

Week ending 17/18.4.10

I suffered a Saturday without rugby. After the anticipation through the morning and the gelleh ride to the football ground I faced my dreaded Saturday afternoon outcome of 'no game'. A kids football and volleyball tournament had taken precedence. Here, there is no bar on site to revert to instead, just a return home.

After a morning in the garden on Sunday we visited the beach for the first time in a month, since the hustle experience with Mum. The difference was stark; the season is closing – hard to believe when the weather is still so good – but the contrast was eerie to what we had become accustomed. The sea has warmed up again, to indoor swimming pool temperature, such that the onshore breeze was cooler than the water. We met Adama, our market trader friend who had recently lost his twin sister- it was the first time we had to talk since her demise. The cause of death is 'unknown', malaria is common and expressed but 'unknown' implies taboo female issues such as cervical cancer. What else can you say? Gambians are fatalistic; a mandinka greeting is "where are your people?" replied by "they are there" – simply put "not dead". I know other African cultures have a morning greeting which translates literally as "I am glad you did not die through the night."

Monday's start of term staff meeting started only one hour late and only lasted 4 hours for those of us there at the beginning; I was kept awake by the bloke next to me who had to give minutes of the September meeting to the lecturers arriving every 5-10 minutes through first hour and a half. The students adopted a similar attitude in their return to college, no students on Tuesday, one on Wednesday, a third of a class on Thursday. They wanted to complain about the marking scheme used for the previous term's assessment = why had they been given 15 marks out of 30 for a presentation when another maths class had been given 23 out of 25, apparently. The answer created the dilemma: I have been recruited to raise standards so I mark to my standards – Gambian lecturers don't have the same standards; I doubt whether I would give such a high mark and explained that I look forward to observing the said high flyers as it will imply Education is very good and VSO support will no longer be required. When I asked them "why had I been employed" they suggested it was my qualifications – I told them I had a BA only, and there are many more Gambians with their Masters who in theory have better qualifications (a masters is the target for all potential academics here) so they understood the point I was making about the quality of my standards and expectations. I still have no aspirations to acquire a Masters and my time here amongst so many with the qualification has convinced me of my lack of respect for the title.

I received censure from my Programme Manager on Wednesday. In November(week 15) the 'new' volunteers, myself included, had our 3 month review workshop where we were supposed to discuss common issues and find solutions for our settling in, Nuha, the manager, had showed little interest in our ideas - which included a newsletter amongst ourselves that would help us link ideas- he couldn't even be bothered to tell us about a glossy newsletter published around the time of arrival already in existence. Our idea was intended for 'in-house' consultation but would have appeared to have been shanghaied now for the whole education sector to include distribution among our employers! In anticipation of the latest publication I had made a comment (considered inappropriate) about the lack of professional application in the up country schools and attributed it to a lack of supervision by an absent Regional Director. Another volunteer, an ex headteacher no less, had made similar criticisms of his Regional Director (different region) on the same page which also faced 'political' editing. If we can't make professional comments amongst ourselves at an office level we better register with Amnesty International before facing the regime outside in the Gambia!

Paperwork has mounted at the college as previous year's students; those not taught by myself have completed exams and distance learning assignments. The 70 exam papers are the least of my worries. 350 assignments is a little more daunting – the reward will be i) greater insight into their difficulties when I have to lecture them over their summer holidays ii) 1000 dalasi (£25) for the privilege (in the UK the reward would be 10x for marking exams!). On top of these expectations the VSO media officer had called Denise, from her blog site, to ask if we would be prepared to be interviewed for an article in the Mail on Sunday. As telephone communication difficulties meant the call to Denise only allowed 1 in 6 words to be heard it was decided that a written set of questions for an email response was the best option; so we went two evenings formulating our response to that – we're told the article should be published before the end of the month.

We started our walk at 7am on Saturday, an hour earlier than the practice. The first river crossing was easier than previously; the second was the wettest we got (it had dried up altogether last time so we were caught out). We had feared the bumster hustle to be the greatest challenge but it was absent for the most part; it might have been that starting an hour earlier we cleared the tourist beaches before they had warmed up. We had more interruption from taxi drivers when we had to cut inland to avoid the high tide on the rockiest area. We finished walking on Saturday afternoon and taking a wallow in the sea to stretch off felt a little like the after match bath we enjoyed at Middlesbrough Rugby club a couple of seasons ago; it was also followed by a beer or two as the sun went down – a 'sun downer' is a Sills family excuse for a drink; well combine that with a happy hour and there was plenty of liquid carbohydrate to complete the challenge on Sunday. The walk on Sunday was new territory compared to the previous day so promised excitement; but it didn't materialise – the previous days cooling breeze had dropped, the sand was softer and the going definitely tougher. We arrived at the southern point of the Gambia around 3.15 (later than planned) but the map was inaccurate to the lie of the land and where the village/ return road should have been we had to tramp an hour and a half through mangrove swamp to return to civilisation and collection by taxi. Google earth suggested the route would be 42.5 miles; that didn't allow for the extra miles to get back to the road system. The body withstood the test – one blister on the ball of my right foot, sea side, and bruised ball on left, sandbank side – and a bit stiff in the legs. The sport relief socks will be available on e-bay once they have been washed!