

Week ending 22.1.11

So ends another week out in the field; it was the best trek I've had so far, and whether that's because I've become accustomed to the privations or I'd prepared better it has certainly passed without some of the previous trials. Indeed my week was over earlier than a normal working week as I was delivered to the front door by 1pm on Friday.

Last Saturday seemed to be spent getting ready. Denise was attending at First Aid course at her school so I was responsible for the kids. I treated myself to a last evening of home comforts with electricity to watch a Monty Python's *Life of Brian* as I thought the *Always look on the bright side of life* attitude would help me survive. That was certainly the case when the vehicle came to collect me on time on Sunday lunchtime – it was a 22 seater bus (not the usual 4WD) and the original destination had been altered. The ferry crossing was not the usual sit around and wait as queue jumpers bribe the officials and we arrived mid afternoon at the home compound of one of the team. There we benefitted from evening electricity and I was able to watch the Gambian news on TV for the first time; a fairly amateur production but the main event was the suddenly impending *Roots* homecoming festival in a couple of weeks time. It is the one thing that the country has as its biggest potential tourist pull but rather than priming the travel companies 6 months ago to boost interest they are promoting with the equivalent of a card in the window of the local newsagent! On the second evening the news was not shown, as the time was dedicated to an ego boost for the President to celebrate the 4 years of his AIDS programme; his faith healing is now to be extended to curing sickle cell anaemia and high blood pressure before Independence Day (a month away) which will be added to his success with AIDS, infertility and diabetes. He thanks the West for his 'success'; apparently our scepticism has been the driving force for him to prove it wrong and he will be running 'alternative' therapies as his principles are from the East.

The availability of electricity was suddenly snatched away at my lowest point of the week. On Tuesday morning I assumed we would be returning to the same compound when I awoke and took a bucket bath, but was told before I was dressed that we were moving on immediately – I was not pleased at having to pack up everything with 10 minutes notice; the decision had obviously been made in Wollof and I had not been made a party to it. That night was an uncomfortable one on the concrete floor of a shared accommodation but the remaining nights were on a mattress.

In contrast the highs were:

I visited a school where the Queen had visited 49 years ago – I read the record of the event in a school log written in an almost Victorian cursive script.

On one occasion when the team had sent me to another school ahead of them, I made my own way back hitching a lift on a horse and trap.

The meals we were fed was tasty local food.

The teaching I witnessed, for the most part, was better than that previously seen and the classroom environments far better than last year so signs of improvement are there.

One of the more intellectual members of college staff was with us (he attends meetings on time!) and I had many a long discussion with him. He left his home in Sierra Leone at the time of the troubles which explains his different outlook; but the galling thing is that he probably respects my country more than I do – I thought I set him a real dilemma when I challenged his faith with the option of a trip to London or

Mecca? Without hesitation he chose our capital. He spent hours listening to the BBC World Service on his radio while we were away and I felt a real sense, from our discussions that you really do have to travel to fully appreciate the value of your home. He hopes to attend a University in the UK to gain a Masters – I hope for his sake he achieves that goal, he deserves it more than most of the Gambians I have met. In one of the compounds we stayed the student teacher supplied me with warm water for my bucket bath – it was an amazing luxury, such simple things!

The area we were covering is renowned for its dairy cattle so I did get to experience fresh milk ...but the Gambians don't like it 'fresh' – they prefer it sourer so whenever we acquired any it was left on top of the engine for hours to heat up and get 'churned'. It made a change that I behaved like any other Gambian lecturer by requesting a time delaying detour to visit 'my people' and collected some oranges from our friend Alf so that I, too, had some cheap upcountry goods to return to the city!

On our return trip on the ferry a Gambian did try and pick my pocket of my wallet. It is a notorious site for such crimes. I do wish that I had the wherewithal to have broken his fingers at the time, but I had stopped to allow a mother to alight from our vehicle- where she had been suckling her baby- to join the rest of her gang (kafo) gathered in the vicinity. He had the cheek to stare unashamedly back at me before disguising himself behind a pair of sunglasses!

The other disappointment to the trip may actually be seen as a positive. When Mum and Mandy had been staying in their hotel in December they had spoken with some philanthropists who were providing water filters to schools where children were suffering water borne illnesses. I had tried to market their product amongst some of the schools where I had time to chat with Head teachers. Conscious of the potential 'grab anything going from charitable causes' attitude here I had tempered the enquiry with "how good is your attendance" to try and elicit sickness as a cause for concern, but none of the schools had a problem so I found no outlet for the filters. The only school with attendance problems was on the Senegalese border where they were in stiff competition with Madrassa(Islamic) schools.

I have learnt a couple of things about myself through the week. Firstly, the local habit of drinking Attaya(green tea, the word means friendship) gives me a headache the following morning – more than beer does, so there must be more to it than meets the eye! I think I have a 'poo fear', my bowels were only able to pass two motions through the week- I do not know if this is due to the unsavoury state of the long drops available, or the concern of performing the act in the open aware that the CIA spy satellites have you covered even if the people passing in the street the other side of a grass fence ignore you. Either way it was great to get home and sit on the throne with the door closed!