Gambia 2017

By Ted Missons

In October of 2017, Tony and Karen DiMarco very kindly allowed me to visit their school in Farato, The Gambia. I was joined by Alice Kish, who also volunteered in the school with me.

Getting off the plane at the country’s only airport was like stepping into another world! The heat was stifling and the culture was so different. There was everything there, from vendors on the side of the road selling piles of watermelons, to flatbed trucks driving around crammed full of people. In fact, the most common form of transport was the infamous ‘Gelly-Gelly’ or bush taxi. It is a small van or people carrier with the internals removed and replaced with rows of metal seating. In order to make each journey as efficient as possible, the drivers would squeeze as many passengers onboard as they could! The most extreme case I recorded was during my first week in-country. I jumped on the gelly-gelly, which would have been a 7 person vehicle in the UK, and we somehow fitted 25 people onboard! The woman sitting next to me had a bowl full of baby chicks and there were some live goats tied to the roof too, I couldn’t believe it!

As well as being a cultural goldmine, everyone was so friendly. Within a week I felt like I’d been working at the school forever, and nothing was too much trouble for anyone. All of the teachers and students were so welcoming and they all went out of their way to make sure that I was settled in and feeling happy. All of the Gambians I encountered, especially those affiliated with Yalding School, were more than willing to share what little they had. I hadn’t been at the school long when I was walking across the village square and a group of 3 men were eating a tiny bowl of rice. They noticed me walk past and were insistent that I ate with them even though I had never seen them before; I was honored by the invitation but politely declined. Although The Gambia is statistically the 14th poorest country in the world (CIA World Factbook), everybody shares what little they have, making for a society which is rich in community spirit, wellbeing and friendship.

On another occasion I went for a wander around the village and bumped into Mamut, one of the teachers at the school. He said he lived around the corner and invited me to his compound. It was eye opening to see that him and his family lived in two rooms with one dim light bulb hanging from the ceiling in each. We sat and chatted, and then sat in silence for a while, just enjoying each other’s company, as is not uncommon in their culture. As a thank you for the invite, I gave him the bunch of bananas that I had on me and it was humbling how he was absolutely over the moon with them, it made me realise that we really do have too many material goods. This same thought was brought back later on during my stay when I played (not very well, I must admit) in a school football match. I wore my flip-flops, which was certainly not the best choice of footwear, however I didn’t fancy running around barefoot like most of the others. Only very few of the students wore football boots, and those who wore them only wore one. From what I gathered, they couldn’t afford to buy a pair; so two players would club together and wear one shoe each. As well as this, instead of a whistle to signal to players, the referee of the match would have to search for any debris he could find and bang together to make a noise – usually a tin can and a stick.

I had so many experiences of kindness during my stay; too many to include all of them in this article, however one occasion sticks out in my mind. I had walked up to the shop to buy some bread for breakfast but on arrival was very kindly told that the bread was still in the oven and would be some 10 minutes. Alhaji, the shopkeeper invited me to sit in his chair around the back of his counter and brewed me a glass of local tea whilst I waited. I played a game with his two young daughters who were happily sitting together in a cardboard box, and we chatted to no end. The bread eventually came after 40 minutes but I wouldn’t have wanted it any quicker.

Volunteering in the school was fantastic. All the students were eager to learn and I had one group of boys who came back after school everyday for hours at a time to learn to read. To start with, they couldn’t read word like ‘cat’, however after about 5 weeks of a few hours everyday, they were more-or-less fluent readers. It was an amazing transformation and definitely one of my most memorable moments. The staff were all really supportive and whether I was reading with students or making bottle rockets, they were always keen to get involved play a part.

In my opinion, the most attractive thing about the Gambia, apart from the good nature of the people, was the fact that nobody was in any rush to do anything. I had plenty of experience of this, from waiting for 7 hours at the customs office in the port, to friends turning up hours late with no explanation needed, but this was far from bad! In fact, it meant that there was not the pressure we feel in the western world to keep to a schedule and be rushing around all the time. It is not uncommon to see someone sitting under a mango tree in the morning, and see them in exactly the same spot again in the evening. Passers-by would stop to have a chat and brew green tea with them, and I was often invited to sit and chat, making the 10 minute trip to the market last an hour or more! Something else to note about that Gambians is that all their greetings are in pigeon English. I was often asked for my ‘good name’ and if I was ‘fine fine’! Hand shaking was customary, and even when shaking the hands of people I’d never met they would keep holding my hand for a few minutes whilst we were talking!

Before departing I’d heard stories about kidnappings and how dangerous North West Africa could be, but they couldn’t be further from what I experienced in The Gambia. During the entire 2 months I was in Farato, I did not once feel unsafe or at risk. I would actually go as far to say I felt safer walking around in Farato at night than I would walking down Maidstone High Street!

It was such a rewarding experience volunteering in Yalding School, Farato and I would definitely recommend it. I’d love to go back again and made some brilliant friends during my time out there. Thank you so much to Karen and Tony for facilitating the trip and helping the village of Farato to no end.

I would also like to give my condolences to Kemo Konte who sadly passed away earlier on this year. He was a much loved teacher at the school and member of the community.