

Week ending 8.1.11

Bon Annee! Still having problems getting the need to speak French out of the system – I had the same problem on arrival in Senegal when I was automatically greeting Africans with ‘Salaam Maleikum’ but receiving ‘ca va?’ as a response. Three weeks can hopefully be limited to the highlights of one page. The highs were very much in Senegal; it seems so disloyal to our ‘home’ here but you could not believe the difference between two neighbouring nations. The resort in which we stayed is about 75 kms(as the crow flies) but you would have to say more than 75 years in advance of the Gambia.

Preparing for the trip we dreaded a power cut would hamper our packing efforts on the Sunday evening so cut short attending a beach party with the Butlers (beekeepers) and the routine beach touch rugby. This was after I had advised a frequent Gambia ‘tourist’, from Middlesbrough, interested in taking a VSO placement. Fortunately the power stayed on through the night so packing and leaving in the morning was no problem. As mentioned Saly is only 75 kms away but the route is twice as long to skirt a large delta, parts of the road are horrendous such that the taxi drivers leave it at some sections to follow a sand track through the bush when they can’t be bothered to ‘s’ through the chicanes provided by the holes in the tarmac(maybe an extra 10 km in gutter to gutter manoeuvres). The discomfort was worth it, we had only been in the resort for an hour and a half before Denise was suggesting we extend our stay as long as possible (an option previously given by the apartment owner).

I think it would be fair to suggest that this bit of French Africa is being kept a secret by the Gauls. It is sometimes referred to as the St.Tropez of West Africa – it may not have flash yachts of the mega-rich but whilst a little more expensive than Gambia it was worth its value for clean manicured palm lined beaches without the hustle we face here. The Senegalese people seem to realise they have a golden goose that is worth preserving, but they are obviously helped by the number of French who have emigrated to create businesses or retire. However, the Senegalese are more focussed on getting on with work and having a general purpose(their President is photographed in a business suit instead of the white ceremonial robes worn by the Gambian leader, as an example of the difference); such a refreshing change after 16 months of observing men sitting under mango trees watching the world go by.

We left the resort on only four occasions, once to visit a couple of nature/ game reserves; at one stage as we walked across the mud flats of a swamp the guide pointed out some ‘hyenas’ running free – they were probably jackals from their gait, the kids were frightened by the guides lack of real knowledge or vocabulary. They encountered ostriches later which were equally impressive to them. We visited the local town, Mbour, to experience their market and fishing centre. The beach was packed with locals landing and processing catches- it had far greater variety than we have in the Gambia – hammerhead and reef sharks the size of Bradley couldn’t fail to impress him. We did spend a night away in the capital, Dakar, where we enjoyed walking on real pavements of tree lined streets, Abi was impressed by high rise tower blocks and we were by the general signs of development. It was Boxing Day and we were even able to take the kids to circus – we were conned a bit by the poster which had a tiger leaping through a flaming hoop so thought it might be non pc with other performing animals (just like in the old days!) but it wasn’t to be – the European performers were very good but the Africans, unfortunately, were weak. Whilst visiting the slave island, a midday football match was being played by the locals - on a pitch which included a large baobab tree (circumference about 10 metres!)

On Christmas Day we did manage to roast a fresh Turkey (the supermarket could have supplied goose or Guinea Fowl but Denise wanted the traditional fayre after last year); I missed the Queen's speech again but a dip in the pool made up for that. Our New Year was tame, but continental fireworks were used on the beach away from the residences – a rare African health and safety precaution as grass is used on the roofs; TV footage showed palm trees alight in the centre of Dakar following celebrations there. We did get to watch some of the 'famed' wrestling, the Guide books describe it as the national sport of the Gambia but it impossible to find a bout as football predominates; the big annual battle was covered by two TV channels in Senegal. We managed to avoid the novelty of television more than in the UK but the use of a washing machine was a pleasure too far, so we had to stay just that bit longer.

If the truth be told I knew I would not have a lecture until Thursday morning and even then expected a poor turnout from students so didn't think it was worth rushing back, and we delayed our return by two days. Student attendance was as bad as expected but I did collect my pay for December, paid with the heaviest wad so far = 120 (25 Dalasis) notes, they're worth about 60p each. As I put dates into my new diary I really did feel that I am in the final straight and we'll be back in the UK all too soon; I have too many things that I want to see through- the only problem that now I have seen that Senegal can do it I'm not convinced Gambia can.

One of my targets is to take the rugby team to play a match in Senegal; I hope I can convince the President of the Association that he owes me a favour now as I helped him with his national cricket team by creating a link, through neighbour Lynn, to give them some quality coaching this week in anticipation of their forthcoming tour to South Africa. The rugby team have shown some independent determination, by altering their training arrangements to concentrate their efforts to the weekend (so I will have sessions on Friday and Sunday evenings) and arranged a fixture over the holiday period.

On another sporting front, the College finally took delivery of some sports equipment promised by the German Olympic Federation last September, at the time of my arrival. I had seen some athletics gear this past September when I had visited the Minister for Youth & Sports on rugby matters, and warned colleagues at college that I suspected it had arrived. They duly made enquiries to be told that it indeed been delivered but as the college hadn't collected it at an official handover (because they didn't have a telephone number to request an official recipient apparently!) someone had taken it home for safe keeping! We think most of it has survived this wayward incarceration but it would appear not all boxes are intact. There are, at least, some javelins. I had previously made enquiries as to why the Gambia focussed on track events but no field events, and if you will forgive a 'non PC' aside the Afro-American on TV show MASH was called 'spear chucker', raised the absence of the Javelin here; the best excuse I got was that it was considered dangerous to spectators (a fair comment when one considers how unaware Gambian children are of the roads that run through their villages). The down side to this development at the college that now they actually have some equipment that I could use to help with delivery of a curriculum my workload in the Maths department has increased by a third.

Anyway my New Year 'blues', the usual annual anticlimax after Christmas, are the wonderful clear cool skies in the mornings here; this really is the time to be working in Africa – or did that holiday do me too much good?