

Gambia 2016

Thank you for the opportunity you gave us through your generous donation to fund our project in Gambia! It was an incredible experience and the whole group enjoyed both the connection we made with the people and the time we spent working on the project and exploring the village and neighbouring area. We managed to complete the classroom during our stay there and had enough time to decorate inside and out as well as tile it and add a chalkboard. The first few days we spent meeting important representatives of the village and familiarising ourselves with our new host families but during the first full week we mainly cleared and levelled the ground, moved bricks, mixed cement and laid bricks in contribution to the classroom as we worked with the community. The second week was much the same as we continued to build higher and lower, not only building up but solidifying the foundations and moving pipes. In the third week we moved on to plastering and whitewash and mixing cement remained a large part of our work as it was in constant demand. It was a lot of effort to get all the materials in one place and mixing them but seeing the building progress made it worth it. Finally, after all the plaster had dried we were whitewashing the walls and the builders were working on the roof as our insurance prevented us from participating in manual labour off the ground. After we finished the final cream and brown paint coatings we got to decorate and clean all the tiles, ready for the children to move in.



The classroom in its very first stages, right at the beginning of the first week



The classroom in its very final stages

The inside, decorated with shapes and their names, numbers, and the alphabet in upper and lower case



Literally leaving our mark (the outside wall)



The completed classroom with its final coats of paint and roof



The opening ceremony: this was the first time the children ever saw the classroom!

It wasn't all work though! As it was also a cultural exploration for us we also took days or afternoons to explore markets like Brikama and see the Gambian wildlife as we not only went bird watching early in the morning but also saw crocodiles, snakes, and monkeys which was an almost unreal experience. We carried on the MBG group vs Gunjur football match which we won! In addition to completing the project we also spent a weekend upriver and visited James Island, an important site for the history of slavery in Gambia so that we could better understand our predecessors' role in what happened and how it affected the country. Although I felt that daily life was exactly as I had expected, it was a completely new experience walking down the streets of Gunjur. A five minute walk to the market easily lasted half an hour as you would find yourself talking to everyone on the street and it didn't take long after talking to one person that another would come over looking for your attention. The community spirit was outstanding and I even found a few people that had been to Marlborough as well as others that were hoping to go. It wasn't only the people on the streets that were different either. Dotted everywhere on the streets were stray dogs, chickens, cats, goats, small lizards and the occasional donkey and cow if you headed a little further out of the centre of the village. The treatment of animals is hugely different in Gambia and although a few (like Lamin, our guide) had a pet dog, pets as a whole were uncommon in Gunjur and when most people saw a dog or cat they'd chase it away.

I found myself constantly involved in my host family's daily life whether it was talking in the evening and drinking attire or playing cards and helping judge the boy's fitness contests or helping them sweep and cook (I even taught my host, Jai, how to make English pancakes). Although it was hugely different to my life back at home I enjoyed it immensely finding it rewarding to get the techniques right (after a lot of practice) and properly clean and area or brew tea. My host's husband, Fralala, was actually the director general of Agriculture for Gambia and I often found myself having long conversations with him about literature and talking with him and his friends late into the night about their travels and their lives. Since he had such a high position my compound was very nice (and I've included pictures below) and I had fan in my room, which definitely seemed like a blessing in the hot days and sweaty nights, and a toilet seat, even though it was just over a hole, but that was more than some people!



Crocodiles! This one was 42 years old and we all got to stroke him (with the guidance of an expert of course).



The monkey park was great! We all got to feed them ground nuts and everyone had them climbing on their shoulders!





The outside view of my compound, it was on the main street and there were two shops just besides the gate, one of which my host owned. This set up was common for the compounds closer to the centre of the village



This is inside the compound, all the doors down the right side were the rooms/houses of different families or my host's sons while where I stayed was down at the bottom. In the evenings, we'd all gather and talk in the centre area



The cooking area.



My bedroom. I didn't actually spend much time here unless I was sleeping; I was too busy talking to my hosts all the time!



The bathroom, shared by three people including myself. It was a hole but with a toilet over the top. It doesn't sound great but it wasn't too bad once you got rid of the flies!



This is the main market early in the morning so it wasn't as busy as usual, it was just after it rained so there were still some puddles but they dried up quickly in the heat.



Everywhere we went in the village we were followed by children shouting 'tubab!' which meant white person, we were pretty strange to them but they definitely weren't shy! One of the group, Anna, became somewhat famous amongst the children.



Just before the English meal we cooked for our hosts at Simone's compound, everyone said they loved it!



Building the project was a lot of work so it was important to take breaks and drink plenty of water because of the heat!



Lamin Bojang (or rather Skinny, a GLC guide for 10 years pictured on the far right) took us to his bar at the beach and taught us all some Gambian dancing!



Anita (an important member of MBG) celebrated her birthday while we were out there so we managed to have a personalised cake delivered from Serakunda



On one of our afternoons the group made the trip to Brikama where we bought fabric to be made into traditional Gambian clothes; we also visited the craft market while we were there and were amazed by all the delicate crafts we found there. We also had a go haggling ourselves! While we were there we also found ice cream which was amazing in the heat.



On one of our weekends we went upriver to the Bintangolong lodge for a relaxing break. It was right on the river and was absolutely beautiful with stunning scenery, I'm sure I don't just speak for myself when I say it was a lovely experience!

