

# SVP News 19

Sudan Volunteer Programme

Registered Charity No 1062155

March 2016

English language skills are needed more than ever by Sudanese graduates looking for work either in Sudan or abroad. SVP continues to support teaching as a second language in towns and cities around the country.

On the  
way to the  
World  
Cup:  
Sudan vs  
Zambia at  
Merowe

Photo by  
Mats  
Liekens



## *A note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme*

This is the nineteenth annual issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of stories from our volunteers in last year's programme. We hope these will encourage others to join us. We thank all our 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:

Tim McVicar Briana Humphery Joseph Payseur Damian Kruz Patrick Haverty  
Saida Wolff Charnaë Suplee Dan Morgan Margaret Scarborough Caterina Inverso  
Jacquelyn Kunz Annetta Zucchi Jamie Prentis William Scott James Riley Mats Liekens  
Angus Girling Angelica Razack Emilie Heath Jordan Greene Kamal Gray Rhea Pendleton  
Kamran Sehgal Chris Clatterbuck Nokomi Achkar.

*Dear SVP members – please stay with us: we urgently need your support*

**Ahmed Bedri**

*James Riley from UK writes: I have been here in Merowe for about nine weeks now and I have to say it's a pretty special place. It sits right on the bank of the Nile, about 200 miles north of Khartoum and 350 miles south of the Egyptian border. It moves to its own lazy rhythms, which ebb and flow like the river lapping against its banks. Most things happen at a snail's pace, the people never seem in much of a hurry to do anything. I've no idea how many live here, no more than a few thousand I would guess. I've asked around but my question is usually met with a shrug. 'I've never counted' was one response, accompanied by a cheeky smirk.*

*I live in a house with my fellow volunteer Mats. Originally built for the Chinese and German engineers working on the Merowe Dam, it is extremely modern by Sudanese standards and has everything we need. It sits on a typical Merowe street; wide, quiet and dusty. Every morning we take a minibus from the university's administrative buildings, at the top of the road, across the river to the medical campus in Karima. As we wait for the bus we sit in the university reception, which is a crumbling brick building manned by a group of convivial, underemployed security guards. Merowe is an incredibly peaceful place and as a result there seems no need for the university to have this level of protection. In truth there is little worth stealing. Nevertheless there is always a minimum of two guards on duty, but often as many as six or seven men sitting around chatting. We always share a cup of tea, and despite the language barrier, still manage to share a laugh and a joke. My Arabic is not brilliant, and neither is their English, but we often end up proper belly laughing as we theatrically mime to one another. These morning encounters offer the perfect illustration of the Sudanese character; warm, funny and hospitable.*

*The bus is supposed to arrive at 7.45am but like everything else, operates according to Sudanese time. The bus journey is probably the best part of my day. I love watching Merowe's wide and dusty streets pass by, as the sun seeps in through the window. It can get very hot here in the desert, as high as 50 degrees in the summer, but the weather is lovely and warm on*

*the morning bus ride. There are few cars and a handful of donkeys meandering through the streets. Merowe sits slap bang in the middle of the desert and as we move past the edge of town, it's just miles and miles of golden sand as far as the eye can see. Taking the bridge across the Nile and watching it glint in the morning sun is quite something. We also pass by the magnificent Jebel Barkal (the 'holy mountain') and its accompanying pyramids and ancient ruins. It's a morning commute like no other.*

*We arrive at Karima campus where we teach medical and nursing students. Again they are in no rush to start lessons and often filter in slowly during the first twenty minutes. This can be frustrating but I've come to accept it as a fact of life in Sudan. Despite their tardiness, they are extremely well-mannered and eager to learn. The lessons are a lot of fun and when they are over I usually spend time in the office with the students, either correcting their written work or chatting away to them in English. This is a great chance for them to practise their language skills they wouldn't get if we weren't around.*

*We take the bus back at 4.40pm and usually get home around 5.15pm. The university has a chef who prepares home-cooked meals for all the staff. Shortly after we get back, she knocks on our door and hands us a tray laden with food; a mountain of rice, white bread and a big pot of piping hot Sudanese stew. The food is delicious and extremely hearty, though I'm not sure how healthy it is for me to be overdosing on all these carbohydrates. After dinner my stomach is so heavy that I usually have to lie down and give myself time to recover! There isn't much to do in the evenings but we do have a television which has a few English channels so we usually just veg out in*



*Jebel Totil by Kamal Gray*

front of that. Then it's off to bed to get some rest and ready ourselves for another day in sleepy Merowe.

A volunteer from Zimbabwe writes: It's already my 5th month in Sudan – how time flies! It has been a mixed bag of experiences and emotions. Having arrived in Khartoum around mid August, the temperature ranged between 40-44 degrees Celsius - a typical desert climate. The heat was hard to bear especially during the day. In the night we occasionally experienced dust storms, at times violent and scary. The weather was my greatest challenge at least for the first three months. We would however have days when temperatures would drop to the high 30s and on such days it was common to hear comments like 'good weather today' from local friends. I would agree simply because I did not want to offend when actually I could feel little difference between high 30s and low 40s.

I started teaching two weeks after my arrival. The first week was spent getting my residence permit and on general orientation. I was introduced to some friends of SVP - Sudanese girls who showed me around various places in Khartoum. I visited the National museum, the scenic Al Mogran where the two Niles meet and also enjoyed relaxed evenings sipping tea by the popular Nile Street. I was introduced to Dr Hala, Director at the University of Khartoum English Language Institute (ELI), who explained how the Institute worked with volunteers and how they expected me to conduct English club activities. I was assigned to teach a communication class.

My first class was for employees of the Ministry of Higher Education. It was really challenging teaching this group as most of the students could barely speak English, what made it even more challenging was that in the same group I had a couple of students whose English was very good. Some seemed uninterested, bored and rather disruptive; I had to go out of my way to motivate them and ensure that every student engaged and gained some benefit. What I have come to realize is that I have also been learning more each day by engaging with the students, above all, learning to be more patient. I have

enjoyed the English clubs more as they are not as structured as the communication courses, with the opportunity to explore through discussion topics and activities in which students can actively participate.

My life in Khartoum has been centered around ELI. It is more of a routine but I'm very happy that recently SVP introduced a regular Wednesday dinner. Besides having meals together this has been time to share life and work.

Essential to the Sudanese is their concept of hospitality and generosity. I have had countless tea and dinner invitations from the locals, as well as receiving countless dinner and tea invitations I have been invited to numerous wedding ceremonies. Wedding ceremonies in Sudan have a format followed strictly. Women and men seat and eat on different sides of the hall. Sudanese women may tell you it okay to dress liberally for weddings but experience has taught me to dress conservatively even for parties. I remember getting some looks of disapproval showing up at one wedding ceremony in a dress that exposed my arms and legs. Being African people always assume I am Sudanese and of course expect me to be covered up. On the streets I would sometimes get men honking and shouting! (an expression used in the same context as "wow") whenever I did not totally cover my legs and arms. Well that was on the street and I somehow thought a wedding set up would be a bit more liberal. Despite these restrictions, weddings are always something to look forward to: lots of good food, candy, singing and dancing. Its always refreshing getting away from work and to dance the night away with Sudanese women teaching me some of the traditional moves.

My stay so far has been insightful, eye-opening, enjoyable and sometimes challenging, however I am grateful to learn that even these challenges are part of the experience.

Mats Liekens from Belgium writes: When I arrived in Khartoum on the 4 October 2015, the first thing I noticed was the heat. I had taken 3 different planes to arrive at my destination, and was now finally there. While I left the airport, I noticed a small group of people waving at me. It was James, Jackie, Mohammed and Ahmed, a group of SVP volunteers and coordinators ready waiting for me who gladly took over my

heavy backpack. I was given a bottle of water while Mohammed talked to a few cab drivers, and before I knew it, I was at an apartment on the 3th floor in the middle of Khartoum.

In my first week, I was introduced to my fellow volunteers. An American lady, a New Zealander and 4 Brits accompanied me on my Sudanese adventure, together with some Sudanese volunteer coordinators, who took me around the city, accompanied me on walks along the Nile and a visit to the Khartoum history museum. This one week was a great way to acclimatise to the new culture and the mandatory new customs I had to learn, but I was eager to travel to Merowe, the small desert town where James and I would spend our time teaching.

Merowe is a small town of approximately 1,000 inhabitants, now a comfortable 6 hour drive from the capital. James and I were put in the Abdul-Latif Al-Hamad Technical University to teach first year Medical and Nursing students. When we arrived, the university wasn't quite finished yet, but we were introduced to our colleagues and classes and put in the teacher's accommodation of the university, a very comfortable, 2 bedroom house with cable TV and 3 English channels, including CNN and BBC. We felt like we were being treated as VIP guests. Four days into our stay, we finally got the call that the university was ready, and that we would be able to start teaching on Sunday. We had learned in Khartoum that the weekend in Sudan starts on Friday, the holy day for the Muslim faith, where daily life stops and everyone visits the mosque. Sunday was to become our new Monday, quite strange at first.

Sunday came, and both James and I had frantically prepared our classes. We were told that there could be up to 80 students and that our classes would last a 100 minutes. We prepared the best we could, and even now, 3 months later, I still remember walking into my classroom for the first time . . . It was nothing quite like I'd ever seen before. A huge room filled to the brim with desks, each housing 4-5 students, all the girls wearing a Hijab (headscarf) or Niqab (full cover) and all boys wearing a nice blue shirt with the university logo on it. I still remember how eager and shy the students were during my

first class. I had always expected such a huge classroom to be quite difficult to manage, but the students were so willing to learn that I had no trouble whatsoever. I finished my introductory class and sat down with James, water bottle in hand. It had been a few months since I last taught for such an extended time and my throat wasn't used to the scorching heat yet, and we both shared stories of our first class.

While we were talking, one of the teachers came up to us to ask if we wanted to take an extra class. One of her colleagues hadn't shown up and the students didn't have anything to do. I didn't mind, and it immediately taught us both an important lesson; planning isn't everything.

Many things in Sudan will go 'not as planned.'

The bus that will drive you to school might be 2 hours late, your students might have been given a holiday without your notice, or the bell will ring at 7 in the morning on your day off. You learn to live with these things, however, and after a while you don't even notice it anymore. That trip that was planned 2 weeks ago? It will happen when it happens, "Insha Allah". If (and when) God decrees .

Now 3 months in, and I'm already halfway through my Sudanese experience. It feels strange, because I hardly noticed that any time had passed at all. My students will have exams at the end of this month, and I've gotten to know each and every one of them. They spend time in my classroom in between classes because they're bored and we share stories and pictures of our lives. They teach me about the Holy Quran and their devotion to Allah, while I tell them stories about travel and distant cultures.



Water Jars in Gezira by William Scott

In the evening, James and I eat our dinner while we share stories about our classes and we catch a movie every once in a

while. Our Sudanese friends take us to the local holy mountain, a walk along the Nile or a small pet zoo that has some colourful parakeets. Winter has arrived, and while we both agree that mornings can be a bit chilly, we can't help but laugh at the students when they arrive in huge woollen jumpers with mittens and a scarf while the Sudanese desert sun is peeking through the window and the temperature is still above 25 degrees Celsius.

I'll surely miss this place, because I'm afraid that the next 3 months will go by just as fast.

Jamie Prentis from England writes: What I have loved is being thrown headfirst into Khartoum; it really has been a thoroughly immersive experience. Being exposed into a world so (wonderfully) different has been an eye opening, jaw dropping experience. For me, the chaos of downtown Souq al-Arabi was what I craved and sought. I wanted somewhere far away from the sanitised, structured tedium I was enduring in the UK. Sudan provided the perfect remedy.

Yet my purpose in Sudan was to teach English, something I had never previously done. I would be lying if I said I'd really considered teaching before, seeing myself as someone without the skillset or patience to make a competent educator. I also wasn't particularly sure I'd find it very enjoyable. With this in mind it meant I spent the days before my first days at SELTI in all honesty quite frightened. I've never really been a shy person but the idea of standing in front of a class of 30/40/50 odd and teaching, even in my own language, scared the life out of me. What if they couldn't understand me? What if I wasn't very good? What even really is a lesson place? I questioned whether it was something I should really be doing with no experience of formal qualifications. Fortunately Tim our ever-reliable 'Man in Khartoum' was there to ease my nerves. He had this wonderful ability of being able to calm me down, focus my mind and boost my confidence without necessarily treating me like a child or mollycoddling me. Sort of like an eccentric older brother or uncle I guess. And teaching turned out to be ok. More than ok in fact. It really is like being dropped in the deep end teaching in Sudan, because I was expected to just get

on with it. This aided my development hugely and meant I learnt quickly as I went along. I was forced to adapt and find a variety of ways on the go of how to get the best out of my classes and to further the learning of my class. I found the students to be generally highly motivated, regardless of what level they were. Whether I was teaching the difference between 'have' and 'has' or if we were discussing ways of promoting policies to counter climate change, it was a richly rewarding experience because the students were open to learning and new ideas. I was always struck at how excited they were to learn from a native speaker and how highly they valued this as they sought to improve their language skills. Time away from lessons was typically spent having relaxed conversations because they understand and valued the impact this could have on their ability. As I said, I never saw myself as someone who was particularly interested by teaching. But as time went on I understood the feeling of satisfaction one can feel as you see someone grow and improve before your eyes.

SELTI is a wonderful place; compact and much like a community, soon I felt like I knew everyone. I enjoyed spending time with my colleagues and some of the best friends I have in Sudan are the guys who work there as drivers or security guards out front. SELTI is a language institution, rather separate from the university and, as such, most students were older than me and were only on 4-7 week courses. I believe this made them more focused because they were trying to improve their English for a specific purpose rather than a general part of a university curriculum. It is just a shame that management seemed to be so incapable of achieving anything resembling a decent day's work.

For my first teaching break I planned three weeks travel through as much of Sudan as possible. My first destination was the town of Kosti, four hours south from Khartoum in White Nile State. Travelling by myself, it took me all of 45 seconds to be invited to stay in someone's house that evening. Bashir, the gentlemen I was sat next to, struck up a conversation, slightly bewildered to find someone so clearly foreign perched next to him. It is a sign of the remarkable trust that the Sudanese can

make you feel that I didn't hesitate to take him up on his offer. Following the Nile south, as the volume of farmers and donkeys became increasingly numerous alongside the ever-growing number of green pastures stretching into the horizon, we told each other about our families, our history, our hopes and our desires. I was continuously looked after, almost attended to. Staying with Bashir offered a wonderful glimpse into the day-to-day life of a typical Sudanese family at home and the differing roles for each member. He wasn't poor, but certainly not rich either, and shared everything he had.

Moments like those are not particularly adrenaline infused or fast-paced, but they nonetheless are exhilarating as you realise how precious an experience it is to be able to spend time with people so willing to allow you into their home. I will never forget drinking milk out in the courtyard under the stars, clear away from the city. Bashir would constantly say how he would never forget such a special day. I always had to remind him that neither would I-how could such a special experience ever slip my mind. Like everything in Sudan, what a privilege.

William Scott from England writes: With the advice of several current and former volunteers to say 'yes' as often as possible in mind, Jamie and I accepted an invitation to spend a Friday in October outside Khartoum. This meant resisting the temptation to devote a day to nothing in particular that inevitably follows a week-long cycle of teaching, lesson planning and sociable tea-drinking.

Our companion was Hashim, a warm-hearted but quiet student in his early twenties, and our destination was his home village of Wad al-Turabi, some fifty miles south of the city. The village is known for its location adjacent to a huge Nile irrigation project and as the home of the eponymous family whose best-known son, Hassan al-Turabi, has been a leading figure in national politics for over half a century. The Wad al-Turabi we arrived in, however, was an unassuming place. Here, the main road cut through a vast, flat landscape interrupted only by a large cluster of low buildings, none rising above them except a scattering of minarets and the pointed dome of the al-Turabi ancestral tomb.



Sunset on the Nile by Kamal Gray

Although three busy months have passed since then, certain memories of that day remain vivid and have gone some way to shape my impression of Sudan. One of these is of roaming the fields on the edge of the village filled with sorghum, okra and peanut crops, their greenness such a sharp contrast with the scene that had first greeted us, and feeling the searing heat of the autumn sun on our backs. Another is surveying Hashim's house with its abundance of beds doubling up as chairs, its state-of-the-art widescreen TV imported from the Gulf and its humble, hole-in-the-ground toilet outside. Or of meeting his brother and childhood friends in their immaculate white jalabias, our lack of a shared language doing nothing to hinder their natural affability and profound curiosity about life in Britain from shining through. It was one of the best examples I've been given of the celebrated Sudanese hospitality and generosity – cold drinks presented on ornate metal trays and a feast of meats, olives, cheeses and salads (and of course the ever-present fuul, tamia and fresh bread).

Perhaps not a country that competes with those to its north or southeast in terms of tourist appeal, and with more than its share of inconveniences for long-term visitors and Sudanese alike, but days such as that Friday spent in rural Gezira have convinced me that nowhere in the world can offer richer opportunities for the experience and comparison of cultures than does Sudan, and that the best and most memorable of experiences are often made of far simpler things than watching the sun set over Giza or touring the Maasai Mara.

Kamal Gray from the US writes: As I stepped out onto the street clad in a white jallabiya and matching skullcap, a group

*of men who work in my building all flashed a thumbs up as I walked past them. "Now you're completely Sudanese," they called out. Since I arrived in Khartoum, most people have mistaken me for a local. Many are baffled when I don't respond to their requests in Arabic and my commonly Sudanese first name only further confused the matter. After learning that my parents are both Jamaican, they often joke that there must be some mix up in my family. I definitely have at least one Sudanese great-grandfather, I just don't know about him as yet. After all, I look just like the people in Shendi or El Obeid.*

*Being black has made my experience in Sudan a bit different from the other volunteers. I am more or less invisible as I walk around central Khartoum, while all eyes are on the other volunteers with greetings of welcome as Sudan as they pass by. Even so, I can say that the Sudanese haven't been any less kind or generous towards me. I was only in the country for a few weeks before I was invited to a wedding and I soon discovered they were quite the extravagant, lavish affairs. At*

*the wedding hall I arrived to find nearly a thousand people gathered. The men donned their crisp, white jallabiyas and the women wore beautiful, multi-colored thobes. While I initially stood at the entrance unsure of where to sit, it wasn't long before a man whisked me away to come join him at a table. We exchanged our life stories, and as soon as the music started he dragged me off to the center of the room to join the growing crowd around the bride and groom. Soon I had learnt the 'Sudanese snap' and was ready to dance to Sami Maghribi's greatest hits. One of his songs even had a bit of reggae influence and my new friend looked over and said, "See, we even brought a little bit of Jamaica here to Sudan for you!"*

*I can't say whether or not I should expect the next world-renowned reggae artist to come out of Khartoum, I know that Sudan had welcomed me with open arms. Whether I'm Sudanese or not, everyone has been made this experience something I'll remember for years to come.*

**SVP needs your membership to support our efforts.**

**No salaries or rent paid in the UK. Please email for a Standing Order**

**Sudan Volunteer Programme**

**34 Estelle Road, London, NW3 2JY**

**tel & WhatsApp +44 7910 940 819**

**david@svp-uk.org**

**www.svp-uk.org**