

Week ending 3.4.10

Sunday was too hot to venture far other than the wifi café in the evening; we had some indifferent skype connection but I did get a reasonable chat with Dale- the good news being that he'd passed his driving test. My aim on Monday morning was to renew my driving licence at the biometric centre; I joined the chaos to be told I couldn't have a biometric licence without a biometric id card, I had explained to the officer in charge that this was the sort of awkward bureaucracy likely to drive NGOs from the Gambia. I travelled to Brikama to meet the Dean of the University to discuss the sports field project but he was not there until Wednesday; the only positive was the article in the newspaper about myself- unfortunately not much about the team or the inactivity of the committee. On the gelleh home I found myself mid vehicle but surrounded by associates – a rare event; one of the rugby team was sat at the front, behind him a student from the college(Sports Minister so a kindred spirit) and then behind me volunteer, Sukey. I'm usually lucky if there's one person I know let alone 3 on the transport.

Tuesday was used as an admin day; partially brought on by VSO themselves, the flights for Denise and the kids have to be paid by us – they were bought in July, I advised VSO that it would be more convenient if I could pay for them at the start of August, rather than the week of departure, but I was fobbed off to accounts and they didn't get back to me. As they have got to their financial year end they have suddenly decided to track us down and requested the payment. I moved some money into our *Abbey/Santander* current account to pay electronically to find they have changed their security systems so I can't make transfers without them texting me a code to my mobile ...only they can't seem to be able to text my Gambian number – oh dear! (or stronger words really come to mind!). I also learnt that I would be well advised not to drive out of the Serrekunda area - where Police might ask for my new driving licence- and the explanation about the new requirements for NGO workers are unlikely to be accepted easily. Wednesday I attended college, by gelleh, to find the Dean again absent but told that I would be meeting him at the workshop the following week. The fun in the evening was the need to pack for our trek to the largest game reserve in Senegal(it's almost as big as the Gambia) in a power cut.

Thursday was a very early start to catch the first ferry to Barra, we met Francis, the jeep owner, on the boat and our guide, Momor(we had met him before when we visited the game reserve with a Mum the previous month). We explained that we must reach the reserve gates by 6pm if we were to stay in the hotel we had reserved; they felt it was possible if there weren't too many stops. I should add that I had proposed a route remaining north of the river but Francis had suggested it was better to cross the river upstream and use the south side when the decent north bank tarmac ran out. We made 'reasonable' time to the border of Senegal, 4pm, where we were told to expect an hour's drive to the beginning of the last stage of the journey – we could just make it. We took that time at face value forgetting the habit of Africans giving the answer they think you want to hear; at 7 pm we were still on an awful road with intermittent phone signals making rearrangements to the accommodation schedule difficult. We had been advised of a 'short cut' to get to the park gates which we tried to use at that time, we seemed to be making good progress when the driver and guide decided they had missed a turn so turned around and drove back for a further 15 minutes to find the required road – it was only just passable through the vegetation and streambed, add the darkness and worn out children and you can imagine the relief when we came across a 'camp lodge' at the edge of a village on the main road around 8.30. Unfortunately, there was 'no room at the inn' so we were directed to another camp 'nearby' = another African sweet answer and 30 minutes driving on the highway to a camp signpost for a further 3 ½ km down a dusty track; having got that far we decided it was easier to drive another 30 minutes along the highway to the camp at the reserve gates. We arrived at 10 pm and thought we were set for the following day.

Then Momor, the guide, admitted that he had never been that far east (nor had the driver, I had been following our progress on a map, but they mean nothing to Gambians), that the driver thought a) he wouldn't be allowed to drive the jeep in the game reserve, b) he had insufficient fuel to take us around the park so we would have to double back on ourselves before proceeding. I told Momor if that was the case we should forget everything and return to the kombos in the morning; that Francis had told us the vehicle was more than adequate and we would have used alternative transport to get us there if it was inappropriate. We checked the fuel- there was 1/3 of a tank- more than adequate for our needs there. We also discussed the route that I had proposed to Francis along the north bank and Senegalese knowledge stated it was a very good road.

The trip continued the following morning, after a tedious display of inefficient bureaucracy by the soldier trusted with the issuing of tickets, we entered the reserve to get to the hotel we had booked for the previous night. A superb location overlooking the bend of a river with beaches where the wildlife visits to drink but also adjacent to a swamp plain where wild life was visibly abundant- as much of the park is quite thick bush (not the African savannah of the brochures). We spotted a good variety of wildlife along the route. Having checked into the hotel we aimed for another camp to book lunch before searching for hippopotami in the river. We were able to leave our vehicle to watch a herd of about 20 from a vantage point of less than 50m - with calves, recently wounded subservient males and the bull displaying his authority with huge jaws agape; proper nature programme footage. We returned for lunch and were amused by monkeys raiding the kitchen areas, I paddled in the river - cautiously, there were hippo prints in the mud, which my own foot fitted into such was the diameter. With the heat of the day the wildlife had retired to the cool, so we returned to the hotel to rest before our planned river safari. It took us in both directions from the hotel, one way good crocs and grazing deer varieties, the other a taunting session with a troupe of baboons and further hippos who 'teased' us with photo opportunities - thank goodness for digital cameras so that you don't have to explain that ring of ripples! We didn't see any other 'big game' but we were awoken in the night by a hyena in close proximity; my memories of Kenya have more of that wildlife but this part of Africa is a much different habitat, the kids and Denise were happy with the experience.

We took the road I had originally proposed on our return journey - what a difference! If we had used it on the way we would have met our intended deadline on the Thursday but how often is local knowledge worse than the foreigner using 'old' technology such as maps? We passed through Tambacounda, a town mentioned in Michael Palin's *Sahara* trek to Timbukto and drove parallel to the railtrack through a hot landscape littered with shredded truck tyres and cattle carcasses (it seemed too hot for the vultures to clean up). We visited West Africa's version of Stonehenge, stone circle burial sites that are worth seeing if you are passing, before staying on an island in the river. Janjangbureh, Georgetown, MacCarthy Island (names new and old) has colonial/ slavery history is ideal for birdlife but also has regional administration offices which include VSO education staff; the 7 of us met up with the 3 placed on the island along with 2 more that had visited for the weekend; quite a gathering in the circumstances. We had an unpleasant end of evening encounter with the lodge management when many things were said that were regretted and withdrawn the following morning. The lesson I learned was that when dealing with the Gambians I should believe resolution is possible with time and reflection instead of rising to a challenge.

Sunday's journey home felt longer than we had intended but was not unpleasant. We visited a *lumos*, an African market on empty land where most traders arrive by donkey and cart. The hardest part was the realisation that after the 4 days of fresh air in the back of a land rover I would be cooped up indoors for a week with a 'talking' shop. The other regret was the lack of Easter provision for the kids; Abigail noticed, Bradley wanted to get home to play on his *Star Wars lego* game on his Nintendo DS.