

I'm writing a two part report this week as I won't be able to use a computer for the remainder of the week as we're off "up country". Where we are heading it might take 6 hours to travel 20 miles, electricity will be rationed and we are more likely to experience traditional Gambian village life for entertainment. We have to leave all valuable items in the guarded VSO office while we are away, and that includes this computer – we really have to plan ahead and second guess now.

The importance was stressed on Sunday when another volunteer had a break-in while she was out. We then had an intruder in our yard that night, Denise woke me when she heard a cutting sound, I got up and spotted a surreptitious looking local peering through our kitchen window, when he touched the mosquito gauze I told him to "go away" in Mandinka, so he ran off saying that he was there for a lesson! Yeah, right, midnight on a Sunday! The security/ yard boy walked down the garden some five minutes later with his torch (on reflection, to probably cover his complicity). In the morning I checked the window to find the gauze had been cut, (he would have "pole-fished" if not disturbed) and later told the landlady. She informed me that the yard boy was going to be sacked 3rd September because he doesn't speak her language and he has too many friends coming into the yard. His going might make things worse for a while, but we do have an extra light in the yard as a consequence. Some neighbours also accosted me in the street yesterday, to protest the innocence of the accused thief (they say everybody knows everybody in the Gambia); the lad (shamefaced with tears at this point) claims he was after oranges from the tree - so I suggested that maybe there had been someone else at my window that I had seen, to give them a way out; his friends accepted this and shook hands but the culprit wouldn't. I hope he has learned his lesson but I suspect he will try something again in the future.

My Mandinka lessons have now finished and I think I just passed my test today. My VSO boss, Nuha, joked with me that after all the years I had been setting tests as a teacher - now the tables were turned. I might pass on a sympathy vote; while practising our language, with instructors, in a local market I trod on a dislodged concrete block that took the skin off the length of my shin. In the UK I would be suing the council for compensation; here I'm just hoping the rain had washed off the tetanus, etc and that I won't have to turn my leg purple with gentian violet solution.

The other very useful lesson we had this week was preparing and cooking Gambian food in the traditional way. I volunteered to start preparations outside with the large grinding bowl and a large cudgel to mash onion and tomato (3 foot pestle and 2 foot mortar); no chopping boards are used here. Due to my enthusiasm I was then asked to mind the cooking of the Domoda stew – the phrase "slaving over a hot stove" couldn't have been truer as I stood in the blazing midday sun; my younger colleagues stood in the air conditioned interior sipping Cokes and Fantas! The food was good but the carbohydrates burnt in frustration as I tried to upload some photos to the school blog that afternoon. The internet is so slow, (and uploading photos crashes the connections we have found), but it could best be described as akin to driving a car with the handbrake on, when it is at its best in the morning, but when the USA gets online in the afternoon, three space shuttle specification drag inducing parachutes are applied!

I have now bought the car previously mentioned to make my journey to work simpler, and to allow us to get out and about to see the surrounding countryside and wildlife.

The car would definitely not be allowed on British roads because of the broken body parts and windscreen but it will run well here. The body/ chassis are from a Renault 19 GTD but the spec should stop there as the engine has been replaced with a petrol one which has some strange bolted on carburettor and a disconnected speedo cable so mileage is immaterial. Whatever its VIN says is irrelevant really, I suppose the best clue to its origin is an over sprayed Dutch id sticker- it should really be put forward for the Foreign Legion. The kids think we should call it Remy, after the French rat in Disney's Ratatouille. The accountant who helped source the car has expressed an interest in the car and has already asked me to sell it to him when I leave. To buy the car for £950 in two instalments we had to create a witnessed written agreement between myself and the seller; I signed my name but the seller cannot write – he needed to “make his mark” using a thumbprint only. It makes me realise how much work I will have to do in my time here. Remy is currently in the hands of a mechanic having work completed on its universal joint and front wheel bearing (can't afford a windscreen as well here, may be cheaper in French Senegal?) and should be delivered on Sunday (Gambians work 7 days a week and are still financially poor).

On Sunday we went for a long walk on the local beach. The children got to experience one of my fondest African childhood memories – chasing crabs into their holes before filling them – we found a river bed with hundreds of the crustaceans for Abi and Bradley to terrorise. They also helped some local fishermen pull in a drag net, though they didn't get to share in the paltry catch; a lot of effort for little return. Before returning home we had a swim in the warm ocean, Gambian children are fascinated by Abi and Bradley and usually come up to them to shake hands which they did when Abigail was in the surf with me. But a group of boys became fascinated with me as they had never seen such a hairy body and arms before; it could have been considered a bit of a mobbing but we had great fun splashing in the breaking waves until the lifeguard came and told the boys to move to safer waters, oops! He then introduced himself as “Midnight” –one of the best swimmers in the Gambia who suggested we could share skills some other day; he claimed to have been a spear fisherman able to hold his breath for 4 minutes, definitely a skill worth learning; he also suggested I had been misinformed when advice had been given that a snorkel and mask were of no value here.

Part 2

The highlight of Thursday was being forced to ‘move on’ by security staff outside the American Embassy; I was stood chatting to another volunteer on the opposite side of the road. I wondered whether the CIA had focussed their satellite on us! Is it any wonder the Americans set themselves up for international attacks with such an attitude?

On Friday morning we met the latest volunteers, a married couple, both ex head teachers who intend to take up posts at the far end of the country, the Wilsons. Their arrival was heralded by the worst tropical storm, during the night, that we have encountered so far with the wind loosening mosquito nets and lightning so persistent you could read with it. I jumped out of bed convinced the children would be in a state of terror but they slept through it all; Denise was too scared to stay in bed alone so followed behind me – giving me as much of a fright as anything!

We crossed the River Gambia on a busy ferry amongst lorries, bicycles, bush taxis, loose cows and chickens and soon found ourselves on a track where huge puddles every 100 metres or so slowed us down to a crawl but the countryside/ jungle

woodland was very impressive. Visiting any village requires the acceptance of the village chief; which we had to do. I was expecting an elderly gentleman to welcome us in broken English; instead an educated voice sent a couple of the party to sleep with his explanation of local government. We then drove along a track tilted at 45° to reach our lodge for the night – a beautiful riverside resort. However, the luxuries that we usually associate with the word ‘resort’ don’t apply here – water runs out every so often and electricity is only available for 4 hours in the evening. I had programmed my GPS the previous evening and on checking it we were only 14.5 miles from home; it might as well have been 14000 miles! Our accommodation was best described as ‘basic’ (after 4 complaints to the owner we did have running water – a leak, until the borehole dried up) but the food was good. We were entertained by a women’s group performing traditional music, singing and dancing; we were also required to join in the dancing (stamping the beat and flapping arms) but it matched my rigid ‘dad dancing’ style anyway.

I endured the hottest night’s sleep I have ever known and woke to the sound of rain; I needed a shower but the water was not running so I went outside and started to shower in the rain. I wouldn’t recommend this to anyone because;

1. you might drop the soap, it gets very sandy and isn’t nice to wash with.
2. it might stopped raining before rinsing the soap off.

Both happened.

Whatever complaints we had about our conditions they were reduced to nought with a telephone call from VSO UK to inform Tom Wilson that his brother had collapsed and died, aged 53, the previous day – the Wilsons left Gambia within 48 hours of their arrival. After a substantial breakfast we set off for our second destination, we checked into another lodge (same sort of restrictions on water and electricity as before) before visiting one of the world’s most infamous centres for slaves. We were educated in the history of the slave trade through its association with Kunta Kinteh, the first hero in Alex Haley’s *Roots*. We trod a path followed by many an Afro-American pilgrim and I looked for somewhere to use my *American Express* card, not a chance. Meanwhile the village children wanted to walk with us holding hands. Abigail and Bradley were a big hit and found themselves in games of ‘follow-my-leader’ and ‘tig’ with fronds of tickling grass. Later, we were entertained by a drummer, griot, whilst visiting a slave prison/fort in the middle of the river. His version of “no woman, no crime” was very reminiscent of Vic Reeves on *Shooting stars* performing a club singer style variation!

Our return home today was supposed to be a simple affair. However, our driver/my VSO boss, Nuha, needed to collect some wood from his village so the rest of the vehicles continued on the main road while we made a detour of about 50 metres. Unfortunately, the rains had turned his yard into a bog and our jeep got stuck in the mud – front and back wheels. Whenever you see that sort of thing on a television programme it is usually sunny and there is another vehicle to help pull it out – continuing rain made us sink more and we didn’t have another vehicle to help! With the help of a dozen villagers, spades, a dam to halt the continuing flow of water and some planks (wood and metal), we managed to free ourselves but were well and truly soaked and muddied by the effort. It represented a good exercise in Western ideas to try to resolve a problem (I wanted to jack the vehicle using levers from felled trees) but local knowledge threw Mandinka muscle at the problem, so dead lifting the suspension and scrummage pushing were the skills applied on my part. I was also able

to joke with Nuha how the presenters on *Top Gear* had spent two episodes unsuccessfully trying to stop such a Toyota Cheyenne with walls, drowning and explosions but they had missed out on the ultimate test of his own back yard. A cold shower at home three hours later was really welcome.

Nuha had suggested we might want to change on the way back and that we could stop at another family members house along the way; unfortunately our dry clothes were in the other vehicles. Whilst Nuha took the opportunity to change we were left outside; a dozen or so children came up to the jeep to chat to Abi & Bradley, I disappeared into the bushes to relieve myself but on my return an infant had been brought out. The poor thing had never encountered a white man, I assume, because she ran away terrified; not a pleasant experience for either of us.

After these exertions I have my new job to look forward to; on Tuesday I will be taken to meet my new employer and I will have to start to plan my teaching and complete the role I volunteered for. The car didn't turn up tonight.