

Note from *people and places*: this volunteer's placement was designed specifically for them – they went through our full matching process, as we've been doing with you. The placement report indicates their particular skills and experience – yours may be similar or completely different – your own placement will make best use of **your** experience and skills. Every volunteer is different – in what they give and what they gain. Reports from previous volunteers serve to give you as good a picture as possible about the project. If you have any questions about any of the detail in this report please do not hesitate to contact me at kate@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

Volunteer report - Anke Winchenbach

Placement dates and project

I spent 5 weeks from 28 May – 2 July 2013 in The Gambia.

The project I was involved in still continues after my return to the UK and will hopefully continue for the years to come. I am currently doing a MA in Tourism, Environment and Development and developed an interest in Responsible Tourism and pro-poor tourism during my studies. Inevitably, the names Harold Goodwin and Adama Bah occurred frequently when I started considering responsible tourism to be my dissertation topic, so which volunteer company could have been more suitable than p&p, which are strongly connected to both of them. Initially, the aspect of being a volunteer seemed interesting for my thesis, but I learned during my time in The Gambia that letting local voices speak is much more interesting and relevant.

My topic partly shaped based on local needs, which was "monitoring the impact of trainings which ITTOG (Institute for Travel and Tourism in The Gambia) provided for ASSET (Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism) members".

Without the amazing and ongoing support of Adama Bah, Tejan Nyang, Lamin Bojang, ASSET staff and members and ITTOG staff and students, I certainly would not have been able to conduct my extensive research. The fact that my skills as a tourism professional and researcher matched local needs made my volunteer placement hopefully a win-win situation.

Pre departure preparation

The thorough screening process felt daunting at times, but completely made sense and hopefully ensures that volunteers get placed where their skills are valued and where support is needed.

Speaking to previous volunteers has been extremely useful and provided a fantastic opportunity to hear first hand stories. I felt well prepared and part of a community before I even went.

In order to prepare my research, I asked for details about the training ITTOG provided and Lamin kindly provided what was available. He even went into ITTOG on a Sunday when the internet connection was stable, which is not always the case in The Gambia. However, the documentation on some training seemed patchy and inconsistent, which was confirmed when I was there. Something to improve on ITTOG's side if monitoring the impact of training is desired to continue.

I appreciated the fact that I was asked before I arrived if I'm happy to travel upcountry in order to monitor the training impact in more remote areas of the country. This way, I had time to familiarise myself with various destinations and the challenges of travelling in rural Gambia and could adjust my packing accordingly (e.g. torch, mosquito net, medicine – all which is much less of an issue when staying in more urban areas).

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement

I received a warm welcome by Lamin as he picked me up from the airport. My orientation the next day was interesting and went smoothly and I felt that all my questions I had at that time got answered. From the very beginning, I felt that Lamin would be a fantastic support and research buddy, which proved to be true.

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Lamin, Adama and Tejan were all approachable, fun and challenged me intellectually throughout my stay by sharing their thoughts and being honest and reflective about issues I faced during my research.

My experience and work

Volunteering with p&p was probably one of the best decisions I've ever made. I am almost certain that I would never have been able to get access to the interviewees and documents I was able to through the local support I received. Also, working, travelling and socialising mainly with locals gave me a good insight into the local culture (and cuisine!) and helped me to better understand issues regarding Responsible Tourism practices in The Gambia and beyond.



ITTOG building



Tour guides in Jufreh filling in questionnaires



Interviewing in Njawara...



and Janjanbureh



Tourism Bantaba with Lamin



An ITTOG student holds a presentation about sustainable tourism



Lamin with one of his classes



Badu from ASSET



Adama at the official launch of "tourism bantaba"

For the first few days, I met with Tejan (ITTOG), Badu (ASSET), Lamin and Adama to establish what they expect from me and what I thought would be the best way to monitor the impact their training had. As our communication was open and honest, it was easy to agree on how to proceed so the project would be beneficial for everybody involved.

ITTOG regularly provides training on various topics such as sustainable tourism, customer service, food & hygiene, responsible tourism and tour guiding for ASSET members and other organisations. Due to a lack of financial and human resources, monitoring the training success usually stops at the post-training questionnaire. However, often issues arise at a later stage when trainees are trying to implement changes in their businesses or communities. As the overall aim of the trainings is to practice tourism in a more responsible and also financially sustainable manner, I was asked to visit previous trainees in their work places (or elsewhere if it was better for them) to uncover the main obstacles they are facing, how the training can be improved and what future trainings are needed.

The mode of transport to the sites wasn't quite clear when I arrived, however, we found an affordable yet comfortable way to travel by renting the car from the owner of Safari Garden Hotel. This way, my concern (convenience, heat, travel time) using public transport was taken into account and the project agreed to use part of my volunteer money for renting the car. I think it is very important to make sure you as a volunteer are clear about your needs too in order to benefit the project. A tired, scared, sick or uncomfortable volunteer is unlikely to make a valuable contribution, so listen to your physical and mental needs and address them with your local partners immediately. I always felt my concerns were taken seriously and together we found the best way to keep focus on the overall aim of the volunteer placement, which ideally matches both party's expectations.

We spent 5 days in total in Jufreh, Njawara, Janjanbureh, Tendaba and Tumani Tenda, where I interviewed more than 20 people. This trip gave me the opportunity to hear, see and experience how local people

understand responsible tourism and what factors influence the success of the training they had. Some individuals/ communities find it easier than others to implement what they learned and the research will hopefully help to find ways in how to improve the situation. These 5 days were the highlight of my placement, even though every single day of the five weeks seemed like a school day and I felt constantly challenged in my world views. I learned more about tourism and development in these five weeks than in a year of studying.

Over the following three weeks, I had a busy schedule including various research activities, sometimes with Lamin, sometimes without. Lamin supported me when I needed him, but also provided me enough space and freedom to find my own ways of getting my data. I kept organising interviews with ITTOG trainees and other interviewees (such as Gambia Tourism Authority) closer to where I was based. As part of this, I got the chance to spend 3 nights in Sandele Eco-retreat (the third night was more by accident as it was difficult to travel while the president was in Kartong).

At ITTOG, I felt welcome by Tejan, all teachers and students at any time. I enjoyed being there and felt appreciated. I was given the opportunity to sit in classroom teachings to get a better idea of how teaching is done and what the level of students' understanding of responsible tourism is.

This has been a valuable experience and I fed back my observations to ITTOG teachers, who were open for my feedback. While spending time at ITTOG, I had the chance to chat to a lot of students and teachers in a more informal way, which also helped me learning more about which obstacles exist in regards of tourism education, employment and responsible tourism development in The Gambia.

I gave one lecture (which I had brought as a power point) on the consumption of heritage, which produced relevant questions and facilitated an interesting discussion about tourists' motivations and (over) consumption of heritage sites. The feedback I received was good and I had full attention from the group and the teacher.

However, during my time spent at ITTOG, I was surprised to see that classroom discipline varies a lot, including students checking their mobile phones and chatting and even leaving the room to chat outside while peers are doing a marked presentation. After observing this for a couple of days, I felt it is best to address this with the students directly, asking for the reasons behind their disruptive and disinterested behaviour. The teacher at the time encouraged me to do so, as we both felt it should be addressed with the students themselves.

I took the chance to encourage the students to respect each other's contributions and to build professional networks with their peers, as they will possibly be the future drivers of the direction the Gambian tourism industry will take. Some students thanked me for the encouragement to support each other, which made me feel it was good to address it openly. It's important to keep in mind that some students work long hours or even night shifts while doing their degrees, so the attention span might be limited based on a lack of sleep. More regular breaks might help increasing the attention span, which some lecturers successfully did.

At this time of the year most students are about to finish their degree and are busy preparing final coursework or exams. For most students, the question of what to do after the course naturally was most important. I was asked to look at a business plan (for a ground tour operator company), give advice on studying or working abroad or what I thought about the state of the Gambian tourism industry in general. Therefore, I decided to offer a Q&A session instead of giving a further lecture, which went well and I hope my answers helped some students towards their future decisions.

Some students approached me individually, asking me for help to get an internship in Germany or find an affordable college in the UK. I fully understand that financial and other support is often needed on many levels; however, I often felt that volunteers' good will could be misused. If you are aiming to help everybody who asks you for support, you will never get anything done and for sure disappoint people. Select wisely what you can and can't do and what makes sense. In doubt, ask local people for their advice.

For example the person who wanted me to find a college in the UK has a brother who lives since 10y in the UK, so much longer than I do. Also, all UK colleges are online and ITTOG provides free internet access for all students on campus, so he could have researched colleges himself too. One student who apparently planned an internship in Germany did no previous research on this, did not know which field he was interested in nor

spoke to his lecturers about his plans, even though the Hospitality lecturer has strong professional links to Germany and Austria. It seemed that he just tried to find a way to meet me.

I would advise future volunteers to be very clear on what they can and can't do, so there is little scope for disappointment and misunderstanding. Even though I thought I was quite clear about what my mission was during my placement and what my limits are, some students bombarded me with texts and messages, asking to meet again after I took the time once to do so. The solution is certainly not to avoid meeting with people who are asking for support, but it is advisable to cross-check with the teachers about the individual student's needs and where help is appropriate. Most Gambian people will find it completely normal to get approached for various forms of help from family and friends and even strangers, so it's mainly a cultural difference. Try to keep being polite, you will sooner or later be left alone. The same applies for bumsters who might approach you mainly in Senegambia or on the beach. Be polite but clear, most people will respect your privacy eventually.

In my situation, I re-assured the students that the teachers at ITTOG are very well connected and can give advice on how to proceed with their career, as they know the individual student's skills much better than I do. This worked well and is much more sustainable than students relying on outside help.

All teachers gave me the feeling that they are approachable and supportive to their students. However, it might be worth a thought if ITTOG could establish a regular weekly open Q&A session for students, either as a group session or for individual students, or both, so students can prepare questions and know to whom they can talk to and when.

Another highlight of my placement was when Lamin and Ami invited me to be part of "Tourism Bantaba", a radio call-in programme about issues around tourism in The Gambia. It's every Tuesday from 8 - 9pm Gambia time on Paradise fm. I was listening to the programme twice before I went live, which helped me to get a better idea of what the programme is about. Natalie, a previous volunteer, started the programme a couple of weeks ago. It now has a sponsor and will continue, so I felt proud to be part of a successful continuation of a previous volunteer's work. We talked about the importance of educating tourists to avoid exploitive behaviour and how and by whom this can be done. Callers made very valuable contributions to the show and some students who listened to the programme commented positively over the following days.

Overall, I had a fantastic experience. I felt needed and valued and could clearly see that the work I was doing, particularly the monitoring training impact aspect, would have not been done for a while (or maybe never) without my financial and time-wise contribution and particular skills. I really hope that future volunteers (with the support and advice of local people) will continue where I stopped, as regular monitoring of projects and businesses will make them much more likely to be successful. It would be desirable that with the support of volunteers, ASSET and ITTOG can be ahead of the game and implement a regular monitoring system so interventions can be done. Knowing which areas need more support can help making the tourism industry in Gambia more crises resilient and sustainable. Tourism is one of the most important industries and the biggest foreign exchange earner in The Gambia.

During my placement, I met plenty of ambitious, clever, creative and driven people, who are ready to change the face of Gambia's tourism practices for the better. I don't know what exactly I expected, but I kept being impressed by the positive vibe and hope that overshadowed by far the minor challenges I experienced. The strength of people & places is to match volunteer's skills with the projects' needs, which is absolutely true for my placement.

Would I recommend volunteering to other people?

I would certainly recommend volunteering to other people; however, it's not for everybody. The country and the culture do matter a lot. The Gambian people are extremely friendly with a good sense of humour and have their heart in the right place. The projects I saw seemed well managed and I regularly came across previous volunteer's work which still was relevant, such as the radio programme and very pretty dressing gowns, which are now sold at a high end hotel.

Some other volunteer projects seemed less well managed. I spoke to a couple of frustrated VSO volunteers whose projects seemed pointless and the local management was said to be very poor. Also, it is important to know that there is a portion of mistrust by some local people about the mission volunteers have in the country. I understood that this is based on decades of unsustainable NGO and volunteer work in various sectors. So be prepared for people being suspicious and questioning what you are doing – they have plenty of reasons to do so. I myself keep thinking if my work could have been done by a local person. The answer is yes, but most likely not now, not as quickly (the trip would have taken much longer by public transport) and the number of tourism professionals is very limited (and the ones I met seemed to be involved in plenty of projects already). My advice: keep being reflective all the way through and take nothing for granted.

Leisure time

I didn't really have much leisure time due to the fact that I constantly came across topics I wanted to explore further and aimed to start analysing my findings while I was there. Luckily, tourism research includes doing excursions and chatting to people, so I went to see Katchikali museum and crocodile farm (but stayed well away from the reptiles), did a guided cycling tour in Kartong and went on a boat trip to Jufreh. In the evenings, I socialised with local people, other volunteers and other researchers I met.

Most evenings I stayed in my hotel, but there are plenty of bars and restaurants if someone prefers going out. I also tried to eat as often as possible at ASSET Bantaba, my favourite restaurant in The Gambia with delicious local food and excellent service. The restaurant is run by the ITTOG hospitality school to provide an opportunity for placements for students and trumps most other restaurants in food and service quality.

I also swam almost daily in the Safari Garden pool, but didn't go into the sea as the current seemed a bit too strong for my swimming skills.

Accommodation

The first 4 weeks I stayed in Safari Garden Hotel in Fugarah, a small local run hotel with friendly staff and a very helpful owner. However, electricity and wifi access was irregular, which made it sometimes hard for me to work. The rooms are basic but ok. Overall, you get what you pay for. My placement was just before the rainy season started, so the temperature and humidity increased daily and at some point I struggled to sleep without a/c.

I spent my last week in a place called Luigi's in Palma Rima area, which seemed good value for money, was close to ASSET and had 24h a/c and wifi. I managed to sleep and work properly, but other than that I cannot confirm the tripadvisor reviews at all. It did not feel homely or personal and unfortunately the dogs there (they run a dog charity) never accepted me as an inhabitant, which regularly left me standing outside the gate or my room, shouting for help. I would not stay there again. In cooler month, Safari Garden is a much better option to stay.

What else

I could not have asked for a better placement. I met the most amazing and ambitious people from all sorts of walks of life. Particularly Lamin went above and beyond at all times and his support was invaluable for my placement, but also for the projects overall. I feel that the contacts I made will continue far beyond my volunteer placement and I really hope to have the chance to go to The Gambia.

Kate and Sallie (and all previous volunteers I spoke to), your support has been great from the initial contact until now after my return. I loved being able to chat with you through facebook messenger, which meant I could keep you in the loop about my whereabouts and thoughts while abroad. Thank you!!!

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Thank you.