

Week ending 29.5.10

On Friday morning I admitted in the VSO office that I had experienced my worst week in the Gambia so far; if that prospect appears too depressing stop reading now – or maybe skip to the last paragraph.

The walk was supposed to be a short quick dash of 16 miles; with the added problems of ferry logistics it ended up as the longest walking day we experienced over the shortest distance. We caught the first ferry and while walking out of the Barra terminal a hustler offered a taxi and canoe ferry to Jinack Island for 800 dalasi; I offered 30 as I knew the local rates, his offer dropped to 400. I asked for the taxi station manager to settle matters but he was still in bed apparently, we asked some local women and found the 25 dalasi taxi option. The driver asked for 50 as the ‘white mans price’, we didn’t agree - pointing out the blatant racism that would incur arrest in the UK; the hustler said we needed to buy pencils from him to give to the children, we refused and I questioned his identity as the hustler who had threatened to ‘stick me with a knife’ at the port in March and suggested we visited the Police station while we were waiting; he left quickly. We challenged the driver over his policy for half Africans as Felix, half Tanzanian, half German joined us for the trip; no response. The vehicle was like the one we used to visit the Senegal game park with 8 advertised seats; when they were full and the front we thought we could depart; not so, 12 passengers is the expectation for a long wheel based land rover here (no concession for traditionally wide African female backsides). When we had shoe horned ourselves to capacity the driver tied up his dreadlocks and started connecting some wires under the dashboard, then used a cranking handle to start the jeep ... for a while, it died before he could get to the cab to apply the accelerator. Further cranks proved fruitless so some waiting drivers were recruited to give a push start; the 13 of us remained in our seats! This failed so a tow by another jeep proved successful - we alighted for that attempt- but on reloading acquired a further 3 passengers stood on the rear of the jeep... for half a mile ... 2 got off so we could pass a police check point, then we waited for them to jog through the check point to rejoin their bit of the tailgate. So 16 of us made our way along a sand track; bouncing impossible as there was nothing left in the suspension and we were so tightly squeezed. At the boat crossing we paid our 75 dalasi with the local approval but the driver was not agreeable, arguments were revisited, the charity walk was to aid Gambians, I tried to explain the local project I was trying to support but would abandon if this rip off attitude prevailed. The dispute was settled when I walked off to get in the canoe, the canoe paddler was a contact Denise and I had made on our previous visit to the island - who has been phoning me regularly since – and he offered to settle matters. He didn’t charge us for the ferry trip either. I couldn’t really feel guilty when I considered the price we had paid over New Year for the 400D we had been charged for what should have been 24D, and the island has recently harvested the acres and acres of marijuana we had earlier witnessed. We were accompanied by 4 of the islanders who guide us to the Northern tip, in Senegal, before heading south. We knew we were in Senegal as there was an empty accommodation lodge but the beach had still been raked to keep up appearances; if it had been Gambian, the litter would have been noticeable. I will remember the walk for the carcass of a giant sea turtle, maybe 2 metres by 3 metres washed up on the shore; and the blisters I acquired for not respecting the distance to be covered thinking it could be done barefoot. We reached the headland of Barra to see a ferry leaving so had to wait another hour and a half to continue our journey.

On the return ferry a young Gambian sidled up to me, after greetings asked ‘how are you finding the Gambia?’ I let rip venting my spleen about the blatant racism and attempted exploitation of the white man; he tried to defend it with the usual excuses I had heard before and he managed to maintain my interaction with a “well I haven’t asked for your name or your telephone number as many Gambians would by now”. This was true so I let him continue, he claimed to be a member of the Gambian Youth Parliament and we continued to talk in a more constructive manner; I expressed my opinion about the way children were brought up to beg from the white men and

how this developed into bumster hustle; he agreed so maybe my time wasn't wasted – we parted on good terms without exchanging names or numbers. The remaining 5 ½ miles were hard on soft sand but hustle free, we passed the presidential palace without interference from the guards and made it back to the starting point of 5 weeks before. We had done it – walked the length of the Gambia (longitude goes North to South doesn't it?) thereby achieving an aspiration I had secretly held before we left the UK.

Sunday needed a relaxation period on the beach followed by touch rugby; it wasn't particularly good as high tides had littered the beach with bloated puffer fish (the kids counted over 30 football sized prickly creatures) and small Portuguese man-o-war jellyfish which had to be removed to create a pitch.

I arrived at college early for a Monday as on Friday it had been agreed we would have a meeting before departing around midday. Plans had changed, our trip leader's wife had twins so a replacement was found - my boss (maths dept. head), Korita, who had previously asked me to swap with him so he could visit his family, but I had refused on grounds of family commitments here. He suggested we would be leaving as planned, but the proposed vehicle or driver could not be found, after a late return from up country in the early hours of that morning. A lecture I had previously cancelled I reconvened and managed to finish at 3.45 as the vehicle was still unfound. The two lecturers had gone home to be collected; one of them, Fofani, asked me to collect her expenses for her – I had agreed. When I visited the Head of the school of education to ask about departure times I was asked to take the 3 sets of expenses and 37500 Dalasi (£900) for the course participant's per diem and travel. Fofani returned at 6pm demanding we left immediately; I applied a West African saunter and asked why the rush when I had been waiting 6 hours for this moment-and what were the building materials in the back of the jeep for; her family. When we arrived at my boss's house I was greeted by 2 boys shouting 'toubab' at me; Korita knows from previous discussions how offensive this response is to me but had done nothing to sensitise the situation – I bit my lip and said nothing. I did chivvy Fofani along when we stopped to unload the building materials, she apologised for her previous inconsideration. On reaching Soma, around 9pm, 2km from our destination, things started to deteriorate further-the 2 became petulant about the expenses that they couldn't be bothered to collect from the office. They needed meeting at 11pm to plan the following day; when asked who should open the workshop Fofani explained she had no experience; I recommended Korita as an experienced member of staff at the college – he became evasive as he had skived most of the planning meeting so didn't know what it was about; I explained further that, much as I would love to have started, it would be better for the college image for the introduction to come from a permanent member of staff and that VSO history had shown that if the European leads the response of the participants is that it is ignored as 'just a white mans thing'. I was then attacked for being racist and that if that was the case I shouldn't be helping on the workshop or lecturing any students. Korita eventually relented, did nothing to familiarise himself with the materials and was less than effective even with our support. His performance over the following days didn't get any better and for a so-called educationalist he repeatedly ignored the contributions of participants and let our co-facilitator cause ruction and division with her interruptions. She performed similarly uninspiringly. The two did use the opportunity to make me out as the bad guy because I had been entrusted with the money by the college so if they were unhappy with the 500Dalasi available it was my doing. On the final morning the wheels came off; in the session I was supposed to be leading I had set the delegates a 20 minute task then Fofani, waltzed in after an impromptu visit to her father, demanded they complete an evaluation of the course aswell. I walked out to count enough to calm down(4 figures) and then returned to ask her calmly whether when she was normally teaching she found the students worked best when they were given one thing at a time to do or two or three? "I'm not getting you" was her response so I explained the problem she had created; I was told to F –off. I again withdrew, my

boss was called to intervene in a 'mediation' with the senior officers from the regional education office, but he placed all the blame on me suggesting that I had been a problem from before outset because I had not wanted to swap my period of attendance thereby denying him the right to visit his people. I did, however, learn through the discussions that I was the leader of the course; unbeknownst to me but apparently that's what happens if the boss naffs off home and somebody more conscientious is left at work. I have glossed over other incidents of conflict but the overview has to be, and was expressed in as many words on the morning of the second day by Fofani when she said "I thought you could do the whole day and we will learn from you"; they were only there to visit their families and to get out of the course as quickly as possible doing the least work possible. I was stitched up in a region where their associations counted for something and I was the fall guy however disinterested they were. My 'boss' accused me of being 'wicked' because I was proposing to withhold some of the per deim because delegates couldn't be bothered to turn up for the second day (it's common practice to turn up first and last day of a five day workshop and collect the money as though you've been there all along) after he had stormed off petulantly without offering any corrective advice. I pointed out the President had recently called the rank and file to avoid such petty corruption but apparently I have 'no right' to do that. Thankfully, through this period I was able to escape to eat/relax through the evenings with some other VSO volunteers in Mansa Konko. I also found a Gambian ally whose wife lives in Bristol and he spent time working in Maidenhead and I was able to discuss my school days there.

The journey home was silent; we had to stop to visit Korita's village (he didn't seek leader consent from me!). Back home with the kids they were excited about the new arrival of a goat in the back yard, we fed it some lettuce then five minutes later a boy with a knife appeared. I tried to get the kids inside to spare them the bloody end to the goat; fortunately it's last breath was an exhalation – from its backside; we had to laugh at the blast of flatulence.

Friday's lectures had been cancelled to allow the students to recover from the sport's day held on Thursday. I visited the office to collect post and catch up on emails. I mentioned the existence of an awful time but guarded my words for fear of inflaming issues further. I discussed with Ebrima some of the problems we volunteers face amongst ourselves following an exchange of harsh emails between us. I mentioned the per deim that I had tried to withhold; he told me that despite failing I had done a good job for VSO through pricking consciences – I felt much better. I returned home, the builders renovating the outhouse at the bottom of the garden had caught two rats through the morning – the rodents have been eating most of the vegetable patch so I was pleased – they were too; I watched them skin one to add to their lunch stew! What else can you add? Onions was on their recipe!