

Weeks ending 7.8.10 & 15.8.10

The Sunday after Sanyang was an opportunity for Dale to rest before the start of his work. We did take an afternoon stroll and were fortunate enough to have our first snake experience. A 4 foot forest cobra slithered past over open ground giving us an excellent view.

Monday provided one of my most frustrating teaching days to date. My 9am lecture was delayed by an absence of chairs for the students to use. When that lecture ended I had to vacate the room to find the next class; they had fewer chairs and their lethargy in finding further chairs delayed matters by 40 minutes. My afternoon lecture was pointless as the drumming rain made my voice projection impossible. Rain affected the afternoons through much of the week including the PE sessions I provided to introduce Tag rugby to another cohort of trainee teachers. Two of the sessions had to be postponed; some Gambians had covered their heads with apparent medical advice that if the rain touched their head they would get pneumonia (such mis founded judgment caused a shortage of mangoes from the market as apparently they help the spread of malaria). The rain was so bad on one afternoon the bush taxis even left the highway to collect students from the classrooms rather than wait on the main road.

The rain wasn't so serious at home which meant Dale was working out in the sun on a building site for the first theatre to be built in the Gambia. His contribution is voluntary but his co workers earn a measly 50 dalasi (£1.25). I do feel proud about his application to the cause despite his teenage reticence – he claims he was too tired initially to relay some of his experiences to us but he has since told us about the snake nest in the toilet, communal tapalapa porridge, resting in a wheelbarrow. The experience will do him far more good than any other recent holiday he has had.

After a four day week we headed over the river to give him an 'up country' experience. The first night was spent at Jerreh camp, Sittanunku, (previously visited in our training last September) at river/beach side resort which is backed by forest/jungle. We have been invited back to act as European models to appear in photos required for his intended promotional website. On the second night we returned to Ginack Island to visit an alternative lodge to the expensive option of the New Year. We suffered from the close season lack of maintenance and attention to detail which culminated in an absence of electricity at hotel prices! We probably won't return. Fortunately the rain stayed away for our excursion. We returned to Banjul, the capital at teatime on Sunday- it was amazing to see such empty streets on a capital city.

The subsequent week at college flew by and Dale completed his commitment despite learning that the intended purpose of the voluntary work, for his Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award, would not be accepted by the organiser - it might still look good on university application forms. I completed the tag rugby instruction despite the latest 'self inflicted' bleats – I had wanted to complete the practical sessions the previous week to avoid Ramadan. Consequently, the students used the fasting excuse; I explained my lack of sympathy with reason – why should a religion in the hottest climates in the world expect its followers to show penance and avoid life supporting water? I did lower my expectations of the amount of running I expected.

My morale received a boost on Tuesday with the arrival of a box of sportswear from Middlesbrough RUFC (thanks to Simon and Phil). The VSO office were more than a little excited by its delivery by courier, and a number of them felt it necessary to point out its presence while I was working on my emails. A vehicle was even made available to deliver it to our home. Since opening it I think it is good to see the simple maroon of the club.

Completing household administration chores on Thursday I created an uncomfortable allergic reaction on my chest, shoulders and upper arms. It was time to re-dip our mosquito nets in

permethrin which I suspect caused the problems of a sleepless night – drugs and cold showers failed to alleviate the itching; I knew a cooling fan would allow me the chance to get to sleep but we have been suffering nightly power cuts (there has been a fire in the control room of a local power station). The power eventually returned around 2am and I was able to sleep.

We made a trip to the nature/game reserve on Friday and whilst we were slightly disappointed at the lack of birdlife in the usual haunts (one was inaccessible, crushed by a rain felled palm tree) Dale was happy with his encounters with monkeys and monitor lizards. On our journey home we thought he should experience the bustle of Serrekunda market, an area we hated last year. He took the opportunity to haggle for some fabric to be tailored into some fancy pants and didn't find the place too harrowing – it's much better in sunshine. We still needed a siesta afterwards.

I returned to Serrekunda on Saturday with the newly arrived volunteers to help with their immersion and orientation into the environment and show them how to survive on a volunteer's allowance. I have suddenly become the elder statesman/guru for the education sector here as the longest serving volunteer so it was fairly important I made the effort to support notwithstanding my commitment to Dale. It did, however, give Dale the opportunity to lie back and read/listen to music in more relaxed teenage fashion (he has been up before 7.30 on most mornings!). He also babysat/ took the kids home to bed at the newcomers party so that Denise and I got a late night out to continue mentoring and advising the new volunteers. As we walked home we reflected on the anniversary of our arrival – Denise seems committed to persevering the remaining year which is good for me. We learnt from one of the new volunteers, who we had spoken to over a year ago in his role in the London office, that we had 'legendary' status at HO as we had overcome all obstacles to bring a young family on a placement.

There has been a casualty to the cause, though, this week. Of the underwear I brought with me there was only one pair of boxer shorts that were brief enough to wear safely under my rugby shorts. Unfortunately during my last PE session the waist elastic gave up making their future wear impractical. Alas poor Primark boxers you have expired in the heat and difficult washing conditions and won't be able to complete the journey.