

S·V·P News 14

Sudan Volunteer Programme

Registered Charity No 1062155

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English language skills are ever more necessary for those wanting work in Sudan. SVP has continued its policy of where possible placing our volunteers outside the capital to avoid the traffic congestion in Khartoum. We need volunteers who can stay in Sudan preferably for six months or more.



the mosque of
Sayyid Hassan
al-Mirghani at
Kassala with
Jebel Totil in
the background

*photo by
Will Berridge*

a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the fourteenth 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:

Liam O'Kell Louise Harkins Heidi Erikson Wanda Baginska Debra Winters Rupert Horsley Iza Adamson Chris Allen Ryan Kost Amanee Mohamed Ali Gemeela Sherif Jemma Pursell Deanna Dent Toby Collins Derek Dias Eleanor Bell Owen Grafham Georgia Newsam Nev Ilic Tom Law Elena Minina Wanda Baginska Noorun Khan Lykke Stavnes William Berridge Paul Major Kate Brooks Sofia Wachtmeister Rhea Schmitt Jack Palmieri Rebecca Glade

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

Ahmed Bedri

From Georgia Newsam at the University of Kordofan, El Obeid from her emails 20/06/2010 Well, I've finally arrived in El Obeid. The good news is my bungalow has internet and a TV with one English channel plus a nice big walled courtyard to relax in. The bad news is there is no running water and yes, that includes no flushing toilet. A man comes every 3 days or so and fills a medium sized tub of water which we then have to make last a full 3 days. That's one tub between 2 girls to wash hair, clothes, dishes, flush the loo, shower and finally drink. Already my flatmate has asked the unaskable - 'should we flush the loo or wash our hair today'. Oh dear... Sleeping arrangements are ok. It's too hot to sleep inside the house so every night we take our beds outside and sleep in the courtyard under the stars. I was a little paranoid about tree snakes but I've been assured they are not very common in this part of Sudan so that will have to do. I had an exhausting couple of days going round the university being introduced to approximately 1 million people, or that's what it feels like anyway. No one can pronounce my name either so it looks like

I've also had two marriage proposals since I arrived in El Obeid, neither particularly romantic. The first was from a 17 year old student, about two inches shorter than me. He announced that he wanted a visa to go to the UK, said I had nice eyes then popped the question. Smooth. The second was from a middle aged lecturer (or should that be lecher...) who offered, via translator, to buy me a nice car if I became his third wife. I asked what kind of car and he said... a Volvo. I also got a very odd text message from a man I met for 5 mins saying my hair was like the sun, my ears like the rain. I'm not sure quite what to make of it all.

22/06/2010. All is well here. I had my first proper class today and it was EXHAUSTING. I don't know whether it was the heat or having to answer the same questions over and over but by the end of the lessons I could barely speak. Everyone wants to know what I think of Sudan, what the difference is between the UK and Sudan (where do I start?) and why don't I speak Arabic very well (how rude!). I'm off to a henna party tonight to help prepare the bride for her wedding on Friday. The dust storm you caught me in a couple of nights ago when my phone cut out led to a blissfully cool day yesterday so all is forgiven. After I spoke to you, I decided to head over to the French Cultural Centre round the corner and meet some of the students there. I was mainly motivated by hunger as there was no food in the fridge and I didn't know where the nearest shop was. I walked in to a room full of strangers and announced 'bonsoir, j'ai faim'. Sure enough a chair was pulled out for me to sit on and some poor flunky dispatched to pick up a delicious kebab of peanut-coated chicken and rice. I love Sudanese hospitality!

from Lykke Stavnes at Shendi University "Oh Sudan... This must be the friendliest, warmest, most hospitable and genuine people I have ever come across. In general the capital is dusty, worn down and slightly suffocating but it still has a magical Aladin-like feel to it. Yesterday we went to photocopy an Arabic-book in this ruin of a building where our fruit-vendor-friend Ismael works, and since it took forever we thought we'd go for tea while waiting. So we sat down at one of these corners where men sit on tiny stools drinking tea and coffee and within seconds we had a huge crowd of curious guys surrounding us. Most don't speak more English than "how are you" but they are still really eager to practice that one line. We ended up sitting there for two hours, a man started singing to us with a very feminine voice and old men told us we had to teach their children English. People ran to nearby shops to buy us cakes,

fruit, water and pepsi. It is all quite overwhelming but SO beautiful how welcoming and humble they are. They always refuse to let you pay for anything and simply tell you it's their "duty"...

I have to watch myself not to use pompous clichés when describing the scene but it's hard because this place is just unreal. We went to Sufi-dancing last Friday. It's kind of like gospel church, only it's Muslim and happening outside a mosque in the sunset. They all just chant and dance and spin around praising Allah, wearing Jamaica colours and saying "Ya'maan" in a cloud of incense.

They haven't exactly introduced the healthy living-food products here. So far I've been happy as long as I could identify what I'm eating. But a lot of the times you just have to nod and smile and try the slimy sweet things they serve you which usually turn out to be pretty good."

Three months into the Sudanese experience, it's pretty hilarious to see what I wrote to people back then. I feel very settled in and at home in Shendi. Ok, so it may not be the most eventful town in the country but it is an amazing place to live and work. We have a local kisra-lady (aunty Miriam) and the numerous khudra and okra-sauces are less of a challenge now. I have even started craving fool in the morning. It's WONDERFOOL as Umm Rhea so beautifully put it. It's like we've stopped noticing all the things that surprised and amazed us in the beginning. Suddenly it all just makes sense, like "all the bottles are in the right place" (Kullu jar-rkaana fi makaana) – quote William James Berridge (Eid celebration at Osman's).

From Noorun Khan in 'The land of mafi mushkillah (no problem!) I began this trip with not knowing what to expect. I quite fancied the unknown with no fixed agenda or times. Well, that's perfect for Sudan! Everything is chilled out - except the weather. My first observations of Khartoum were when I looked out from the balcony on my first morning, I thought it was my sleepy eyes, people were moving as though in slow motion. Welcome to Sudan I thought, colourful elegant fabrics floated past with gleaming white robes and smiles, lots of chatter – all in slow motion. My experiences of Sudan have been made by the people. I have an endless list of names and characters that have made my teaching, living and travelling experience so unique. The land of mafi mushkillah is just that. The people are so hospitable with their strap line of – 'no problem' brings ease.

The Sudanese love to ask how we find Sudan, the typical answer being Kwais (good) but that's an understatement. I have had

experiences of being lost in Khartoum where a school boy has escorted me home and paid for my bus fare, amjad drivers (Taxi) who found out I was a foreigner and wished me a good stay without accepting money, fruit sellers who get so happy with my few words of Arabic that when I get home I find a whole variety of fruits I never paid for. One thing is for sure, the hospitality and generosity of the people means you



Noorun's friend Ismael



learning English on Tuti Island

will never starve here.

The fruit seller, Ismael who lives in one of the poorest parts of Khartoum invites us to his house for dinner, and insists on buying us mineral water and tea just because we come by to say hi. The building where his stall was based was torn down, when

I went to visit him I

was sad his place of work is now turned to rubble, he smiled and began his sentence with mafi mushkillah! The man has lost his livelihood, but it's no problem he says, he is healthy and will be able to provide for his family 'Inshallah' (God willing). His faith and optimism a true inspiration. His fruit stall now a bunch of banana's on a cardboard box.

In talking about my experiences of the people I remember this young man I met on Tuti Island. He over heard us speaking in English and just tagged along to practice. He brings his ancient English book with him and begins to ask for definitions and how to pronounce certain words. He inquisitively asks, 'when do you use this sentence 'make haste.' I didn't know where to begin. He then flicks to the health pages and asks what 'hunch-back' means! I was humbled that this 1960's publication was his source of learning English. Yet that didn't stop him, he was so keen and eager to learn. He was a pleasure to sit with and defined the need to improve English language teaching.

We arrive in Sudan at a poignant time in its history. We'd have a grim view of Sudan if we relied on the news, however, my personal experience of the people is so conflicting to the civil wars we hear about. While the people from the South decide on secession, there is work to be done for the SVP volunteers. Our placements await us. I was fortunate enough to experience teaching at the University of Khartoum and Ahlia college in Wad Medani. Both placements brought with them very different teaching and living experiences.

The University of Khartoum gave me some excellent opportunities in developing my teaching skills. The Deputy Dean, Dr Gammar was keen to work on my strengths and he gratefully didn't dump me in the syntax or grammar classes! I was given the scope to develop a class structure of my own with the sole purpose of encouraging the students to speak confidently in English. As a result of this I also worked on some teacher training projects as well as working with the Management school to work with new graduates approaching the job market. This can be daunting, feeling totally unprepared, but when you get to meet the students and get to know them you'll see a group of mixed abilities who have a passion to learn English. They are so eager to please, respectful and just need encouragement. Once you get to know them and their interests your resources and class ideas will be abundant. Let your students take the lead, this will make your sessions more interesting and rewarding.

By having the chance to work in different departments I was able to work with a mixture of students. Sudan offers you plenty of opportunities, the people are very welcoming, and provided you have an interest and some ability they really do believe in you.

My second placement was based in a college in the Gezira state. The teachers and students were very welcoming with picnics and family dinners. I straight away noticed a big difference to teaching in the city. The students came from more rural areas and many had never heard a native speaker before. Everyone knows everyone and I was suddenly adopted three times over! The warmth of the people has been overwhelming. A fellow teacher Ustaza Salwah invited me for a Sudanese meal. When I arrived at her family home they had slaughtered their sheep for me and cooked an absolute feast. I was overwhelmed with their reception and genuine welcome. I was offered their home and the children of the family came in turns to practice their English. The women were all highly educated with masters and PhD's.

The people here really value their education and appreciate the simple things in life. The interaction between young and old is lovely to see when the Habooba (grandma) jokes around with the youngsters and when the parents tell me tales of how they got married. The Sudanese are a nation of romantics they love to talk about weddings and crave happy endings.

From Sofia Wachtmeister in Karima Me and volunteer partner Jack have been in our desert paradise for about six weeks now and the experience just keeps getting better and better. Despite the small and relaxed nature of Karima there is never a quiet moment in the place because of the characters it contains and its sheer beauty. Karima lies on the Nile complete with date palms lining either side and boasts a mountain better known as Jebel Barkal beside its very own pyramids. After teaching one day Jack and I decided to go and fly my kite by the Jebel. As normal on the walk out to the pyramids we were greeted very kindly by all those we passed, with the usual stream of "Keef [how are you]? Tamam [alright]? Inshallah kwiseen [with God's will you are well]? Allah yebarrack feek [may God bless you]. Elhamdu lAllah [praise God!:] and a smile of course! The children of Karima who usually play on the street are slowly getting used to the two white people walking around but seem to also find it necessary to remind us that we are white shouting 'khawaja' ['white foreigner'] after us! The kids are supercute and friendly, usually insisting nothing more than that we take a photo of them. This is usually organised by the older kids who line the kids up making sure they're all in and visible in the photo. Although we have countless photos of the kids we never tire and they certainly don't either! The children who spend all day playing on the sand streets of Karima usually kicking an old football around are always smiling and chatting as if they don't have a care in the world. At first they were slightly wary of us flying the kite not sure what to make of the khawajas and their strange ways this time but it didn't take long for them to join in chasing the kite when it crashed and calmly taking it turns flying it! It turned out that one of the older boys was actually studied in Khartoum and was a student of another SVP volunteer. He was keen to keep up his English during the University holidays so we organised to meet once a week for a language exchange. Our Arabic is coming along slowly but surely. The teachers at the university, Karima market stall holders and taxi drivers

are always keen to teach us new useful phrases usually resulting in many laughs as we try to remember and then pronounce the words! Karima is such a small and friendly town that most of its inhabitants know of us and will greet us with a huge smile when we enter their shops or stalls, usually throwing in a goody or two! We sometimes cook for ourselves; buying meat from smiley Abdul Azim, fruit from overjoyed Ibrahim and staples from gentle Adam. They usually enquire what we are going to make with their ingredients; banana pancakes we answered one day. All three insisted that we bring them a taste of this British- Swedish concoction the next day. We made sure to douse the goodies in vanilla and honey to cater for the sweet Sudanese tooth!

From Will Berridge in Kassala As a location in which to work and write up your PhD, Kassala differs very much from Gilesgate Durham. In Durham, as I typed I was staring out of my window at the Esso Garage, a busy road, and the (now somewhat mercifully shut down) Durham Light Infantry pub. Here as I walk out of the house I can gaze away at the towering Taka-Totil mountains, and open green spaces with an endearingly gormless herd of goats. The university student union has a pool table, however, which is all I need to remind me of Durham- me and Kate also found a rod football table in 'Timintai' restaurant, which provided the only 5 minutes of 'sport' I've engaged in the trip so far. In short, the quiet and dreamy nature of the city offers a merciful antidote to the hustle and bustle of Khartoum.

The 'Mez al-Mu'allimin', or 'Teacher's Mess', is something of a mixed bag. The fridge, telly and wireless internet all brought joyful tears to my eyes as a technophilic Westerner. I have even come to understand my interaction with the bathroom facilities as a character-building experience. 2 days ago some water came out of the shower head which was a special treat. However, since it is an all boys flat the kitchen unsurprisingly looks like *28 Days Later* was filmed it (there is a scorch mark the size of a man behind the stove). However, the genial nature of the company more than makes up for the purely decorative nature of the shower head. They have all provided good company and been exceptionally helpful in erecting my mosquito net- my own inept attempts to do so seem to have provided endless hilarity. Al-Omarabi is a lexical wizard from the English department who delights in coining new words in both English and Arabic (istamwaza- to go for the bananas). He is also, to date, the only Sudanese man I had met who uses the word 'willy-nilly'.

I have also had a discussion with Dr at-Tayyib, the head of the English department, about whether I should be a peacock, and donkey, or a dog. Apparently a peacock struts around in nice clothes dazzling everyone and generally enjoys life, whereas the donkey gets married and is burdened by the duties of being head of a household, and the dog has many children he is permanently chasing everywhere. I asked Dr Tayyib if it is possible to remain as a peacock forever, I argue surely it must be, but he insists that you must also choose at some point in life to be a dog or a donkey, which doesn't seem to be a particularly attractive prospect to me. The teaching is really fun: at the end of every class I am expected to do an impromptu stand up act by telling everyone what I know about the Mahdist state in Arabic- not sure what it has do with teaching English for specific purposes to nurses and accountants, but it invariably gets me a round of applause which is quite nice. Asked my conversation class to name me a famous Briton the other day- what did I get- Shakespeare maybe? Dickens? Charles

Darwin? No, the first name raised was that of everybody's favourite squeaky-voiced footballer.

About six weeks ago we all swanned off to Eastern Sudan to enjoy our Eid break. Every been to Port Sudan? Never drink the water. Ever. Four khawajas out of seven got stomach bugs, and the crew functioned as a kind of mobile patient's ward for the rest of the trip. (I myself bucked the trend and got the flu.) Apart from that Port Sudan is a nice clean place – the ubiquitous flies aside – with a good climate and a nice ice cream parlour. We sat eating some crunchy fish on the seaside next to a massive generator which meant we had to yell at each other to be heard. We popped into the Hipton hotel (which I think is meant to be a Sudanese take on the Hilton) and surreptitiously used the bathrooms, before declining the ridiculously expensive prices offered for use of the swimming pool. We slept 'under the stars' for a couple of nights, once near Suakin and once on a sort of pier by Port Sudan, took a nice dip in the warm waters by Suakin but we were warned off swimming in the sea by Port Sudan due to the presence of something called 'Abu Shouk', a nasty fish which can lash your flesh. We later figured out this was a stingray. When I came back to Kassala and told my Sudanese friends we'd slept under the stars, they thought it was hilarious- apparently it's not often done here! We visited the old Ottoman and British ruins at Suakin which gave me a chance to impress everyone with my historical expertise ('as you can see, it got bombed').



Lykke visits the Meroë Pyramids at Begrawiya near Shendi

SVP needs your help to correct our deficit: in 2010 on an income of £6,653 we spent £9,497, largely on insurance for volunteers and Khartoum coordination. No wages or rent are paid in the UK.

Please support SVP with your donations or membership at £3.00 per month or £36.00 per year or £10.00 concessions: please make cheques payable to SVP or ask us for a banker's order form

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