

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

Susan Davis – The Gambia, Early Childhood Development – December 2014

'Hello Princess. Looking good today!' these are the words that inevitably greeted me on my daily walk to the Senegambian strip. Oh my gosh what an experience The Gambia is! I went to join Lisong at her Little Lambs Nursery but ultimately this encompassed shopping trips to the hectic Serekunda market searching for educational resources, attending flamboyant local religious events and making a fleeting overnight admission to a clinic!

I met with Lisong in the UK prior to my visit to The Gambia in early November through to mid December 2014. I arranged with the school where I was working to show Lisong around a typical UK early years setting. Lisong was very interested in UK teaching methods and took many photos. Additionally, the school kindly donated a generous range of resources.

Initially my accommodation was a bit of a hiccup – excessive noise and cockroaches too close for comfort! However my self-catering accommodation at a Gambia owned apartment block was wonderful. The staff were extraordinarily supportive and caring. When I had an uncomfortable liaison with some bumsters they rapidly arranged for me to have the security phone numbers so that I could be met if necessary.

Note from *people and places*: volunteers are provided with our local partners' contact details and asked to communicate any problems – at which point, concerns can be addressed, as was the case for Susan.

I enjoyed my time with Lisong and she kindly took me to a sponsored school locally to observe their use of an American teaching scheme that I had never seen. We also visited the site where a school is being planned. The children at Little Lambs were much younger than I anticipated....some of the babies were still being weaned! The nursery is organised into three classes, – and in my desire to emphasise written text – I renamed and labelled them as the 'Little Lambs, Lambs and Big Lambs'.



the reading / book corner



timetable

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I presented a couple of workshops to the three teachers there - using stories for literacy, phonic work and numeracy. I planned a supplementary workshop on numeracy but unfortunately was not able to do so due to illness. Additionally I 'sorted out' the training area evaluating the usefulness of the resources and relocating a huge quantity of books into the classrooms for use by the children as well as the teachers. Likewise I used existing resources to invigorate numeracy, literacy and phonic areas.



warm weather workshops outdoors

I was genuinely surprised to find a generous quantity of resources not being utilised and evidence of previous volunteer's homemade resources and commercial supplies seemingly relegated to sacks. Most of these I was able to reinstate into the classroom.

Note from *people and places*: while upsetting, this is often the case in many projects – resources are seen as too 'precious' to be used, and volunteers frequently need to encourage use of resources.

I asked for my donation to be used to provide educational supplies and Lisong and I spent a couple of happy days shopping for, amongst other storage, gigantic tubs so that the children could play with wet and dry sand and water freely.



Lisong during a shopping excursion



The children seemed to love this playtime and I will always remember one little two year old crying genuine tears because she had already had her turn.

Before I went it seemed that I had a lot of information concerning the bumsters that are so prevalent in the Senegambian area. However, it would seem that they in fact operate on a dual level – financial and sexual. Having visited many, many developing countries I was alert to the financial hassle but astonishing naive to sexual harassment. Often lighthearted but always inescapable; I stopped counting after 22 remarks during my twice daily walk. Whether it was because I was travelling independently I don't know. However clearly I was the only woman who believed the young Gambian men used the beach to demonstrate their athletic prowess in the hope that they would be spotted by a football scout!

Lamin (a member of our local partner team at Faces & Places) who works in the tourist industry, met with me when I first arrived and prepared me for some of the ploys executed by the bumsters as well as warning me to be cautious of speaking negatively about the President or politics.

I was very keen to grasp any and every social excursion! Lisong invited me to three church events and they were quite extraordinary. The most moving being when a young woman was ordained into a religious community after her novitiate.

I was also ill while I was there....volunteers be aware! I thought I was being very careful but no, I did manage to get gastro enteritis! I will always be so grateful to Adama and Lisong. They were so caring to me and beyond the call of duty, stayed overnight in the clinic with me. I will admit, I was scared but it was fine in the end. However, I will never pooh pooh those rehydration sachets again! On the positive side I had a really informative chat with the Dutch doctor and learnt the origins of Dutch, Holland and Netherlands! Interestingly in the whole five weeks I was there I did not speak to any British people at all bar a fleeting hello to two English women doctors!

Note: again we see the importance of our local partners in supporting volunteers throughout their time in country.

Overall I do feel positively about my time in The Gambia. Lisong and Adama were very welcoming and at a personal level I gained enormous insights into everyday life of The Gambian people. The children were inevitably gorgeous and I truly believe that I gave as much support and access to UK educational practice as I could. I hope I left Lisong with many ideas and plans for the continuing development of the education system in The Gambia.



maths, colours, sorting, reading – all can be fun

My recommendation for other volunteers would be to interrogate the literature meticulously and explore the country comprehensively. I focused on education because I was participating in an educational project but in fact I should have investigated The Gambia much more generally.

Concerning the project specifically, I think future volunteers should continue to demonstrate how to exploit existing resources. I believe that energy should be directed at outdoor play as a valuable learning environment and a narrow focus on commercial resources is erroneous. There are training materials available for teachers that explain, instruct and demonstrate the countless, free teaching methods available. However, notwithstanding this, I do believe that a graded reading scheme would be worthwhile –for example Oxford Reading Tree.

Sue Davis

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