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## **Volunteer placement report - No Woman Left Behind, The Gambia**

**Volunteer: Michele James**

### **Placement dates and project**

17.3.23 to 7.4.23 which was 3 weeks altogether

### **Motivation for volunteering**

I am very focused on supporting ethical volunteering and travel, building on previous volunteering experiences. It is important for me to feel that we are working with local people on their priorities and adding value to a project rather than taking up time or resources.

It is also an incredible opportunity to be able to expand my knowledge and learning of different cultures but as a consequence also about myself.

### **Pre-departure preparation**

The information provided before departure was very comprehensive and informative, especially about the area, what to expect, what to wear, the projects and what previous volunteers had contributed.

### **Orientation**

I arrived on Friday afternoon, Fatou met me at the airport and we drove to the apartment, she helped me settle in and then took me to exchange my UK money into Dalasi, the speed which she checked the exchanged money was amazing. Fatou then explained where the local supermarket and key landmarks were and I was free to explore over the weekend by myself. Fatou came to meet me on Monday and we went to ITTOG together so that I knew how to get there for the following day.

I felt very well supported by all of the local contacts throughout my stay, but especially by Fatou .

### **Experience and tasks at work**

My time was spilt between working with Fatou on the shop and restaurant development and also within ITTOG college supporting the Business Management course as part of the NWLB project.

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Building on previous volunteer's work I could use the business plan which Ellie had created with Fatou as a guide for the direction of the project. (note from people and places: Ellie was a volunteer who had worked with Fatou and the NWLB team a couple of months previously – this is a perfect example of one volunteer 'passing the baton' to the next)

### For the shop/restaurant development –

We created a simple action plan for the progression of the development so we could move this forward and keep track of the areas still to be worked on. As it was agreed to focus on completing the shop area ahead of further development of the premises, this helped us to be able to ask questions regarding the timeframe for progression of the work needed. The work which was then arranged included: building completion, electrical work, supply of shelving units and general equipment for the shop.

Although there is still more to be done Fatou is more confident that this will be completed soon.

We also visited wholesalers to establish the supply of some of the dry goods for the shop, which will be sold alongside the produce from the village gardens.

### For the Business Management course-

I worked with Fatou, Lamin and Bakary who are teaching on the course to support the women during the classes and on a 1:1 basis to discuss their initial business ideas and how to progress these.

The NWLB students



In class activity



NWLB official launch 7.4.23



## Success and challenges

Successes – it felt that we made a bit of a breakthrough on progressing the work needed on the NWLB shop project and the next steps. There had been delays from the beginning of the year but we managed to organise most of the set up work and equipment by the time I had to leave.

Challenges – the very relaxed approach to time keeping and planning was a bit frustrating at first, especially at the ITTOG college. Although I had expected taxis and drivers to be more flexible in the times they arrived as it turned out that they were all very punctual and extremely helpful.

The attention from men as I went to or was on the beach in particular, was disconcerting at first, but they weren't threatening and only a very few were particularly persistent. I was grateful that I had been advised this would happen so could be prepared and wasn't so shocked.

## Personal highlights

The whole visit was a brilliant opportunity to experience a different way of life and approach to everyday matters. The people I met and saw around, were very calm, unhurried, patient and respectful of each other, which is a big contrast to UK life. This experience also made me even more appreciative of the practical things we have at home, when there are high levels of poverty there, but slightly envious of the friendly approach to strangers and relaxed way of life that exists in The Gambia.

Working with the college and especially Fatou, was particularly rewarding, especially as we managed to move some things forward for the shop development.

## Would I recommend volunteering

Definitely!

It is such an amazing opportunity to be able to spend time with people who have a different culture, language, location and way of life plus to be able to support local projects and share knowledge.

## Leisure time

After work in the afternoons I could relax by the pool and lovely gardens in the apartment building, which was something I appreciated, but initially underestimated the tenacity of the mosquitoes.

In my other free time I would spend time on the lovely beach, especially in the mornings before it became too hot and busier and did arrange trips such as to Kunta Kinteh island. Part of this included a ferry crossing from Banjul to Barra, which was an incredible experience, including having to run to get on it.

Relaxing by the pool



The local beach



## Accommodation

I stayed in the Riyan apartments, which were simple but very clean and comfortable with everything I needed for my stay. There were ceiling fans in the bedroom and lounge area which were essential as the weather got hotter. Air conditioning was available for a small charge but I didn't need that in addition to the fans.

The staff at the apartments were very friendly and helpful, including in arranging drivers and explaining how things worked in the apartment (such as the washing machine). It was a very convenient location for local supermarkets, fruit stalls, small shops, the beach (which was only a 5 minute walk) and the college (which was a 15 minute walk). Unfortunately there is a major road development work underway in front of the apartment building and although there wasn't much noise from this at present there could be in the future.

Power cuts in The Gambia are a regular occurrence but there is a generator in the apartment building and although the signal varies there is also free WiFi available.

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