

Week ending 20.3.1022nd Mar

What a week to remember! On Friday evening I was asked by a new volunteer how I found the Gambia from experience; I told him I'd have to get back to him after I had evaluated the recent trek, my overview had changed. I had been to an area where *The Rough Guide* isn't rough enough!

The proposed 10.30 collection on Sunday was postponed at 10.20; the jeep hadn't got its fuel sorted. I was collected just after noon to then spend an hour collecting other members of the team from the Serrekunda township before a further stop midway to Brikama (home of the college). I had expected us to travel to the ferry port at Banjul to use the good North bank road from Barra, the college have used up the allocated ferry passes for the main crossing so we had to aim to use the less popular crossing at Soma- but use the rough South bank road (knackered the car week 27). We stopped at Brikama to have a new universal joint fitted (not a Sunday afternoon *Kwikfit*), then visited the market for snacks, then a chop shop to eat (15 dalasis=35p), then the driver's compound to collect his 'brother' who wasn't there but we did meet him on the highway to give him, and his bottle of compressed air, a lift 30 kms along the highway. We caught the ferry at sundown before stopping at Farafenni for more chop shop eating; it was dark and as there was nothing to see so I managed to sleep while driving over the 'luxury' of tarmac road until Janjanbureh, then awoke for the 'farm track' to our stop at 10.30, at a school where we woke up the teaching staff to find us somewhere to sleep. We were at the far edge of region 5, poised to attack region 6.

We awoke at first light and left 7.30 to cross the border of the region at 8am. My expectation of a 'plan of action' disappeared as now we were in region 6 the leader wound down the window and asked a passerby the whereabouts of the nearest school. That started a chain of successive schools for the following four days; more ad hoc than possible to imagine. The detail would be tedious to list but I should share some reflections.

I had read a VSO commissioned survey which had highlighted the difference between up country teacher attitudes and those of the kombos areas, it was as well I did to prepare me for my expectations. Class sizes are smaller as the population is greater spread but less supervision means the teachers have a far less professional approach in paperwork and dress (headteachers in baseball caps, dress codes advising teachers shouldn't wear singlet and shorts but baggy jeans and 'bling' *Hustler* T-shirts are OK).

I lived without electricity and running water in different 'locations'; having a bucket bath most mornings (one morning after a night on the floor) made me feel a bit like a military field exercise, not a 'professional' teacher – the main difference was that I had to dress smartly instead of fatigues. I found a lot of 'peace' time; the poem reads "we have no time to stop and stare," but I did find time to stop and stare as life's pace required in simple villages of mud huts and straw roofs. I also spent much time sat in the back of a jeep, usually excluded from most conversations held in the vernacular, looking for wildlife that has disappeared from this part of Africa.

I stared at the night sky; I thought we had a good sky to view compared to the UK but with the lack of light pollution inland there are so many stars. Orion is usually easy enough to see in outline back home but in these skies I saw about 50 other stars within the Orion 'body' section. I shared 5 communal food bowls in different communities but realised how simple life can be. I did get to the town of Basse when I sought medical advice for an itchy rash (maybe scabies) and left the team for a night/day but it was like Las Vegas by comparison – I ate in the only restaurant in town with Tom & Lynn. They only have chicken (covered in tomato ketchup) and chips on the menu.

If anyone could tender a swap, maybe on E-bay, of a 50kw Electricity generator for sufficient solar panels to support 33 computers I could put you in touch with a school that has been lumbered with the 'blessing' of an electrical supply they just can't afford to use.

I met a Headteacher, in his 20s, who graduated as a teacher in 2007 but has been a Head for a year and a half after his 'probationary' teaching year. Such is the difficulty of retaining teachers in the rural areas(300 metres from Senegal but 300kms from his kombos home).

We really should value the infra structure we have of roads and lanes, much of our time was on dirt tracks where zigzagging is the only option; some would be challenges for the tanks of our army let alone the minibuses of standard transport.

My overnight detour into Basse entailed a visit to the clinic to have a rash checked over. The doctor didn't wish to take any chances so sent me for lab tests which included the need for a stool sample. I was directed to the public convenience within the medical grounds and do not believe I have encountered a more unhygienic area on earth, I selected the pit drop with no excreta in the foot well but discovered natural cleaners had taken over; the hole was a writhing mass of maggots. As I tried to think of other things my mind considered the scene in the film *Trainspotters* when Ewan MacGregor drops his fix accidentally into the dirtiest toilet in Edinburgh and then tries to retrieve it. I think I might have swapped places given the option at least he had running water.

I did feel slightly out of my depth when I tried to rejoin the team after the all clear from the clinic. They had told me to meet them in Barrakunda when I spoke to them at 12.30. I found the necessary transport, after crossing in a canoe ferry, and waited from 1pm until 4pm for the vehicle to fill up before setting off. As I had no map I was not confident that I had found the right vehicle so sought to recontact the team - but they were out of range of mobile communications. I did re-establish contact just after the vehicle set out, during which time I had agonised over whether I should just get back across the river to the safety of Tom and Lynn rather than find myself stranded in strange borderlands without communications, to be told they had now left Barrakunda so I should go to Badjakunda. "Is that possible?" I asked, "Can you speak to the driver?" "No, I'm at the back of the bus in the opposite corner to him." My phone was passed forward, and after 2 interrupted calls due to lack of signal a suitable drop off point was negotiated. I rejoined the team after a 23 hour interlude.

The decision was made around 3pm on Thursday that we had achieved as was feasible with the resources available = insufficient fuel supplies so we should head back to Soma for the night. I checked my GPS, only 186miles from Fajara. Great, I thought, I had wanted to return to Basse but this gave me the chance to be back for more of Bradley's birthday than I had previously anticipated. Despite a puncture (3rd of trip) on the drive to catch the last ferry we arrived at 8.29; the last ferry left at 8.30! Negotiations were made and the ferry made an extra journey, but we had to "tip" the captain (10x the normal foot passenger fare). The team then split as they were taken to various friends and family in the Soma area and I was left with the driver to go to the accommodation at the Region 4 Education offices. Unsure of what was happening, as all discussions had happened in Mandinka, we waited roadside for 'a man with the key to our lodge' I was told, he never appeared but a young lass with a bowl of food for Buba did. I had been warned that he had a bit of a reputation, from veteran Anne, but this explained why he had been so keen to get us back so quickly. He took her home apparently 3 hours later, whilst also recollecting a member of the team and acquired another puncture.

I got up with the daybreak expecting another early start to get back for midday. The driver got up at 9, discovered the puncture half an hour later but also claimed to have lost the wheel brace the following evening so we had to wait for the driver of a similar vehicle to come to work so we could borrow his. We eventually left Soma at 12.45. I was quietly fuming at that stage about the delay and had suggested to Sulayman Cole(the cynical well poisoner of the trip) that I should sit in his 'grumpy seat' for the way I felt. The comment was rejected, Sulayman is diabetic and the delay had denied him his medication. My mood was not helped by the fact that

my phone had discharged all of its power; I had not taken a plug in charger expecting no electricity but had taken my wind up torch with adaptor for phone charging. I shouldn't have relied on 'gadget' technology as the wind up connection isn't very good so little charging is possible - and I drafted 2 texts arranging my return which were wasted as the power died as I was about to 'send'. The driver drove slower than he had at any point on our trek, I assumed to conserve fuel, I suggested that if we wound the windows up and used the fan we could make better time- the idea was rejected. After we had stopped separately for prayers(hard to argue against on Fridays), bananas, charcoal(twice), oranges I explained that it was the day of my son's birthday and having me back early was important to him. "Sorry" one said - "Don't say sorry to me, say it to my son!" was my retort. I did eventually lose my cool and swore when the driver chose not to take the quieter, quicker fuel efficient road, to allow dropping me off first. This unsubtle approach hit home; I was dropped off second, instead of last as was intended - can I regret my actions? Ask me next August or when I have returned. 186 miles is achievable in 3 hours back home, not 25(granted 15 hours should be deducted for the driver's 'roll in the hay' and consequences). Will I raise the issue of professional standards? Probably, I suspect little will change now, but if enough of us refuse to be led a merry dance by the driver concerned then maybe one doesn't need to be left with a sour taste in the mouth at the end of a wonderful chapter. An expedition that I had been warned would be gruelling was actually very enjoyable for the education and insight it provided.

Bradley enjoyed the remainder of his birthday with me around but I did have to attend a High Commissioners reception in a bid to foster rugby relations with the visiting army regiment. Unfortunately, my contact couldn't create anything this time around. The Gambian Rugby sevens team will have to wait until November for their first official fixture.

Saturday was a blur of cleaning kit after the trek, getting money, drinks, ice and food for the party. Denise did herself proud with the spread supplied - she will find entertaining so easy when we return to the UK. The kids will remember these times without doubt. I have learnt about remote civilisation, OK, not the remote desert refugee camp, but more importantly, where life has built up over the years with a community that has created schools and should continue to survive without the trappings of our lives.