

*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 mariama@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk*

Shiobhan Evans - Mary's Little Lambs School Volunteer, The Gambia 1–28 November 2025

The first question I am always asked is why? I wanted to share my skills and experience in a school and country where that type of support was genuinely needed, somewhere I could help in a small but meaningful way. I spent a long time looking for the most appropriate placement, as many opportunities focused on teaching English or doing crafts in schools and felt more like it would be a gap year experience, which wasn't what I was looking for. With People and Places, you submit your CV and it is shared with partner projects based on your skills and experience; the projects then outline what they would like you to do, allowing you to decide whether it is the right fit. That process was important to me, and I also knew that at 58, I didn't want to stay in dorm-style accommodation with lots of 18–20-year-olds, so staying at Riyan Apartments suited me perfectly.

There was lots of correspondence before leaving for Gambia but the most useful pre-departure preparation came from the Zoom meetings with People and Places representatives and with Lison and Michelle. It was during one of these meetings that I decided The Gambia was where I wanted to go, and the meeting with Lison and Michelle gave me a very clear idea of what I should prepare and take with me. There was some initial confusion about the cost of the accommodation, but this was quickly resolved through email and a followup meeting with Diane from People and Places, which reassured me before travelling.

When I arrived, Fatou was on a course in China for the first two weeks of my placement, so Musufin met me on my first day. I arrived on a Saturday and we walked to the school and briefly met Lison. I was glad I had arrived over the weekend as it gave me time to find my feet. Musufin was wonderful company and helped me learn the route that I would walk to school, organise taxis (including how to haggle), and find ATMs, money exchange points and a SIM card, all of which helped me feel settled very quickly. Every morning, as I walked to school, I passed groups of people who greeted me warmly, and I always felt safe in the area.



people and places: responsible volunteering



During my career I worked as a teacher and head teacher, and the school asked me to support staff in developing topics of learning that incorporated different curriculum areas, as well as helping to create a School Improvement Plan. I also worked with Michelle to observe lessons and give feedback to support teacher development. I brought with me a range of books that I had previously developed activities around, lesson observation templates, a large “Big Book” with examples of topics built around big questions and the learning that had been generated, and a folder of ideas for active, hands-on learning. In addition, I brought specific resources such as measuring tapes, colouring pencils, chalk and a beautiful poetry book illustrated with paintings of animals and trees, all of which were used meaningfully during my time there.

One of the challenges was the lack of technology, although this was something I grew to enjoy. Everything was handwritten, including the School Improvement Plan, class plans and workshop resources, and I found that this actually reduced unnecessary paperwork and allowed us to focus more clearly on learning. In the classrooms, the only electrical items were the lights and fans, and electricity regularly went off. Teaching was largely teacher-led, with children answering questions and copying from the blackboard, and I was in awe of how hard the teachers worked and what their working day involved.



people and places: responsible volunteering

I usually arrived at school at around 8:15am and worked until sometime between 1pm and 3pm, depending on the day and the heat. During the first two weeks I generally finished around 1pm and returned to my accommodation to write plans and prepare resources, while in the final two weeks I often stayed until 2 or 3pm. On my first day I was introduced to everyone and spent time sitting in all the classes to observe, and I was also given curriculum books for each class so that I could prepare more effectively for planning meetings with each teacher. These meetings went very well and were something I enjoyed very much; we shared ideas openly and I always made it clear that everything we did would be a partnership. After each meeting I wrote a topic plan based on the notes from the meeting and then worked alongside teachers in the classroom to put ideas into practice.

Some teachers were keen to see examples of how lessons could be

taught with pupils more actively involved, so I led sessions where children worked in groups rather than individually or in pairs. They explored learning through reading, discussion and problem-solving, and then demonstrated what they had learned by creating posters, making models, presenting their findings, drawing maps on the playground or acting things out in class or assembly. One teacher commented that the children were learning so much while doing all the work themselves, and that it allowed her to move around supporting groups, which she found both effective and enjoyable.



people and places: responsible volunteering

There were many wonderful moments throughout the placement. Highlights included Prep 2 performing *The Three Little Pigs* in small groups, children drawing maps of the local area on the playground, and Prep 1 delivering an anti-litter campaign in assembly. Prep 6, in particular, worked with real focus and determination, showing high levels of motivation and engagement as they designed and created different learning areas in the garden, including a reading area, mud kitchen, puzzles and an art space. They carefully planned their ideas, worked collaboratively and took great pride in what they were creating. Their final presentation to Lison, Michelle and Frances was a genuinely proud moment for them, as they confidently explained their ideas and the impact these areas would have on the rest of the school. They then went on to host the younger children, welcoming them warmly to explore and play in the spaces they had designed.



Towards the end of my placement, I delivered a workshop for all staff

which gave us the opportunity to pause and reflect on what had been achieved during

our time working together. It



felt important to recognise the teachers' commitment, creativity and willingness to engage with new ideas, and the session became as much a celebration of their work as a professional discussion. We also spent time thinking ahead, beginning to shape a whole-school topic around Independence Day in February 2026, considering how this could bring together learning across the curriculum while celebrating Gambian history, culture and identity. The workshop was collaborative and thoughtful, with staff sharing ideas openly and building on one another's suggestions, and it felt like a meaningful way to bring

my time at the school to a close while leaving space for future development to continue.

people and places: responsible volunteering



Outside of school, my leisure time was always

busy, with visits to Kachikally Crocodile Pool, Bijilo Forest Park, Abuko Nature Reserve, Kotu Beach, Tanji fishing village, Sanyang Beach and Fathala Wildlife Reserve in Senegal. My accommodation was excellent, and having a swimming pool and a restaurant on site made a huge difference. The staff were wonderful, and as I was travelling alone, staying at Riyan Apartments meant that I

never felt lonely and always felt comfortable.

I was warned about the “bumsters” and found that being polite but firm worked well. Flashing my wedding ring and saying, “I’m working here, no thank you,” usually stopped any unwanted attention, and often, after a few days of walking past them, the conversation then shifted to friendly chats such as, “How was school today?” “Really good, thanks — how was your day?”

I would like to end by offering my heartfelt thanks to the staff and children at Mary’s Little Lambs School for welcoming me so warmly and making me feel part of their school family from the very beginning. The children were wonderful — polite, friendly and full of warmth — and the staff were equally kind, generous and supportive. As I worked alongside the teachers, sharing ideas, planning together and learning from one another, I hope that, in some small way, this was helpful; whether through shared planning, new approaches to learning, or simply the time spent reflecting and working alongside one another. Leaving everyone at the end of my placement was quite emotional, and it is a testament to the relationships built during those weeks and to the strong sense of community that runs through the school.

I would wholeheartedly recommend volunteering with People and Places. Being able to share my skills and experience as a teacher and head teacher was extremely important to me, and travelling on my own, it was reassuring to know that support was always available if I needed it. The Gambian people are truly fabulous, and this placement was both professionally fulfilling and personally enriching.

people and places: responsible volunteering

Please note – this report is supplied by a former volunteer and the contents are intended solely for your information and personal use. people and places has permission to publish this information to you as a future volunteer.

*Please check with us if you would like to publish it beyond your own circle of friends and family.
Thank you.*

