

S·V·P News 13

Sudan Volunteer Programme

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The job market is now hard for young Sudanese in Sudan, making English language skills ever more necessary for those wanting work. SVP has continued its policy of placing our volunteers out of town to avoid traffic congestion in Khartoum and needs volunteers who can stay in Sudan preferably for six months or more.

the river at
Sabaloha,
south of
Shendi

photo
by Wanda
Baginska



a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the thirteenth annual issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of extracts of stories from our volunteers in last 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:
Izabel Adamson Chris Allen Amelia Charles Geoffrey Austin Wanda Baginska Jeff Benson
Christopher Bodimeade Zoe Cormack Harriet Cross Heidi Erickson Tom Files Louise Harkins
Rupert Horsley Kholood Khair Ryan Kost Nicky McCreesh Liam O'Kell Amelia Oliveira Ruth
Roden Patricia Rousset Serge Rousset James Ryan Don Sloan Leanne Smith Charlotte Stemmer
Andrew Watkins Debra Winters Amanee Mohamed Ali

Dear SVP members - we depend on your continuing support.

Abmed Bedri

Life in Khartoum - *Andy Watkins*

We were talking about my plans, and I said that I would likely be in Sudan for three months. As I write this that dinner was nearly ten months ago and I won't be leaving for at least two months. Such is the allure of Sudan and its people. When I arrived I began teaching at Nileen, Sudan's largest university, myself and four other teachers took over the summer program and were barraged with over 300 students all of whom struggled to fit into our large lecture hall to attend class. Eventually we expanded into four massive halls to hold separate classes. Before arriving, I was worried because I had no training as a TEFL teacher. But what I quickly learned was that while many of the students did indeed need very basic English instruction, many others were in need of simply dialoguing with a native English speaker, a very rare commodity in Sudan. So we set to work designing course plans that included debates about the role of women in Sudanese society, discussions on the biggest challenges facing Sudan in the 21st century, role plays about job interviews and games focused on various types of specific vocabulary -business vocabulary for example. By the time we finished three months later, we had scores of ideas for lessons. While the class was amazing, it was not without its hurdles. Classrooms at the beginning were hard to come by, books were in short supply and the library was severely lacking. Internet was not freely available to all students and chalk was priceless. The nature of the students however, their love of education and thirst for knowledge, their overwhelming hospitality made these difficulties seem almost non-existent. The most significant thing I've experienced here however took place outside of the classroom when students would stand to recite poems from memory. Some they wrote themselves, others they had memorized from books or magazines. All were delivered to perfection amidst applause from their classmates. One day over tea with a number of students, I brought up the topic of poetry and asked why so many students prepared such writings. Similar things were much less common when I went to university in Washington - recitation in front of a hundred strangers was unheard of. They told me that poetry allowed them to express themselves truthfully. Many Sudanese are die-hard romantics I learned. So, as I was working on the English language daily *The Khartoum Monitor* I proposed featuring an example of my students' poetry everyday. Thus we began putting these sometimes eloquent, sometimes satirical, but always sincere verses in print. The looks on the faces of my students when they came up with a fist full of newspaper with their names on the headline were priceless, perhaps the most powerful moments that I have experienced, moments I learned to treasure, when you can open a window into a student's heart and see what it is that makes it beat. For some it's poetry, for others literature or politics, but when you see it and have a chance to do something, anything, to nurture it, those are the opportunities that offer the chance for lifelong memories, there only for those who look.

How Abu Bakr saved my Christmas - *Debra Winters*

The alarm going off at 5am is never for me the best start to a day. It is especially unwelcome when that day is Christmas Eve, a day set aside by me for last-minute shopping, meeting friends and generally being self-indulgent. I struggled out of bed, stumbled to the bathroom and was out in the cold morning air by 5.10 looking, in vain, for an amjad (private minibus taxi). After walking for what seemed like hours but was actually only a few minutes

I flagged down a bus. Explaining I wanted to get to the bus station to go to Port Sudan I was let off at the end of a dark littered street. At the far end a lone tea lady was doing a brisk trade and braziers glowed dimly to light the area. An amjad deposited at the bus company's office at 6.04 am and was feeling pretty pleased



Suakin at Christmas- photo by *Debra Winters*

with myself until I was told I was too late and my seat had been reassigned! My initial reaction was disbelief...I was only 4 minutes late! I realised that my seat had probably been sold off hours ago. Angrily I pointed to my name, still written in the space next to seat number 8- a prime seat; on the shady side, not too far back, next to a window. The ticket seller shrugged and looked uncomfortable. With true Sudanese generosity towards 'khawajas' he tried to defuse my anger by getting me a very welcome cup of tea which I accepted ungraciously. As the soothing sugar entered my system I remembered Abu Bakr, a great guy who helped all us new volunteers when we arrived, telling me that just the same thing had happened to him a few weeks before. At that moment I received a text from none other than Abu Bakr himself, wishing me a safe trip! He was clearly awake so I felt no guilt at involving him in my troubles. With a catch in my voice I called him and explained the situation. As I was talking to him the ticket seller started to tell me that he could get me a different seat- number 51- which he proudly pointed to on the bus-seating plan. It was right at the back in the middle of 5 people...no, thank you! Abu Bakr told me he would be in touch soon and not to worry. I hung up and prepared to wait. It was about 6.15 and I had been told all the Port Sudan buses leave by 6.30 as the journey takes so long. Unsure whether I should have accepted the awful, bouncy seat at the back, I decided to leave that bus company's office and go into the bus station itself to see what else was available. Just as I stepped out of the office two things happened at once; my phone buzzed with an incoming text and a man said 'Debra?' in a questioning tone. I answered 'yes' to the unknown man and opened the text- from Abu Bakr

telling me a policeman named Ahmed would meet me outside the office! Ahmed swept me off to the bus station, and led me to the police office for my papers to be scrutinised before I could travel to the area of Port Sudan. While I was queuing to be dealt Ahmed vanished. I wasn't too concerned as I was feeling more confident by this stage that somehow I would be on a bus to Port Sudan that day. And I was right. By the time I had finished being processed in the security office Ahmed had returned waving a bus ticket. It was for seat number 4- even better than my lamented number 8! The bus was due to leave at 7; Ahmed showed me where it was, arranged another tea for me and walked away, waving away my profuse thanks. I was instantly on to Abu Bakr telling him what a wonderful human being he

(some good, some bad) but I had a lot of fun doing it. My time in Sudan was too short, and I will be going back. But meanwhile I would encourage many others to go as soon as possible.

Volunteering in Sudan *Don Sloan*

I have just returned from my third assignment as a volunteer with SVP since leaving the British Council from Khartoum. Before undertaking my first assignment I followed a short, intensive course leading to a basic English language teaching qualification. Coupled with my British Council project experience has proved very useful. On my most recent visit to Sudan I have been preparing teaching assistants and young lecturers at the Graduate College of the University of Khartoum for the IELTS test - a satisfactory score in the test could enable them to pursue Masters or Ph D studies in countries offering courses through the medium of English. What is it like being a volunteer in Sudan? The short answer is stimulating, fun and an enriching cultural experience. Recent assignments undertaken by SVP volunteers include running discussion groups, providing support for teachers at universities, training for public servants, teacher-training course design, and developing course materials for English for legal purposes, including legislative drafting. Others have run general English courses and helped with English clubs. There has also been an increasing need for help with uni-

versity pre-sessional and inter-sessional English courses. Two volunteers have recently produced and participated in radio programmes for learners of English. Another has done editorial work for an English language newspaper. The possibilities are limitless, depending only on your interest, talents and experience.

SVP welcomes husband and wife teams - a couple are currently running courses to upgrade the English of 400 first-year students in the English department of El Nileen University in Khartoum. On an earlier visit Helen and I directed English courses at three scientific research institutes for three months. Volunteers are usually in Sudan for three to six months, but the period could be shorter for experienced teachers. Some younger volunteers decide to stay on and find work with NGOs. While Sudan's temperatures may not be to everyone's taste, November to March are pleasant months, and humidity is low throughout the year. It is certainly worth giving volunteering in Sudan a try. You would need to find your airfare, but basic accommodation would be provided by the host institution and you would receive a modest allowance to help with food and out of pocket expenses. You will find catering for yourself presents no problem - there are plenty of supermarkets, greengrocers, and bakeries. There is also no shortage of restaurants providing western and international menus, as well as Sudanese cuisine: many volunteers sample and enjoy a healthy Sudanese diet. Above all the friendliness and warm hospitality of the Sudanese has to be experienced to be believed... in your volunteering you will be helping highly motivated and appreciative students; a reward in itself.



Harriet on the radio

was! He too brushed off my thanks and told me just to have a great Christmas. As the bus set off I sat in my perfect seat and smiled...I continued to smile through cheesy Sudanese music and a truly dire Egyptian movie until we finally reached Port Sudan 13 hours later. The next day I celebrated a slightly unorthodox Port Sudan-style Christmas with taamiya sandwiches and mango juice for lunch. Delicious! Thanks Abu Bakr!

Khartoum - *Harriet Cross*

I began to fit into Sudanese life much more quickly than I had expected. It was very easy to do due to the generosity and friendliness of many of the people I met. They would bend over backwards to make sure you felt at home and were enjoying Sudanese life. Much of this was in the form of tea drinking, and the Sudanese do not drink tea with sugar, they drink sugar with tea. My teeth are still suffering from this excessive amount of glucose. I miss many of the friends I made and the connections I had, from the young girls and boys I taught at a centre in Omdurman, to the friendships I had with lots of the staff at various universities. I still miss being called Miss Harry Potter by the students at the International University in Khartoum.

My time in Sudan was not just as a volunteer teacher. I also had the chance to pursue my interest in radio and present on an English show at a private radio station in Khartoum. I had an incredible time and learnt more about Sudanese youth culture than I did from teaching. I was able to meet and interview Sudanese disc jockeys and various artists all in the Sudanese music scene. Often I was learning nothing new as the music interest and style resembled American and British rhythm and blues

Atbara - Chris Allen

I've been living in Atbara for two months now - ostensibly as a teacher, though I'm doing most of the learning. I agree with and understand other volunteers who write about being 'overwhelmed' with the amount of new things to encounter. It goes way beyond ginger in your coffee, and it's what makes living here great. Maybe because of the newness, I treasure my most mundane routines and even look forward to them. Like sitting in a mini-bus coming home from visiting friends in El Damer, a nearby town south of Atbara along the Nile. Often it's around 5 or 6 pm, low sun making the dull dirt color a warmer richer yellow. In bus there is practically no talking, at that calm time of day. People climb on and pack into every available inch and the bus boy snaps his fingers to collect fares. It's a close knit society, so almost always one old man in his turban and jalabiya will recognize another with a friendly greeting. When people reach their stops they click back and he hisses between his teeth to signal the driver. At first the clicking and hissing is a bit strange, but it's a relaxed and well rehearsed system. Atbara is the last stop, so I sit and observe while the warm air rushes through the open windows. There are two big Chinese-Sudanese cement factories in the distance, lit up like cruise ships and actually quite nice to look at. The rest is what you might call boring landscape: some regular Sudanese houses, trees along the river to the left, and a straight road to Atbara 25 minutes away. I most enjoy this kind of non-event for it's lazy participation in Sudanese life. I'm not forcing anything, not being the foreigner. I'm just sitting there squashed like everybody else, staring out the windows secretly quite happy about it all.

Kassala - Rupert Horsley

It feels as if I arrived in Kassala only a little while ago, and already it is time to start thinking of leaving. My experiences here have been very good. The teaching was slow to start but this allowed me time to get used to the work which was fine. More than anything I was nervous of the teaching, but soon found that the atmosphere was relaxed and the hours were filled easier than expected. It took a while to work out what worked, but once I had most of the classes were reasonably successful. The students were all lovely, some very quiet and some very keen, all of them late, and it became a good and relatively permissible environment to air our very different views on the world. In the end the teaching, of which I had been so nervous, has become a pleasant and none too taxing routine, the background to my life in Kassala. The rest of my time here is spent on the whole calmly. Kassala is a pleasant, even beautiful town. It has a small, rural feel (donkeys generally outnumber cars), a lively market, numerous fairly distinctive tribes (the least interesting topic of conversation, I found), some alarming sugar loaf mountains, a ruined mosque and a dry river. While the vibe is small town it is actually quite large, as you see when you climb the feet of the mountains for coffee amid the boulders, if anything it is genteel. Or at least, not frontier. My days will generally be a combination of preparing a class, taking a class, reading (an awful lot), going to the market, going to sit and

read in the mountains, going to sit and read at the ruined mosque, drinking tea with a number of people with my friends, communicating with my housemates in rudimentary Arabic, checking my emails, walking or taking a bus from place to place. One of the pleasures is ample free time: I had anticipated this and my luggage was mostly books; Kassala has been the perfect setting in which to read. Kassala is simply a very pleasant place, the happy medium between busy industrial town and agricultural back water, while there are undoubtedly many poor people around the level of visible suffering is remarkably low, which helps the spirits, in the mountain gives the height and spectacle which more than replaces a dearth in entertainment, there are a few places which serve de-



wedding guests near Rufa'a photo by Chris Bodimeade

scent food, there is enough greenery around to keep the eyes of a northerner from drying out completely, and people are as friendly as possible to each other at all times while leaving the option of walking off when you have had enough. This is the making of a nice town.. Needless to say I will be happy to go home, but I will be happier that I came.

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Sudan Volunteer Programme

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