

This week I think I have really come to appreciate what working in a developing country is about, I know I have more to learn but it has been a steep learning curve. I know some readers have commented on the hardships we are enduring but so far it had been relatively easy and I'm sorry for misleading you into discomfort. I will also understand if you lose the will to continue when you read of the frustrations below. Inner resourcefulness and durability was something I had hoped to learn through the VSO experience so cannot grumble and must still be thankful that I am not living 'up-country' where communications would be even further strained.

On Monday the car arrived, an hour later than expected, it ran out of fuel 100 metres around the corner. We took it out for a test run, which included a shopping trip for Denise to get things for the kids to start school; despite a replacement carburettor the car backfired, coughed, spluttered, and cut out when changing gear about the locality. However, the landlady had made an effort to receive the car by cleaning out the garage – I think she was disappointed when she saw it, her comment "I hope you have not paid a lot of money for it", I replied along the lines of "more than I would have paid in the UK for something similar".

On Tuesday I was taken to Gambia College to meet the various heads/principals etc. I soon learnt that the next important date for the Head of the School of Education was 28<sup>th</sup> September for a staff meeting; fair enough I thought, I'll be busy in the meantime. My line manager, Head of Maths, Momodou Jallow, arrived half an hour later to inform me that whilst he was a bit busy this week he was on a wind down because the only official summer leave at the college started on Friday – until the 28<sup>th</sup>! He didn't have a hard copy of his mathematics scheme of work but could provide me with an electronic version of the syllabus onto my memory stick. When his palmtop took an age to load up I started worrying about viruses potentially contaminating my laptop at the first challenge so resolved to upgrade my Avast protection before any further action on planning. I pressed him into accepting my offer to attend the College on Wednesday to help mark some exams he was setting and left. I didn't find the time to run the virus protection that afternoon – I fell asleep exhausted from the exertion.

Remy coughed and spluttered down Karaiba Avenue but was happy on the main Brikama Road-you must remember that she had been a diesel before the petrol engine was implemented so no manual choke is available. I managed to miss the college turning – too busy 'anticipating the hazard' of the bush taxis in the way- but still arrived on time to meet Momodou (actually a very good likeness of Denzil Washington). I helped invigilate the Maths exam to 40 Madrassa students( Islamic schools); their enthusiasm was refreshing but their ability questionable ( I think their families may have chosen religion as the best opportunity for them to earn a living). The tests would have been accessible to most year 4/5 children. I was given half the papers to mark but completed them so quickly I finished the lot in an hour and a half to the amazement of 'Denzil'.

On my return I decided to use the wi-fi internet café to update the anti-virus software. It was the afternoon so the system was slower than normal because of American traffic( refer to week 3 description) and it took 1 ½ hours to download. A co-volunteer I had given a lift to the café had said "you need a lot of patience" when we suffered the first power cut of the afternoon – that broke the wifi connection. I thought I had

done my lot of patience for the week; I couldn't have been more wrong. Through this time I also discovered my mgrid email address was not allowing access for some reason (on a VSO course our emotional support network was analysed and I thought this area was covered by email; disconnection was something unanticipated and upsetting in practice!). Plan B= had to create a gmail account to try and contact the administrator to resolve the problem.

I resolved to attend the VSO office first thing on Thursday to get on with accessing the syllabus, make use of a printer, internet and library resources. After checking the memory stick for virus with two different software checks I tried to open the syllabus to find it was completed on word 2007 and inaccessible with my word 2003; the internet full compatibility pack offered to download in 9 hours! Knowing I would obviously need some upgrade to work with my employers I thought I would at least download the minimal element of *word 2007* only- the internet suggested that would take 3 hours – so I thought I could at least make some generic resources(100 square) while that was happening. It downloaded 7% then crashed, 9% , 18% and 22% before disconnecting totally. In the meantime I had asked if the office computers had *word 2007* on them but they have not been updated, Nuha laughed as he told me and said “now you know you are working in a developing country”. I admitted defeat after 7 hours in the office no further on - the library has nothing of value.

Denise had a good morning on Thursday uploading her blog ( peruse it if you want to see photos at [www.denisefamilyourgambianadventure.blogspot.com](http://www.denisefamilyourgambianadventure.blogspot.com)) at the wifi café so I thought that would be a shortcut to the necessary software. The minimal *word 2007* application downloaded in 10 minutes – yeehaa – but still didn't allow access to the syllabus document and I couldn't find any way to make it work (and neither could one of my younger co-volunteers) so decided to download the full compatibility pack. The estimated download time started at 1 ½ hours but then slowed and packed up at 68% so I'm still no further forward. The phrase 2 steps forward one step back is reversed here! We did at least see SKYPE (a recent advancement in the Gambia) in action so will try and set ourselves up with an account.

Away from my trials and tribulations the children have started their new school. Bradley has come home each day quite pleased that he has done “no maths, no writing” but he has been able to watch DVDs on a TV. His nightmares, a reaction to anti-malarials, have abetted since reducing his dosage. Abigail has no uniform yet but is enthused by the staff she has encountered and has not quite adjusted to the routine of the day with regards to eating lunch/snacks. At the gates of the school is a tuck stall/shoe shine stand. Over the 3 days we have set off to walk to school we have been offered lifts by vehicles heading to the school on 2 of the days so the 10 minute walk is negligible. Denise had a cookery lesson from the maid and produced a beautiful Chicken Yassa but is still struggling with the ferocity of the stove burners.

We visited the famous ‘Charlie’ a crocodile of some local sacred pools on Friday afternoon; the kids were too scared to touch the crocs but I'm sure Denise will upload the photos next week. The crocs are free range which means that during recent rains they escaped into the compounds of the local neighbourhood, there are no safety precautions for such an eventuality. The nature reserve wasn't worth the entry but the museum very good with the cultural/ folk aspects of the Gambia. When we returned to the car it was being ‘protected’=local kids laid on the roof, etc. Fascination in

Abigail resulted in the children wanting to touch her hair; a little concerning for her in the middle of a mob but she survived smiling.

On Saturday I had to go to “work” acting as a VSO observer in a “participatory approach” (VSO SKWID course in action) to effect change at Gambia College, where we witnessed the staffroom politics battle between the proud and the over-evaluative. Later, I took myself out for my first official exercise for a month, a very sweaty run along the Kotu beach resort area; I hope it will get easier. To the shouts of “hey big man” from the locals I did grab the spare tyre around my waist and say “yes, I wish I wasn’t” – I’ve got some work to do to compete with the bumsters.

Sunday morning was a work oriented early arrival, before 8am, at the internet cafe – to download the Microsoft conversion software before the Americans wake up and clog up the system! Got so much achieved; can read the syllabus document – feel like a real anorak at the sense of success with a piece of IT at last!(almost 10 hours for 10 mins with UK broadband?). Even had responses to emails sent through session = big morale boost as it means my gmail is working; something I had come to doubt when I sent an email to myself and it didn’t arrive. After a shell hunt on the beach we went to a barbeque at an experienced volunteer’s house. It was a good test for the car negotiating street wide puddles etc and worth the effort; the gang of new volunteers were assembled and catching up on our progress was important; two are occupied but otherwise we are all waiting for 28<sup>th</sup> September like myself. Emily, a paediatrician, probably has the hardest task of all – working in the hospital with 3 children to a bed, language communication difficulties with bereaved parents and a “crash team” that saunter through crises – definitely not your *comic relief* images and harrowing compared to my IT trials. The network of fellow volunteers is vital if we are to retain our sense of purpose.

Tomorrow I aim to visit our Volunteer office within the college campus to check what is available to us there, as for the rest of the week I will continue to plan lectures for use next month, with an even lower expectation than I had before leaving the UK – I’ve learnt that much from the Madrassa students; but downloads are off the agenda!