

w/e 4.10.09

The temperature this week has been generally hotter. We didn't feel like travelling too far on Sunday because of the heat; I took a walk to the beach for a swim but that wasn't particularly refreshing as the ocean is still warmer than a public swimming pool. We managed five skype calls in the air conditioned cool of the wi-fi café but then walked back out into heat, at seven in the evening. Nightfall hasn't brought relief; the temperature at midnight on Tuesday was still 35°.

On Monday I had fired myself up for my first official day of work and arrived at Gambia College ready for the proposed staff meeting at 9am. I then turned on my mobile phone and found a text message advising me that the meeting had been postponed until the Tuesday. I tried to make use of the time by attempting to set up a printer in our campus office. The printer had been donated by an office in Canada as being surplus to their requirements; software was available for installation but the vital cable that connects a USB to the printer is missing (one step forward two back, again). We had tried some other USB cables from digital cameras without success, borrowed some from the VSO office when the cable was suddenly found under a desk on Friday (but it still won't work, I think the printer heads have dried up – please help if you know of an everyday solution we can use to clean them, I'm sure *Readers Digest* will have produced a book about such stuff) . Anne, the veteran volunteer, informed me that the head of the school had approached her to ask if I would prefer to have an office away from my female co-volunteers as there were some spare offices in the new university building. Anne was insulted as she had previously had to share the room with at least 3 volunteers; I suggested it would not be following VSO gender equality guidelines to accept the offer – we shall wait to see what transpires. My gender perceptions were challenged further on my return journey. I had been making a habit of giving a lift to roadside hitchhikers/gelleh flaggers in uniforms but had considered changing my policy after the incident with the bent copper in Serrekunda. I did stop at a broken down mini-bus gelleh-gelleh to help the passengers; four squeezed onto the back seat and I was slightly surprised when the gang allowed a young mother to sit in the front (usually a male prerogative). She seemed reluctant and confused when I asked her to put on her seatbelt (only worn in the front; the kids love the freedom out of their seats in the back on outings) but did fit the lap belt section appropriately and put the shoulder strap behind her. Her non-compliance with my expectations was then justified as she started breastfeeding her infant; call it British pomposity if you will but I was taken aback, but what can you say or do? It is a natural way of life here and a reminder that I am the alien.

So Tuesday I set off full of expectation for the staff meeting at 10am and was the second person into the staffroom at 9.58. By 10.10 there were 4 of us, 3 volunteers and one Gambian lecturer (renowned for his 'western' time keeping). The meeting eventually started at 11am with 20 of us but a further 20 had joined by the lunch break at 2pm. It wasn't my place to say anything but the people watching was good value; the staff are striving for a professional standard that UK teachers promised in return for their workforce agreements and elimination of 25 tasks whilst they have to continue with many of the '25' (they're paid about £50 per month). Throughout the Head of School proved her worth. She also made a public attack on the lack of activity by the PE department whilst also using it as an opportunity to introduce my sporting background as a potential advisor to the department. It had been my intention

to approach the head of PE at the end of the meeting before the outburst of dissatisfaction, but that was unnecessary as Madame Ndow (the head) led the liaison. Having reviewed a drafted wish list of equipment I asked to see facilities and equipment. The facilities consisted of a football pitch (baked mud diamond in the middle with grassed corners) but as much space again of uncultivated land. The resources on hand were a volleyball net, two volleyballs and some football shirts; I got very excited when I was told there were some rugby balls in Madame's office. I went to look for them and found three size 3 balls (fit for 7-8 yr olds) and, thankfully, a near complete set of tag belts. I cannot say how pleased I was at the thought of being able to develop sport within the college and its potential value for the children of The Gambia; but I fear it is such a long way off and there will be many doors I will be knocking upon to try and improve the resources for the student teachers so that their awareness is magnified. (I would appreciate any of this readership who may be saving retailer's vouchers for their children's schools, usually Tesco at this time of the year, if they could ask the school to contribute some of their free bounty [even half a dozen airflow balls] to the cause for which I would be eternally grateful.)

On Wednesday we met the students. They crammed themselves into the Main Hall for 10am. Amy and I (two fresh and very white, not through fear, faces) forced our way to the front of the hall and waited, and waited fronted by 8-900 new students. The first Gambian lecturer to join us was responsible for Geography and chatting with him made me realise how anglicised their education system still is; why teach Physical Geography in a country where the highest point is 118 feet amongst sand and water? Meanwhile, technical staff tried to get the electricity to work for the PA system, fans and lights but that was no excuse for the delay of the staff before proceedings started around 11.30. The lights worked then the fans slowly started to work but then the power went off; it might have been the PA that blew it or just a power cut as the rain started. The roof started to leak above the lecturer's heads, so we found ourselves shuffling around to keep dry, but Madame kept talking despite her own increasing wetness. The students were a credit for the 3 hours they endured in the hall but you cannot imagine the same scenario being accepted in the west.

After the induction I got my teaching timetable; busy at the College Wednesday to Friday with the early part of the week to be spent visiting schools closer to home to support the student teachers that started their courses in 2007 and 2008.

I returned home to find a flip-flop had disappeared from the doorstep, or had changed colour and size, as a tatty replacement sat where the left one had been. Denise and Awa had been around for most of the day but could not advise me on its whereabouts. Torn between outrage at the cheek of the theft, my stupidity for leaving shoes outside, the value of a pair of flip-flops (25D=55p), I also considered the quip of Mr. Finkell who suggested one could never run out of shoes in an Islamic country as they're always left outside a mosque I went for run. On my return I resolved to ask Aboubakr, the security/yard boy if he knew anything about the exchange but could not find him, so started my cool down bath. Abou then appeared at the door with a neighbouring security boy and the flip-flop thief; hooray for Abou. I am glad he was not sacked a month ago (week 3 review); Auntie Luci doesn't have a kind word to say about him but he tries incredibly hard to please for 35p a day (opening and closing the gate and garage when I go out in the car) and I am able to exchange pleasantries with him in Mandinka, which he appreciates.

Thursday's meeting was more of a marathon than Tuesday's. 10am start proposed, 11.15 actual until 4.30. Thought I could take Friday off to do some emails to set Sport wheels in motion but then discovered I needed to collect some data from the college, as I learnt that I would be teaching a further group of Arabic Studies Student Teachers, last thing on Thursday. I did arrive late on Friday as I suspected staying in Fajara to wifi emails from 8 am would be more effective than going to college to wait for Madame to arrive to turn on the server to allow internet access (such tight bureaucracy is not unusual out here; our VSO neighbour, John, who works in the dept of trade & industry doesn't see the point in going to work when the IT guy is off work as there is no internet access, usually Friday). Madame, the hub of all things in the school and subsequently in great demand supplied the wrong information but had left for the week when I found the error. Pretty much a wasted journey/day, other than to discover the next IT hurdle in getting the printer to actually print.

On Saturday night we (the recent volunteer intake gang) had been invited to experience *Sandele eco-retreat* by Geri & Maurice of the Safari Garden to help celebrate her birthday. To make a day out of the journey we visited Gambia's Reptile & Amphibian farm; very much a hands on experience which pushes the importance of snakes in the environment (for vermin control), rehabilitation and conservation of endangered lizards, tortoises and turtles; Bradley touched all creatures but wouldn't wrap a python around his neck; Abi was a real wussie. The beach at Sandele was stunning, unspoilt and without the usual bumster hustle of local beaches but it could not go without its own signature; approximately 100 bullocks were driven to graze in the dunes by the beach! Geri showed us around the resort(a reclaimed quarry) after explaining its rationale; a project built by local people with local resources that will belong to the local community when the lease expires in about 20 years time, whilst also ensuring the tourist experience is not just a voyeuristic journey which creates greater divisions between cultures but is a more mutually beneficial understanding to the impoverished Gambian and wealthy Westerner. What is equally amazing in its concept is that it is providing a five star luxury product, to compete with a recent Sheraton, maintaining eco-friendly principles that include composting toilets. To indulge in such luxury (discounted off season) for a night was a real treat but left me thinking that there is another message beyond VSO that must be expressed. I don't want to rant as some eco-warrior, nor sound like a sales rep, here but if you would care to share in the good green principles within the project I would point you towards the website, (geri@gamspirit.com) and their *Pathways Foundation*. Incidentally, Geri returns to the UK this week to take part in a *Guardian* awards ceremony in recognition of the work she is doing in the field of eco-tourism with a part of the project. We have the further opportunity to go and build a 'volunteers house' within the resort so that future volunteers, including ourselves, might benefit – I'm very tempted for sake of learning wider skills beyond weekend DIY. We returned from the weekend quite shattered; our mundane early to bed routine upset by an evening/night sat on a beach round a fire under an African sky (went to bed 11.30!). The only excitement on the return journey was the metre long monitor lizard, which chose to cross the road when he heard us coming. Tomorrow I start lecturing at last, speaking slowly because the Arabic students are not as well educated as the bulk of the student teachers.