

On Monday we took the car to another beach area, Cape Point, and found a secluded beach; beautiful but for the jetsam litters that had been washed up against a prevailing coast of the Atlantic. The ocean was warm, must be over 20°C, so very easy to soak in. Whilst stood waist deep we spotted a 'fish' over a foot long which I tried to force into the shallows by blocking its seaward route for 20-30m. Chasing it I was able to get a good look at its features; it was very shark like in movement and shape- which is the only reason I didn't try to get hands on it for fear of its potential bite. Denise had got out of the water in fear before she had realised what it was; I suggested it was a dogfish to keep her happy. She thinks it was two foot long and is probably right; it makes my fishing story of "the one that got away" better.

I took a run later that afternoon in the cool, around 5pm; when I was still sweating after a cold bath 30 minutes later I read the air temperature on the kids forehead thermometer; only 36° C at 6pm! I must start running in the morning.

Bradley demonstrated true Gambian acclimatisation, while discussing a picture story of a man running for a bus I asked "what do people ride on?" "gelleh-gellehs" he replied without a second thought.

On Tuesday I met with the veteran volunteer, four years at Brikama, Anne Cassidy to discuss VSO work at the College and decide which part of the office we would claim for ourselves. We discussed modus operandii and expectations – don't expect full classes until the end of October (that means some of the planning I have done so far might well be worth postponing) and the termly up-country support reviews can be rough and ready experiences (she has had to share a bed with the generous school secretary and frequently thinks "never again" on her return) so there is much to anticipate/ learn.

She also recounted meeting a local head teacher who burst into tears on her arrival asking how children could learn without desks to sit at. To attend free school here requires parents to supply a uniform and a desk & chair, sometimes only the former is feasible but the more fortunate ones do carry their desks on their heads on the first day of the year. I immediately thought of the desks we throw away at Ayresome that could fill a classroom each year but was warned against shipping the "waste" out here; Anne had tried importing books from her Canadian home for them to be waylaid in customs for weeks – money to employ the local carpenter is a better option. Amy, my co-volunteer for Science teaching, had witnessed children in the same school sharing pencils and patiently waiting for each other to finish work.

I mentioned the name of the kids school in Fajara and Anne was impressed; a school outing last year had taken Zenith to Gambia College where pupils had sat in on a lecture; at the end they asked some more intelligent questions than the student teachers Anne was educating!

I also found something efficient that works out here; some money I had instructed my bank to send to HSBC for forwarding to the Gambia actually arrived. An internet transaction made last Thursday, which left my bank on Friday, was credited into my Gambian account by Tuesday(local banks were closed for Eid/korite on Monday). Some IBAN transactions had threatened to take 21 days when I asked in the UK so I was well and truly impressed. On discussing my deposit options I also learned that there are some fixed rates saving deals paying up to 11% - so here might be the place to invest while the UK banks bail themselves out of the credit crunch. (Any takers? First, review the politics of the colourfully titled President, he's my age but achieved so much!)

We attended our first leaving volunteers house clearance that evening – this is the way volunteers improve their living quarters from hand me downs. We arrived too late for a bookshelf unit that I have aspired to since moving into our accommodation. To add

insult to injury I was then asked to transport it in the back of the Renault; a bit of a cheek really but I have been promised the bookshelf in 10 months time when they return to Hull. Denise acquired a number of skirts/dresses, Abi got some ornamental butterflies, Bradley a water pistol and myself, a carry mat for my aforementioned upcountry ventures.

Wednesday saw the kids return to school, Abigail exited happier now that she is making friends; Bradley not so, but a friend had given him a dalasis coin(2 ½ p). I used the wi-fi internet café to update myself and source a self supporting mosquito net. A mosquito net is something I hadn't thought too much about before leaving home because I thought impregnating a sheet sleeping bag with wash in mosquito repellent would suffice where a simple head net over my face wouldn't cover. I have now realised that:

1. using a sheet sleeping bag will probably be very uncomfortable with the heat
2. taking my volunteer supplied net would mean rearranging the sleeping arrangements for the family here in Fajara and the hanging systems are not really compatible with some of the high ceilinged accommodation we have visited.

I borrowed a single person pop-up net when we visited Juffreh and decided this is the way forward but sourcing them is not easy, Amazon had the answer, but I hope Mum can send it on before my first trek upcountry, as we're not on their delivery options. We attended a farewell gathering for 3 of our 'training' colleague volunteers; Emma, Paul & Courtney are heading off to Kerewan for their placement so the departure needed some recognition as the end of a chapter in our volunteering process – the gang is breaking up and the work should soon begin. I spent much of the evening talking to local unassuming eco-warrior, Maurice of the hotel we first stayed in. He has founded a company that creates buildings without concrete breeze blocks. Sorry to get on an environmental soapbox but the nightly BBC world service programme covers more 'local' news for the continent - so the effect of failed rains in the horn of Africa predominate more than they would in the UK media, concrete production is incredibly unfriendly for the environment.

Found a frog in the kitchen as I was preparing to go to bed; don't know how it found a way in. I thought it could do more good eating insects in the kitchen so decided to let it stay. I would have evicted it if it had started croaking but it had left by the morning before I could show the kids.

On Thursday Denise and I visited Bakau market; smaller and less intimidating than Banjul or Serrekunda but nonetheless ramshackle and disorganised compared to our normal expectations. I did manage to find some wire for teaching resources, and home decoration mounting. We bought a foot long whole Ladyfish(apparently we paid 4x over the locals price at £2.25) which I then had the privilege of filleting, as a first experience. I paid the same price for a machete; I have now experienced opening three coconuts, windfalls in the compound, with frustrating levels of success. The Ray Mears/Bear Grylls philosophy of 'you shouldn't burn more energy than you benefit from consumption of the food' would be in the balance from my efforts so far. On the first occasion much of the flesh got lost to the ants outside, when my attempts to break open the final nut in the kitchen succeeded in damaging the concrete floor(maybe due to the humidity of the rains then). It is nothing like as easy as the old *Bounty* advert used to imply = one chop by a lass in a bikini. I hope the new tool will keep the number of hacks to single figures. I can also use it when I start to manage the garden plot the landlady has agreed to me starting, though I will be waiting till the dry season kills off the large snail population(the babies are the same size as UK but they grow to 6 inches).

Was awoken by misted rain on my face (seived by the mosie net) on Friday as the wind brought what some believe to be the last of the rains; it may sound British to discuss the weather but the rains play such a part in day to day life. I delivered the children to school but there were no teachers in parts of the school; they had been waylaid by the weather. Experienced volunteers have said repeatedly that we have come at the most difficult time of the year. The rain had dissuaded my suggested outing to a wildlife park; Denise fears increased mosquito activity at such times so instead we visited Serrekunda in search of a Batik factory.

Serrekunda was as wet and as muddy as any other excursion I have made there (scene of grazed shin, week 3). It is the “heart” of The Gambia for road intersections, people concentrations, sprawling markets, bush taxis termini, consequential bustle, red mud, etc but the “nice” tourist guides do suggest avoiding it. We also encountered a bent copper who wanted to create an offence when I had missed a diversion route sign (a crowd was in the way). I argued my case and was prepared to go to the station to make it official but an elderly gentleman supported my argument and resolved the situation. The policing on some of the busiest streets is reactive rather than proactive, i.e. they sit off the street chatting until suddenly they are made aware of a car doing something like parking at an angle then jump up and get officious; or in this case fail to ensure diversions are clearly visible. It is amazing how quickly word of mouth spreads within the streets and markets – a friendly local, who had directed us to the factory, took us back to the car via the covered market area, where we were met by a vendor with the only two pieces of batik amongst the stalls. Nothing met with Denise’s requirements but we are hoping to source something in our neighbourhood; John, within our compound, knows of an artist just across the traffic lights. (The “traffic lights” are a significant landmark here, and were the only set in the Gambia until around 5 years ago!) Wednesday’s frog reappeared in the evening; it had got to the far end of our quarters in the toilet but it only had tiny ants to eat there so we put it out using a dustpan and cloth.

It had been my intention to distribute this on Saturday morning, as part of a new weekly schedule where we would visit the wifi café to skype parents around 9am (8 here) and I wouldn’t find myself waiting until the middle of the week to update the school blog and yourselves. Best laid plans were scuppered when the streets were empty and the café closed; so we went for a walk on the beach before the heat of the day. We were reminded, whilst walking, that it was ‘clean the nation day’ = on the last Saturday of the month national pride is supposed to drive us to do our bit to tidy up the environment (or hide out of sight). We didn’t do last month either as we were engrossed in the Abuko Nature reserve so we had better put it on the calendar for next month when we will be looking even less like tourists. We also witnessed a traditional /cultural event when we saw three furry costumes running around on the beach (think of an orang-utan coloured wookie) each slashing a pair of machetes (a bit frightening for the kids); their role was to ward off evil spirits for the boys ‘graduating’ from their rite of passage, i.e. circumcision. The lads, aged 5 – 13 had been away from their homes for 3 months, including a visit to the hospital for the op, and were now on their way home from the wilderness. It was an unexpected bonus to the walk as the way this culture had been portrayed in the Bakau museum one would have thought it no longer existed, and it was not included in the *Roots* TV serialisation (maybe too scary for the Americans).

Fingers crossed this will get emailed Sunday evening at our default skype time.