, it was staged for the tourists but in a better way than the troupes that visit hotels - as the village children all joined in with the dancing and performance. On arrival at the ferry port the queue for vehicles was too long to stay with the limping Bedford so we returned as foot passengers to be delivered home by yet another vehicle. Things had gone wrong through the day but the travel company continued to react to the situation to achieve a positive outcome proving that it can be done by Gambians; one British tourist hadn't seen it with my 'experienced' eyes and had demanded an early return without lunch after the puncture incident. We had also, again, witnessed the wonder of rural Africa, met an old friend and all told had a welcome excursion. It has been a varied and expensive week; I feel guarded about sharing it with other volunteers when some are contemplating their future in the country after witnessing horrific domestic violence where a whole village watched on and then 'consoled' the perpetrator – we are so lucky.