

Week ending 1.5.10

Fortunately *sett-settal* was cancelled last weekend which allowed us to condense weekend activities in anticipation of trainee teacher observations. Saturday morning allowed a refreshing skype session to Mum and Dale. I took the kids for a walk on the beach on Saturday afternoon collecting jetsam flip-flops (recyclable resources for a Gambian sports day) and visited the VSO office to collect our post. No post was available as it had obviously not been collected – something of a moot point when I had sent an email to the VSO country Director highlighting the theft of goods from the VSO post box during the week. The VSO office managers who had tried to brush me off when I had requested support had been quick to defend their inaction – causing more emails from myself about their actual efficiency in bringing about VSO goals! Emails had also been flying about the censorship of our newsletter; causing far more of a stir than if it had been published without a, previously disinterested but recently self appointed, editor involving himself.

Sunday morning was packing and a nature walk around the golf course before an intended trek collection at 11.45; that was only 45 minutes late. The trek started well, we arrived at the Banjul port terminal with a vehicle and were on the ferry within half an hour (fourth time lucky for such efficiency). The proposed first night was to be Fass where Rex Bojang (Arts lecturer) said “we would be very comfortable”, I didn’t expect a *travel-lodge* guarantee of full night sleep etc but my hopes were based on my region 6 experience last month – I was disappointed when I saw the torn mosquito screens billowing in the windows of the teacher’s accommodation section. I was shown to a room storing 3 bicycles with oil on the floor; I placed my sleeping mat in a section out of the oil. I then learned that the area was bad for mosquitoes; indeed the ‘singing’ in the pit latrine suggested worse. We watched an interschool football match, complete with competing drumming bands, pitch invasions when goals scored, and Drogba-like scoring gestures. While waiting for dinner I walked into the village to get some cold water from the Mauritanian run bitikos; they had freezers but no electricity to keep anything cold. By Monday morning I was pretty miserable; my eating tool (hygienic for communal food bowls) had broken, my camel back had leaked drinking water into my bag of clothes and Mr. Korita (my boss and the team leader) had announced that the workshop that had been intended for the end of the week, that had meant I had only packed for 4 days away instead of 5, had been cancelled. Not the best start to the week! I did at least observe the best teaching I have witnessed so far in the Gambia, but then ended the day with some of the worse. To be honest I was expecting similar standards to that of the furthest region; but was pleasantly surprised at the quality seen. I did discover the source of the oil in my bedroom (we spent 2 nights in Fass); on schooldays it is used to garage a battered moped!

I expected better accommodation on the Tuesday but it got worse. The college lecturers on trek have a habit of sharing room/beds if it means saving money and as VSOs we propose something of an inconvenience in our expectations. My fellow lecturers, and driver, commandeered the student teacher’s bedroom and showed me the lounge/dining/corridor room that would be “my room” where I would be comfortable on the floor. I knew there was another room at the back of the building where I assumed the teachers would be sleeping; they didn’t – we shared the main room. Before discovering this I had used the pit latrine, or thunder box, considering the neighbour I had who on pouring his water (no tissue paper here) flushed a bat, roosting in the chamber below, out and up my pit! Not really what one would expect to happen completing ones number twos. My night was disturbed so I didn’t feel too guilty when my own morning chorus of muffled flatulence interrupted the morning prayers of my fellow housemates such was my mood.

Wednesday night’s accommodation was better = off the floor. The mattress, however, was made from stitched together rice sacks containing dried grass (the word straw implies quality). I used my sleeping mat under me to avoid potential insects living beneath me. The head teacher of the

school that was hosting us took me for a walk around the village; it was a warming experience to visit compounds of mud houses with straw roofs to simply greet and exchange pleasantries with the chief and the locals. I woke up to find that the snacks I had taken (trek is renowned for inconsistent feeding patterns but this one was well regulated by 'Mama' Cardos) had been raided by a rodent, furthermore, the water pipe to the camel back had been gnawed, meaning more wasted drinking water. Fortunately I was able to affect a working repair but I felt what else would fail me on the expedition?

My inflatable pillow gave up on Thursday night, but there were foam cushions I could use in the comfiest accommodation of the week. It even had a pedestal toilet (sunk deep into the concrete cesspit so no cistern required) but no roof to the ablution facilities – just a view of the cashew orchard. I ventured into the orchard to test a cashew apple, based on a recommendation by Rex; my olfactory senses took me back in time to a resort in Mombasa where we stayed, as a family, some 40 years ago. Here was a taste and smell that I have often sought in the interim without being able to recall its origin, but has now been reunited. But as all 'scrumpers' find, you suffer for your adventure; I was warned the following day that the juice bleaches your clothes if spilt, I found I had burnt my lips eating an unripe apple. While waiting for dinner I took the opportunity of 'civilisation' of the large village, Sitanunko, (previously visited in week 3) and found a compound with a generator showing the Liverpool v Atletico match. At the end of the 90 minutes I thought I should tell my colleagues where I was (though if they were worried and asked anybody locally if they had seen a *toubab* recently I'm sure they would have been directed to me); my phone was out of signal range so I had to walk 5 minutes to get a signal. When I returned the compound was empty, the chairs all stacked and the TV gone – no chance of watching extra-time for some reason; nothing to do but to return for an 'early' 9.30 dinner. Our host, incidentally, was the Chairman of the school's PTA, who recognised me from the VSO in country training excursion up-country last September; his son, who had played for hours with Abi and Bradley, recognised me too and asked after the children. The day will be remembered for rice; rice pudding with ground peanuts for breakfast, a rice benachin with fish for lunch and a further fish and vegetable rice platter for dinner.

Friday (rice/peanut pudding for breakfast again!) was the least busy day for observations, as all head teachers were away at a workshop so most schools in the region seemed to be teaching one lesson only. At the school I visited two small children came up and held my hand; a little girl called Isatou and a boy named Kebbah; it was very touching, as the Gambian names Abi and Brad have been given are the same. We joined the ferry queue at Barra around 1.30, the good news was that the second ferry had just started working; the bad news was that the build up of traffic - used to three operable ferries – was substantial. Pulling strings based on the status of being a government vehicle meant we got on a ferry at 5pm. I got home just after 7pm.

On reflection it had been a much harder trek than in March for living conditions and work completed, (31 observations in 14 schools) but the food had been better, as had much of the teaching. I was hit by a stone thrown through the window of a classroom; the thrower didn't know about it as the windows are 6-7 feet up the wall, below the roof. I made a complaint that it was ok to hit me but what if it had been a child? The response implied corporal punishment would be applied to the miscreants, that it was important not to mark down the student observed (I had recommended he be removed from the classroom for further training) and that the children didn't really matter. Working with further college lecturers I acquired a greater appreciation of their standards; I witnessed them saying students were 'really bad and needed a lot of support' for marks of 70% (C grade) while I was considering the same grade a 'satisfactory' level despite the disappointment some students expressed – the bad ones I gave an E but I don't suppose my colleagues would dare to do that. I have realised this represents something of the dilemma I alluded to two weeks ago; I have been recruited to raise standards so I shouldn't drop them to the level of my colleagues really and reward mediocrity with high grades (which seems to be the Gambian way) should I? I wondered whether it is because everyone knows everyone, or a relative, here so an element of nepotism creeps in. I felt under a

little pressure on my penultimate observation when the student teacher told me her brother was the VSO accountant; my initial thought was “to be Gambian I now need to give her a good grade” but then I also reflected that if I didn’t reward her unduly word might get back to Nuha that I was a harsh assessor – that, I thought would be a better judge of my standards. If I am ‘called to task’ I can ask if my standards must be lowered for Gambia’s education and if that is the case why recruit me? (I gave the lass concerned an ‘average’ C and she didn’t complain.)

I anticipate issues with Nuha next week.

As a footnote, in one school I was approached to be asked to help set up a computer. I plugged all the wires in the right places explaining as I went and turned the thing on. It fired up but could not proceed any further without the floppy disc required to make it run. Some kind –hearted school in Wales had sent a defunct/obsolete RM PC but had not included the vital software to make it run. Africans can make second hand cars run, when they are palmed off here – computers are another matter. So if anyone knows of a school with a store cupboard where there might be some RM software stuck at the very back corner please could they forward it to me as we have at last found a use for it!