

## The Gambia Trip 2018 – Sun, Sweat and Science

Sitting down to write this, I am finding it very difficult to put my experience into words. It was truly unique, and so many memories are rushing into my mind that I cannot decide where to start. But I would imagine that despite its clichés, the beginning is the best. The story begins over a year ago, when we began planning and fundraising the trip. Going through a company, Venture Force, the initial ideas for the experience were put down based off its successes in previous years, which made the organisational side far easier.



The fact that we went through a company made the task a lot easier, but was aided further thanks to the help of Steve, a veteran at travelling to the Gambia, who organised a lot of the logistical side – from transport to spending time in the schools. However, it was still down to us to fundraise, which we did through activities such as cake sales initially, before later moving on to the big event – walking the Neolithic Marathon in May. With the

support of friends and family, this gave the majority of the funds raised, so was highly worthwhile. Even more activities, such as car washes, ensued in the summer to subsidise the trip more and by the time the trip came around in mid-October, I had made moderate progress towards funding it.

Careful planning was also vital before we went out for us to be able to teach effectively. Long before the actual trip, as a group we began to design the experiments we would be teaching to the students out there and having these checked by Steve to ensure they would be possible and useful. We had all sorts of experiments, ranging from using deflecting jets of water to demonstrate static electricity, a cup on a string to show centripetal force in action and even dilute battery acid for rates of reactions! Without this consideration beforehand, I feel that we would not have been able to make the trip the success it was, as we would have lacked the sustainable resources that we took out and hence struggled to make the teaching fun for the students.

The departure date came around a lot quicker than I had expected, and before I knew it, I was off to the Gambia, ready to do everything that we had been planning. I kept a journal while I was there, and I feel the best way to share my experiences would be to include this, with some additional comments along the way:

### Day 1

Well, for a start, it's hot! But we're here, and this is actually happening!

The flight was fine despite the 2-hour delay to refuel, and we have arrived and unpacked, although it already seems sleeping may be an issue all week but it'll be manageable. Spent the evening on the beach playing with a Frisbee, followed by a lovely dinner of freshly caught butterfish and chips, then a little bit of time chatting before bed.

### Day 2

Night is hot too, it seems. (*We went in late October, just as the rainy season came to an end. From what I can gather, in our winter it does cool down but only very slightly!*) And loud. (*You get used to it*) But I've had enough sleep to get by on and feel ready for the first full day.

This is turning out to be a very sweaty adventure! But after an omelette breakfast, we were off to Kartong for our first cultural excursion and the first thing to notice is how friendly everyone is! Unlike the UK, the whole community is just a huge family in so many ways, and it already seems unusual not to greet people with 'Hello!' or 'Salam Alaykum!' depending on the situation. Even the children, some of whom seem barely over 5 years old, want to meet you and hold your hands as you walk around!

Lunch was as nice as anticipated (fish sandwiches) and was followed by a leisurely walk back to Halahin Lodge along the beach – the breeze makes a real difference in this heat! In the afternoon, it was time to go in the sea. Paddling and chucking a tennis ball around were the top activities, both being thoroughly enjoyable!

Later on, I gave washing my clothes a go – failed but oh well, better than nothing! Then a dinner of chicken Yakka, a traditional dish, followed by fresh watermelon. Along with Sam, I received a 'promotion' to group leader for tomorrow, so we'll see how that goes! *(Each day, two members of the group were nominated leaders and became responsible for the smooth running of any activities – be it dancing, teaching or even just visiting the market. If anyone had questions, they were the first people to go to, and if anyone had gotten lost, that would have been their responsibility!)*



Evening activities for today included chatting and card games, before everyone headed off to bed – I hoped it would be less sweaty that night in preparation for another exciting day!

### Day 3

Morning! The leadership day began reasonably well, with Tapalapa (bread) for breakfast and the usual announcements following. Then we all got on to the buses for our trip to the river.

When we arrived, we started out by learning more about the fishing process in the village, which included both the smoking and selling of the fish after. Following this, we headed out onto the river on boats for a wildlife-filled river cruise – it was mostly birds but still hugely impressive!

After landing, we drove to Berending village for a traditional dancing display, which fortunately was far more interactive than any of us had originally thought. Phew! It's hot work but good fun, something our culture is definitely missing! 'Tubab'ed a lot (*'Tubab' is a term used a lot in the Gambia literally meaning 'White Person', coming from the coins, or 'two bob' that the British used to give out when they went there*) as usual but all in good humour.



Lunch was vegetable sandwiches and after eating we were on our way to the Brikama market to procure fabrics for some traditional clothes. Also picked up Colin the Courgette (initially renamed 'Cod' and further renamed to 'Courgette of the Day') as a legacy of our leadership, the idea being that it will serve as a 'reward' for impressive work or contributions each day. All quite a busy experience! Following that, we returned to Halahin, lazed around for a bit to beat the heat and met our tailor. Pre-dinner announcements saw Colin/Cod passed to

Dan and leadership to Dan and Joe for the next day. Fish for dinner and then quickly back to the room before the night walk.

The night walk was great fun too! Hundreds of crabs on the beach and stars in the sky, and the walk was followed by a brief stargazing session, where the big questions in life we contemplated before a long chat with Sam about similar topics until 2am.

#### Day 4

Early start today (unfortunately pairing with a very late night) to head off to Gunjur Upper Basic School. Saw a short assembly in front of the whole school to start, which included prayers for both Islam and Christianity as well as recent performances in exams. Following this, we sat in on lessons, starting with biology. First thing of note: very different classrooms! Wooden benches and blackboards all facing a blackboard where the teacher stands. It is also a very different style of teaching – there is a much bigger focus on taking notes on everything and continuous lecturing by the teacher here than in the UK. The curriculum also goes into a lot of detail – there is stuff in Grade 8 (*Year 10*) biology that I'm sure I'd struggle with, despite taking it for A-Level!

Short break and then straight back into it, with home sciences the next lesson. Cooking gas was the focus of today, though the very friendly teacher with highly disciplined students was an odd contrast to the classrooms I am used to seeing in the UK. We then met shortly with the science club before teaching tomorrow and then back onto the buses to Sifoe Senior Secondary School. Set the experiments up after a veggie sandwich lunch, despite some difficulties, and tested some of these experiments in preparation for tomorrow.

This was followed by a discussion and lesson on African Politics (Military Coups in Africa) which was very interesting and not something I'd ever really learnt about before. The most surprising fact would have to be that a coup has taken place in every country in Africa except Senegal. Fascinating!

Nap time for me when we returned – staying up late the night before did not go well in the heat! 2 hours was enough to refresh though and before long I was awake again ready for a dinner of chicken and chips. Lessons in napkin folding also ensued, which work hopefully won't ask me to use when I get back!



Then back to Berending for even more dancing! We were met by what seemed like a lot of people who all wanted to talk to us, then the dancing began. The Kumpo, a member of the village dressed in a grass costume like a bush, with a big spike coming out of the top, seemed to be the centre of the activity and circled the area performing its many moves. Before long, we were all invited up onto the dancefloor and joined the activity for the rest of the night.

The Gambia has a fascinating culture, in which most people belong to one of the many tribes. The Jola, with whom we danced, celebrate this in many ways and this includes (what I interpreted to be) the representation of spiritual creatures in their dances. The Kombo, which people frequently ran up to and possibly whispered secrets to, (*I cannot say for sure as there is an air of secrecy around the whole tradition*) was one of these, and the other we met was the Agomela - a creature with a plant covered body and a long, dark snout. Fortunately, both creatures we met were friendly, although it seems this is not always the case – I was told that some of them attack the other dancers!

After the Kumpo and Agomela left the floor, we entered a free-for-all period of freestyle moves. Both members of the village and our group would run into the centre of the ring of dancers

and musicians, perform some moves and then drop back to join the group. I think we performed adequately or impressed a bit – Anna’s one-handed cartwheels and my diving rolls were both met by clapping and cheers!

The Kumpo briefly returned after the freestyle period ended, and then the group began to disperse after around two hours of dancing. *(By this point I was very relieved that I had decided to have a nap before)* I found myself teaching some basic aikido to some of the children *(Who had been impressed by my rolls and asked me to do it again)* and then after a lot of goodbyes, it was back to Halahin. Spent an hour on the beach before returning to bed and eventually falling asleep after a long but exhilarating day.

## Day 5

Not quite as early today – 7am, which is much more civilised! Enjoyed the usual breakfast and then headed off to Sifoe Senior Secondary School. After quickly setting up the experiments from the boxes we had prepared them from yesterday, our counterpart students began to arrive from 9.30am, and the practical science began.

It seemed that after the day in the school yesterday, I had largely overestimated the level of understanding of science that the students had – instead of the intimidating A-Level standard knowledge that I had expected, it was more like GCSE level. My confidence took a bit of a knock from this when my explanations were met by largely blank faces, but I soon recovered. *(I didn’t go into as much detail and had Sam notify me when I was assuming too much prior knowledge for the biology and chemistry stations, and I did the same for him in the physics ones)* I really enjoyed the afternoon after this – there was great participation from all the students throughout!

Our experiments continued and as time went on, I began to learn something new about education in the Gambia. From what I could gather, detail is key, especially in diagrams or tables. The students are fantastic at sketches and graphs when observing something or coping results, but most seemed to struggle when we asked them to plot graphs from their data. However, after identifying this slight gap in their knowledge, we worked on the necessary skills such as scales, lines of best fit and axes, in order to help them improve. Because of the way we encouraged them to draw graphs at each station, our group were able to draw excellent line and bar graphs by the end of the session, which I hope is something that they can take away and use in their school science lessons. One student, Ebrima (Pronounced Abraham) impressed me in particular with possibly the best line of best fit I have ever seen and a fantastic ability to extrapolate data using this line during the electromagnet practical. I am absolutely gutted that I will not get the chance to teach again tomorrow (due to the BMAT being so inflexible) and disappointed that the original plan of teaching the following day instead can’t go ahead due to the students here being on holiday then, but oh well. It’s outside of my control unfortunately – I can’t do everything.

After the students left, we tidied up and ate our vegetable sandwiches, playing a quick game of indoor baseball using a used-up tube kitchen roll and the tin foil from the sandwiches before wrapping up and heading back to another lodge on the way back to Halahin. While everyone seemed excited by the promise of Wi-Fi, I instead just played cards with Sam seeing as I didn’t bring any electrical devices with me.

When we made it back to Halahin, it was BMAT revision time until dinner was served. A nice relax followed, and then off to the beach for a bonfire. Initiated by Helen, we played some infuriating games involving ‘tapping out someone’s name on a bottle.’ My complex rules (number of beats = number of syllables?) all turned out to be wrong – it was always just the name of the first person to speak after the tapping ended. After this, it was off to bed nice and early to be ready for tomorrow, which would have been nice if it had worked. *(I didn’t get to sleep until past midnight)*

## Day 6

BMAT day! An early start (5.45am wake up) gave way to a speedy bread breakfast before we all piled into the luxurious extra bus for today. This one had an intact windscreen! A nice surprise compared to the others, seeing as one of the doors fell off one of the other buses yesterday! It wasn't too long a drive to Banjul, so we just brushed up on notes and looked out the window for the journey.

When we arrived, we waited for a bit and then the test began. While it almost ran smoothly, (a few people bumbled in but Poncelet quickly shooed them out) it felt like it went quite badly in spite of the practice, but I imagine that would have been the same even in the UK and whatever happens, it's done now. *(Turns out it actually went fine – got the results I needed)*

Headed back through Brikama again and stopped for a quick lunch of burgers and chips before returning to Halahin. Seeing as no one else was back yet, I just relaxed for a while and made the most of the water pressure that had somehow appeared by having a quick shower before heading down to the beach. There isn't much else to say until dinner, which was chicken Domoda, as this was when a group of dancers arrived at Halahin to perform. It was all around a fire this time, and a different style of dance but with the usual levels of participation! The dancing was, once again, one of the highlights of the trip and I fell into bed exhausted almost as soon as it was over.

## Day 7

The final full day! Not too early this morning (8.30am breakfast) and then off to the reptile sanctuary to start the morning. Saw creatures that were deadly (Puff Adders) and harmless (Beauty Snakes) as well as some that were cute (Baby terrapins) and less cute (crocodiles), stroking many. We even had pythons around our necks! *(The purpose of the sanctuary was to educate the Gambian people about reptiles, as many are fearful of snakes (the country is home to some poisonous species) and will kill them despite their endangered status because they cannot tell which are safe. The owner hoped that he could show them that many are not to be frightened of and there are better ways of managing a snake sighting.)*

Following a short break, where we sampled and bought jars of peanut brisket, we headed off to a moderately sized fishing village near Banjul. It was potent smelling, but once again, it was fascinating to explore the culture and lifestyle of the Gambian people!

When we finished at the village, we hopped back on the buses and drove to the Gunjur Project, another lodge. Played cards and relaxed for a bit before jumping in the pool *(Which was a bit crowded with 12 people in it!)* for a hotly contested game of pool volleyball – what could be a better way of cooling down?





Late afternoon – returned to Halahin for the last time and after getting changed, went straight down to the beach for a final swim. Played a fun game of tag in the water before getting out and watching the last sunset, which was a little hazy, but beautiful as always. Following this, dinner, which was another variation of fresh fish and chips, before the Gunjur Women’s dancer group arrived. A Mandinka dance this time, with Fada and Aisadu joining in as well. It told more of a story than the previous dances, and although I couldn’t quite work out what the tale was about, it was still good fun. I think everyone especially enjoyed the point where Sam (*One of the leaders from Venture Force*) was ‘married’ off to one of the dancers. Achy muscles, a few small holes in my trousers and a big smile on my face were the

results at the end!

For the final part of the evening, most of the group wandered down to the beach for a last glimpse of the stars before heading off to bed.

## Day 8

Looks like it’s time to go home. After a heated discussion on whether or not orange mangos exist (*They do – fact*) everyone headed off to finish packing and then met up at the hammocks to relax for the last bit. Went for a nice walk along the beach with Nyah for a bit, joined midway through by Sam and Amy, which was a tad warmer than I had expected despite the breeze, but it was nice to squeeze it in before the end of the trip.

A final check of all the rooms followed, and speeches from Buba, and then we all piled onto the buses. We waved goodbye to Halahin, with Buba, Kadi and all the other staff waving back, and drove to the final stop on our journey – the craft market. We all had the opportunity to haggle if we wanted to buy anything, with varying degrees of success. I like to think I was reasonably successful, but it was more just an enjoyable experience and a chance to pick up some souvenirs for home.

After the market, we all returned to the buses for the final time and drove to the airport. After unloading our bags, we all headed inside for an emotional goodbye. Touching words were said by our leaders, Fada, Aisadu and Steve before a fair bit of hugging as we headed through to departures.

From here, all ran smoothly and this is where the Gambian adventure draws to a close, leaving me with memories that will last a lifetime – as well as sand on my legs that probably will too. The friendships I’ve formed here are ones I am sure will last, and the things I’ve learnt I have changed me for the better. I spent an incomparable week in a beautiful country, but more than that I believe that now I am a more open person. The friendliness of the Gambian culture is infectious, and I hope to bring some of that back with me to the UK, where our society could certainly benefit from a bit more warmth and less reserve.

So, I guess the last thing is to say thank you. To everyone involved – you made this trip, and I wouldn’t change a minute of it. I hope you felt the same way as I did, even if I’m still jealous you didn’t have to sit any exams while we were there.