

S·V·P News 21

Sudan Volunteer Programme Registered Charity No 1062155 March 2018

English language skills are ever more necessary for those wanting work in Sudan. SVP has continued its policy of placing volunteers outside the capital. We need volunteers who can stay in Sudan for six months or more.

*the Nile near
Dongola
photo by
Jack Garnett*



a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the twenty first annual issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of extracts of stories from our volunteers in this year's programme. We hope these will encourage others to join us. We thank all the friends, supporters and members of SVP-Sudan and SVP-UK whose donations and goodwill, ideas and skills, time and enthusiasm make our work possible.

SVP specially thanks all our volunteers - and their families - who give so much of themselves:

Damian Kruz Tim McVicar Jacquelyn Kunz Kamran Sehgal Abdullah Hamid Zainab Lalwal
Amal AbdelGadir Andrea Collados Cate Pollock George Garrett Jorge Ibarra Laura Attwell Rachel
Alford Will Kelland Isra'a Nour Edmund Bennett Henry McCann Samuel Ginty Jacqueline Merrill
Chloe Brooks Jack Garnett Sara Katona Amna Elbadawi Daniel Starkov Tom Wyke
Henry Bishop-Wright Aliza Earnshaw Alan Earnshaw Sam Coutts

Dear SVP members - please stay with us: we urgently need your support. Ahmed Bedri

From Jack Garnett UK

Kosti – a place where time stands still.

A completely different world awaited as I stepped off the bus in a dusty backwater half way between the cold officiousness of El Obeid and the often too tiring capital, Khartoum. Kosti was waiting, a verdant oasis of green with the refreshing scent of freshly cut grass only a stumble away by rickshaw from the main thoroughfare in town.

My phone had died at this point, and was on charge in the SDG20 a night guesthouse I'd checked into. Heading to the Nile, a rickshaw dropped me further away than I thought, at a small port. At the end of the lush mango groves lay a landing spot where roughly a dozen fishing boats, of the sturdy wooden kind were hauled up on shore, having completed their duties for the day. Stacks and bales of fresh mint were being hauled off another boat by donkeys ridden by children who would lead them to the souq. Meanwhile, a large narrowboat was ferrying 40 women, immaculately dressed in their colourful garments, across the Nile on their daily commute home. Moribund steamers lay mothballed further up at the port – times have changed, and secession and other issues have left no demand for slow boats south. Still – that aside – life flows on, unabated by changes in the wider world. Music is played in the marshes and the salty smell of freshly cooked fish is never far away. Dust lined the tracks to the now obsolete railway tracks, which guide me back to the market and town.

From Chloe Brooks UK

When I arrived in a hot and dusty Sudan, I was unsure of exactly what to expect. Before coming to Khartoum, I had been worried that being unable to speak Arabic would prevent me from being able to partake in a meaningful cultural exchange, one of the main reasons that I wanted to volunteer with SVP in particular. And whilst I'm sure that better Arabic language skills would be beneficial, I didn't need to worry. Over the past four months I feel that I have really learnt about, and gotten to know Sudanese people and their culture. And of course everyone has been more than willing to help me with my Arabic, whether in the staffroom or at the shops. After a few weeks of exploring Khartoum I started my placement: I teach at the English Language Institute, part of the University of Khartoum. My placement is a little bit different in that most of the courses I teach are communication courses open to the general public. As a result this means that my students represent a wide cross-section of society, both young and old: judges, doctors, security guards, recent graduates, academics etc. They hold a diverse range of views, and have knowledge in different areas, which is both interesting for me to learn more about Sudan, and is great from a teaching perspective, as this diversity often gives rise to some quite lively discussions. I have enjoyed the freedom given to me in what I teach and the space to be creative in my lesson planning. Some opinions can, however, at times be hard to hear, but hearing different viewpoints has really challenged my thinking.

It is often outside of the classroom, whether over a cup of jebana (delicious coffee made with spices), or at a henna salon, where I have had the most interesting conversations with students.

To conclude, I was thinking of how I could sum up my time in Khartoum, and then I read an article entitled 'Random acts of kindness' on BuzzFeed. Rather than

being something newsworthy, random acts of kindness are an everyday occurrence here. For me this this is one of the most memorable and heartening things about Sudan. Whether this is a complete stranger paying for your cup of tea, or helping you to find the right bus. The latter, with my lack of a sense of direction is a real help to me! SVP aims to foster positive cross-cultural communication, and to me this is all about a two-way learning process; I hope I can take a leaf out of the book of the Sudanese and I have resolved to carry out more random good deeds when I go back home.

From Jacqueline Merrill, Virginia USA

One day, in one of my classes with medical students at the University of Khartoum, the term "brain drain" came up. Most of them had never heard this expression before, so I explained that the term refers to the phenomenon when a country or region experiences an exodus of its brightest and most educated people, oftentimes due to job inopportunities and low wages in their place of origin.

Before I was even halfway through explaining the term, several students' faces lit up with recognition. They were quick to tell me what this is a major problem that they see here in Sudan.

"Rural areas, like where I'm from in Kordofan," one student piped up, "need more doctors. People are suffering because there are not enough doctors."

I asked her if she is considering working there once she completes her studies.

She shook her head. "There is no future for me here in Sudan," was her reply. "After I complete my year of National Service, I need to leave. I need to go somewhere where I can get a good salary. Maybe once I have some money, I'll come back here and work."

This conversation quickly engaged a number of students who normally sit silently through my classes. Several of them spoke up at this moment, vocalizing their doubts that this student would ever come back to Sudan to be a doctor after working abroad.

"Most people don't come back," one student said, pessimistically.

Others shook their heads, disagreeing. "My father came back here to work," said a girl sitting in the front. "Sometimes people just need to make money first."

Before I knew it, my class had erupted into a full-on informal debate. By bringing up the term brain drain, I had tapped into something that many of my students grapple with on a regular basis. Throughout the class, I heard people articulate their hopes and fears for the future of their country, along with the conflict many of them feel between achieving personal success and working towards Sudan's development.



The pyramids at Meroë photo Henry Bishop-Wright

Many students spoke strongly about their intentions to stay here to work as doctors, despite the low salaries. Others disagreed, saying that they have no choice but to work abroad due to their financial responsibilities to their families. One, sitting in the back of the classroom, got in the final word before our class ended. "This is the problem," he said. "We have so many smart people here, educated people, but they leave. I am going to stay here. It is my responsibility to stay here and work as a doctor. People need me more here than they need me in Saudi or Qatar or wherever I might find a job outside of Sudan."

Teaching English in Khartoum has given me insight about how many people view their circumstances here in Sudan. By engaging with students on a daily basis, I'm getting exposed to how the younger generation here is imagining its future. Meanwhile, by steering my classes towards topics that my students are passionate about, I am pushing them to articulate their opinions in a language they are yet to master, helping them move, step by step, closer to fluency.

From Samuel Ginty Mass USA

- about best teaching practice at Kassala

Teaching is trial and error, and after almost a semester of classes at the University of Kassala I have been inspired to sit down and write some personal reflections on best practices. Teaching in Sudan presents unique challenges and opportunities to the native English speaking EFL teacher. It has been inspiring, frustrating, tedious, and fascinating. On the first day of class, I realized I had over one hundred students for "conversation" classes. This seemed to me like a contradiction. Normally, an effective "conversation" class should have perhaps 15 or 20 students. To overcome this I used the technique known as scaffolding. Here, students will ideally first write out their thoughts and answers, followed by small group discussions, and finally after about ten minutes a few volunteers can share their ideas to the entire class for peer comments. Ideally, every learner should be speaking and practicing the language for perhaps 40% of the class time, whether through individual work or group work. If the class is finished and every student has spoken many words in English, the teacher can be confident that the lesson was involving.

Another challenge is soft spoken students. While teaching, I noted that students are very confident in writing out their thoughts or answers in their notebooks. However, speaking is another issue. Sometimes the ceiling fans are louder than my students! I tried practicing vocal exercises with the students. For example, when the student speaks, she should imagine that her voice is filling the entire room, or that she is speaking directly to the student at the very end of the classroom. Another difficulty is encouraging certain bright, yet shy, students to speak at all. In my classes speaking is mandatory for participation points, and every time a student speaks they get a point. However, nothing is better for encouraging student participation than a welcoming, relaxed, well organized, and effectively disciplined classroom. Some strategies include fun warm-ups/ "ice breakers", discussing interesting topics chosen by the students, and ensuring that there is no disruptive chatting in the back of the classroom.

It is also worth mentioning that Sudanese university classrooms can have an astounding range of competencies, from near-fluency to



Nuba wrestling on Saturdays at Haj Yusuf, Khartoum - photo Daniel Starkov

struggling with simple sentences. Here I strategically group the students so that stronger learners can help the weaker ones.

The greatest joy for any teacher is to see their students improve. Some moments that come to my mind include students proudly reading their own fictional compositions, student-written skits that leave the classroom roaring with laughter, fascinating conversations about life and culture during office hours and students pleased with positive grades on oral examinations. Of course, we volunteers receive as much from our students as we give. Teaching in Sudan, specifically at the University of Kassala, has been priceless and I look forward to jumping into 2018.

From Tom Wyke UK Ringside at the Nuba Wrestling

Being held aloft on the shoulder of a Sudanese man in the middle of a wrestling ring was not quite how I envisaged my penultimate day in Khartoum.

Before departing to my teaching placement in Merowe, we decided to investigate the Nuba wrestling. Matches are held every Friday afternoon and the traditional sport is well attended locally.

We arrived at the stadium late which meant there were no seats left in the stand while the terraces were crammed with fans. Fortunately, this meant we were able to take up a ringside position by sitting on the concrete ground right at the front.

Next to us one wrestler was already being attended to by a medic.

Wincing with pain, his mangled toe was dabbed with anti-septic and quickly bandaged up. Blood stained the crisp white gauze, quickly turning it into a crimson stub as he limped off to re-join his teammates.

The wrestlers sat together on the sand with their squads inside the ring, urging on their teammates.

A new pair of competitors entered the centre of the ring to begin the next showdown. One of the wrestlers reached down and grabbed a handful of sand to dry his sweating palms. Dusty white hand prints stretched across his chest and shoulders. Slowly the fight began as both contenders cautiously stared each other out in front of the attentive gaze of the portly referee.

The older fighter goaded his opponent by delivering several light slaps to the back of his head before beckoning him to advance.

Nearby a watching teammate produced an antler. Gripping it tightly with one hand, he blew into a small hole, bored into the thin end of the curly animal horn.

Whilst he dexterously used his thumb to open and close the end of the instrument, he played his tuneful war cry. The bugle-like melody cajoled his teammate into going on the offensive, rousing the frenzied crowd.

The action intensified as the wrestlers struggled to grip each other before in a sudden cloud of sand, one of the men was left sprawled on his back.



Drying bricks before firing on Tutti Island - Alan Earnshaw

The defeated wrestler sank in the dust as the victor pumped his fists in exultation. The ecstatic crowd roared while others tried to restrain their dissatisfaction over the result in front of the watchful eyes of the police. Before long the battered warrior picked himself up off the sand and effortlessly heaved the champion on to his right shoulder. The winner lapped up the adoration of the fans before climbing down to embrace his magnanimous opponent. The matches continued in the intense heat as the men, gleaming with sweat and dust, battled on for glory.

Once the wrestling had finished, fans gathered to congratulate their champions. After we were drafted in for a few photos, one lively Sudanese gentleman ushered me into the ring for a play fight.

Despite my best attempts to mimic the wrestlers I had seen earlier, it wasn't long before I was hoisted up and thankfully spared the embarrassment of a dusty landing. Out of true Sudanese kindness, I was given an honorary victory lift for my miserable attempt at wrestling, allowing me to lap up the laughter from among the remaining fans. A memorable end to a memorable day at the wrestling arena.

From Aliza Earnshaw Oregon USA

A Trip to Tutti Island

Viewed from the bank of the Nile in Morada (the district of Omdurman where we live), or from the bridge we cross into downtown Khartoum, Tutti Island is a beautiful spot of green agricultural fields right in the convergence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile. It looks peaceful and serene, an irresistible draw if you're growing weary of the dusty, busy city. Yesterday we walked from Nile Street in downtown Khartoum to the bridge, over the Blue Nile, and onto Tutti Island to explore.

Just under the bridge, we found a curious little scene: an outdoor pool hall. Huge concrete pylons support the bridge high above the ground, with cars and trucks passing overhead. Below the bridge, a tangle of small trees, bushes and shrubs, and hardpacked earth with the usual layer of fine sandy dust. There was a rectangular area enclosed by a wire fence, much like the fences that enclose school playgrounds in the United States, and inside, two pool tables, end to end. Early as it was, several teenage boys were playing pool.

Later we stopped at a small storefront for some fresh bread – so fresh it was still warm and fragrant – and bought a bunch of bananas at another storefront. Then we started looking for an open tea shop. We saw a couple of men chatting over tea, so we asked if we could buy some. “You want tea?” asked a middle-aged gentleman. “Yes please,” we replied. He gave an order to a young girl, and she headed down the street. The tea drinkers explained that the shop was closed, but said, “Welcome, welcome,” bringing out chairs and a small tea table for us. In a moment, the young girl appeared again with two glasses of tea, and one of coffee. We thanked her, thanked the men, and chatted with them as we enjoyed our tea and makeshift banana sandwiches.

The middle-aged gentleman, it turned out, is from Ethiopia, and he introduced his wife, who spoke a bit more English. The two of them have been here on Tutti Island for twelve years, they told us, and the shop next door to the tea place is theirs. They welcomed us to the island, hoping we'd enjoy it. “It's a peaceful place, Tutti,” the lady said, and the two of them said goodbye and vanished.

After we finished the tea, we tried to pay the two men sitting beside us. They smiled and shook their heads, gesturing to the shop next door. The Ethiopian couple had simply had tea brought to us, possibly from their house, because we wanted it. This is just one small example of the hospitality and generosity we've experienced since arriving here less than two weeks ago, and it's typical.

We resumed our walk down the road, hoping to get to the green crop fields that we admire from the riverbank just a few steps from where we live. We turned off the road at a promising place, heading for what we thought was the riverbank. There we met a tall athletic-looking man who was working in a half-ruined building in a field with a few other men. He came over to ask us if we needed any help. His English was very good, and once he understood that we were looking for the riverbank, he walked us along to a good spot, and explained which banks we were looking at from this point, drawing a map in the sandy soil. He showed us where we could walk to see the part of the island we were looking for.

He also pointed out how much the river has eroded the island at this place; there was an orchard to our left that was literally being washed into the river. It's a terrifying prospect for people who've been living on the island for years, planting fruit trees and other crops and making a living from them. There are areas where buildings have been started and abandoned, because these areas have flooded and may well flood again. The man who was talking with us was taking over one of these abandoned buildings, and planning to use it for animals – chickens or goats. Tutti has plenty of agriculture, but it's also a small town. We wandered up and down the residential streets, which are really just narrow defiles between rows of houses, nearly all surrounded by high walls.

We spent a couple of hours walking around Tutti Island, and really, we could have spent a lot more time. But the sun was getting to its maximum, and the heat, too, and we'd been wandering around long enough. We'll come back to Tutti another time, that's for sure.

SVP needs your help

Please support SVP with your donations or membership at £5.00 per month or £60.00 per year or £10.00 concessions: please make cheques payable to SVP or better, ask us for a banker's order form. No wages or rent are paid in the UK.

Sudan Volunteer Programme

34 Estelle Road, London, NW3 2JY
tel 07910 940 819 david@svp-uk.org
www.svp-uk.org