

S·V·P News 15

Sudan Volunteer Programme

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English language skills are needed more than ever by Sudanese graduates looking for work in Sudan. SVP continues its policy of placing our volunteers where possible outside Khartoum, to support the teaching of English as a second language in towns and cities across the country and, in collaboration with the Sudan Ministry of Education, is also developing a programme to send volunteers to teach in secondary schools.

Maulid - the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Mohamed near the Mahdi's tomb in Omdurman
photo by Joanne Lewis



a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the fifteenth 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:
Gemeela Sherif Jemma Pursell Tom Law Wanda Baginska Noorun Khan Lykke Stavnes William Berridge Paul Major Sofia Wachtmeister Rhea Schmitt Jack Palmieri Rebecca Glade Fadil El Obeid Nevena Ilic Helen Lamb Jessica Pratt Andrew Lawrie Mary Atkinson Billie Tomlinson Martha Quinn Christine Murphy Brent Siegel Paul Fean Nabeel Hassan André Figaro Joanne Lewis Isatu Haddi Alexander Skinner Tanya Williams

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

Ahmed Bedri

From Helen Lamb: Celebrations and Festivals in El Obeid Having just spent a hectic Eid week of eating, visiting and partying, I can categorically say that the Sudanese sure know how to celebrate - and without the aid of alcohol!

The week before Eid I was lucky enough to attend a graduation ceremony at the University. So as I took my front row seat at the University of Kordofan, Faculty of Arts 2011 Graduation Ceremony, I prepared myself for the usual long speeches and even longer lists of names that would be even more tedious as I wouldn't understand any of it! Thankfully I couldn't have been more wrong! For me it was exactly the sheer organised chaos and excitement combined with the contrast to a "Traditional English Graduation" that made it so thoroughly entertaining! These students had worked hard for 4-5 years, and families had supported them and made sacrifices to keep them at University - they were all very proud and they were showing it! Whole families were there, some of whom had travelled miles, none of this "two tickets per graduand" nonsense that we have back in the UK. Once the "formal" part of the ceremony had been completed, one of Sudan's popular singers took to the stage and all the students were cheering, dancing and singing and throwing each other up in the air. It was at this point that myself and my colleagues made a dignified exit and left them to enjoy the rest of their evening!

The next day Majid picked me up and took me to his house to have henna applied to my hands and feet, which is a tradition for married ladies in Sudan. I also had my hair braided and his wife showed me how to dress myself in the beautiful green tobe that Majid had given me earlier. All I needed to do now was get the right shoes and skirt to wear with it! So the next day I ventured to the market alone to shop. Luckily I ran into my colleague Elzain, who was out shopping with his wife and daughter and they helped me pick out some "ship ships" (leather flip flop type sandals) that would show my henna off in all it's glory! After that, various strangers took me all around the Souk helping me to find the perfect skirt at the right price.

Eid week is a popular time for weddings, with many people finding themselves double and triple booked and having to attend several parties during the week, some on the same night. After my non-stop week of celebrating I was happy to get back into my work routine - until Christmas in Khartoum of course! more at <http://helen-lamb.blogspot.com/>

From André Figaro: My first day in Khartoum at the SVP flat with Coordinator Paul Major and colleague Nabeel Hassan was great as we spent hours speaking about their experience in Sudan as well as a host of other topics, thanks to Paul's incredible knowledge of all things archaeological. I have been in Kassala for almost four months and to say that life here is totally different to Khartoum would be an understatement. The ratio of donkey and horse drawn carts to lorries is close to 1:1 and the pace of life here slows down to a crawl. It was only after recently spending six weeks travelling to other towns in northern Sudan that I realized how much I truly love life in Kassala.

Since it's quite a small community at Kassala University, we have formed a very close relationship with our students at the Faculty of Education. I won't be the

first to admit that it was unnerving at the very beginning to walk into a lecture hall with about 70 eager university students all focused on you. However, thanks to the teaching training workshop provided by Dr Hala at the English Language Institute in Khartoum I felt a bit more prepared for the task ahead of me. Over the course of several weeks I have gained the confidence necessary to stand in front of 200 students at other faculties and give lectures.

A couple of tips to potential volunteers reading the newsletter: duct tape will be a life-saver in many situations and 50ft -500lb parachute cord will come in handy in more ways than you could imagine. Keep an open mind and try and say yes a bit more than you would usually. Good things come from chance meetings more often than not. Malaria is not cool. Take all steps necessary to prevent it.

From from Isatu Haddi at Omdurman Ahlia University: Today myself and my flat mate woke up to a thick layer of dust buttered all over our living room floor. During the night there was an enormous dust storm. This is just one of those things you become very used to in Sudan- DUST IS EVERYWHERE. I have been in Sudan for about 2 months and I absolutely love it here! At the moment the temperature is perfect- about 29C with a really nice breeze. At night the breeze is even better.

I arrived in Sudan On 10 January 2012. I was to be greeted by the SVP Assistant co-ordinator Rami. I did not need to look for him for very long because he was standing there with a big sign saying 'SVP VOLUNTEERS', he was accompanied with the previous SVP assistant coordinator Abu Bakr. I was told that another volunteer will be arriving in about an hour so it would be best if we just waited for her. Ten minutes later out jumps Joanne (my soon to be flat mate). At this point I remember looking around for the first time and seeing a procession of Sufi Ansar, chanting and clapping, the bright green and red signature colours of the Ansar draped across their bodies. I was in Sudan.



Near Port Sudan - Mary Atkinson

The food here in Sudan is quite basic. People generally eat either Foul or Tamia Sandwiches. I wasn't a big fan of Foul until I went to a village called Begarawia just outside Khartoum and I ate the most delicious foul ever! Foul consist of fava beans which are boiled and seasoned, at times are accompanied with mashed Tamia and fresh vegetables. Tamia are simply Sudanese Falafel! As a vegan I find I can get a good range of fruit, watermelons, the most delicious grapefruits, oranges, and bananas.

Ahlia University is truly special; there is an extremely laid-back, 'hakuna-matata', atmosphere. The University reminds me of SOAS

in London. I teach first year students in 10 classes a week which



Jebel Totil, Kassala - *André Figaro*

are mostly focused upon encouraging students to develop their spoken English. You find that many of these are on an English degree programme but struggle to say a simple sentence. They seem to know many grammatical rules but have no

understanding of

how to put them into practice. So I try to organise my lessons into various fun activities, whilst using the various grammatical rules that they already know. The students are extremely polite and generally keen to develop their proficiency in English. Despite what I heard before I left London I have found that female students are just as keen to speak, a number are the most feisty and enthusiastic of all which is always a pleasure! I absolutely love Sudan. It is Home!

From Tanya Williams: Omdurman has so much history and such a great energy. Although it is not as busy as Khartoum, it has a real University City vibe. Everyone is friendly and has time to help you even when you don't need help. There has been many a time I didn't realise I was in need of a cup of tea until Feisal my new Homie from the internet café pulled up a dusty plastic chair and told me to sit . . or he could have been saying drink . . or anything else for that matter. There is so much that I have done and enjoyed in such a short space of time but the highlight for me has to be when Jo, Ishatu and I laid in the back of a pickup truck looking up at the stars on the way to Begarawia. The trip can only be described as breathtaking. The wind was blowing in our faces, the moon lending its beautiful gaze to light up the desert as we journeyed towards the site of what was one of the oldest civilisations this side of the earth. I'm not really a riding on a camel type of girl but I did it anyway right up to the entrance of the pyramids. I think my camel realised that I was not to keen on him so refused to sit when it was time for me to get off. After a few Bismillahs and a horrific shriek from me, the camel soon learnt his lesson. Although not as big as the pyramids in Egypt I was still happily surprised by the level of access that we had. By one o'clock we were home eating a late breakfast. It was an amazing experience with great company.

From Fadil El Obeid: Once in Kassala the natural beauty and serenity that I had heard so much about became apparent. I met with the other teachers I would be staying with, who were all friendly and welcoming and was immediately taken to the suq in the centre of town where I was introduced to Eastern Sudan's main recreational hobby, drinking sugar with a dash of coffee and some ginger powder. 'Jabana' the name that refers to the metal pot the coffee is served from is consumed in huge amounts in casual outdoor cafes all over the suq during all hours of the

day by mostly young unmarried men. Care must be taken when enjoying 'jabana' on a cool breezy evening in the suq because it is very strong and can cause sleepless nights.

Being half Sudanese I knew the culture and customs beforehand and was only rarely called 'khawaja' – foreigner in public. My poor Arabic provided the university staff with plenty of entertainment. The university itself was less modern than I expected but the staff on the whole were very dedicated and intelligent, al-Omerabi, Atif and of course Dr al-Tayyeb were particularly charismatic and friendly, which on a hot day after working several hours was very welcome. Except during exam time the campus had a very relaxed vibe and a lot of time was spent socialising with members of staff and students. The classes themselves were an opportunity to engage in discussions with students of a similar age to myself, which I found very interesting. I feel that students who regularly attended my classes benefited in terms of improving their vocabulary and confidence in speaking. Introducing students in the English club to the Beatles was entertaining but their unquestioning devotion to Celine Dion quite unexpected.

From Mary Atkinson at Nileen University Khartoum: What justice can any words do to this country of warm hearts, easy laughs and sequins aplenty? I don't usually like to generalise, but it is proved to us SVPers every day that Sudanese people are some of the most welcoming, generous and easy-going you could hope to meet anywhere in the world. A simple rickety bus-ride is still an adventure, frequently sound-tracked by Bob Marley and the hissing or clicking that replaces 'ringing the bell', and sometimes hair-raising (a bus door flying off its hinges on a bridge over the Nile, leading to the blinking of not one eye from the rest of the passengers). And this is not to mention the many accidental trips to markets at the end of the route line, the air heavy with spice, dust and the shouts of boys selling mysterious things in small bags. Teaching is no less of an adventure; no matter how much of a struggle the lesson has been, a student always comes up at the end and says thank you for the lesson. Imagine a university student doing that in England! It's hard to pinpoint my favourite thing about teaching, but highlights include the frequent shouts of 'Teacher! How?' (a direct translation of the Arabic, which doesn't quite come off), hearing the random phrases which have drifted from 1950s English over to Sudan over the years (and trying to teach my boss to say 'higgledy-piggledy') and seeing the students grow in confidence. All in all, I feel I've only just started to discover for myself truths about what Sudan has to offer, summed up neatly by the motto of a women's empowerment charity over the Nile in Omdurman: - the diversity of beauty and the beauty of diversity.

From Joanne Lewis at Omdurman Ahlia: People here are amongst the nicest people on the planet, ready to help their neighbour (or a slightly lost foreigner) for no reason other than kindness. More than once someone has taken a bus with me all the way to my destination simply to make sure that I got there safely. The second thing you learn is that 'time' has no meaning in Sudan. Leave your watch at home! Everything here happens bokra inshaAllah - tomorrow if God wills it. The third thing you learn is that Sudanese love a party. Not a weekend goes by without us witnessing some kind of celebration whether it be a wedding, a festival or simply the weekly gathering of the whirling Sufis at Hamed Al Neel Mosque (which luckily is just across the

street from our house). My Sudanese dancing skills are at tiptop condition after two months of practice.

It can be tough moving to a new place, experiencing a new culture and being away from the things that you are used to but whether it be riding camels in Meroe, dancing with grandmas at weddings or simply visiting Ustaza Shadia or the tea lady after work, it can also be an epic and rewarding new adventure. Thank you Sudan.

From Jessica Pratt in Wad Medani: Each morning I rush out of my guesthouse, thinking I'm late for the bus which will take me to Ahlia College where I'm teaching. But invariably I stand on the street corner for a good few minutes, looking out at the expanse of the Blue Nile and the passing rickshaws.

At the college I teach English clubs. I showed them Monty Python's Dead Parrot Sketch the other day to try and explain idioms. Another day one student described his favourite place: where all the people are free and happy and there is a tower with a clock, called Big Ben. I don't think he realises the streets of London are paved with puddles and chewing-gum.

Some students ask me to explain poetry to them in the library. Shakespeare and T.S. Eliot are on their syllabus. They extract crumpled photocopies of study-guides from exercise books, but never the actual texts. Talking about modern poetry, I ended up trying to explain the First and Second World Wars to one student. She had never heard of Hitler.

Dr Selwa is one of the few female teachers. She brings me lunch each day and we sit in her office eating salad sandwiches. She tells me about past volunteers, Sudanese culture and Oprah's latest advice and asks me about the finer points of English usage and British culture. She is always telling me "Akli!" "Eat!" and invites me round for huge meals at the weekend with her very welcoming family. I walk home from the bus station to my guesthouse each evening along Sharia an-Nil. Strangers ask me "How are you? Are you fine?" or more often than not simply a friendly shout "khawajia!" (foreigner) as I go by. I pass the church where I worship on Sundays. There are rows of plastic chairs, the women on one side and the men on the other. The service is in Arabic and the music is chanting and clapping with African drums and huge smiles. I try to clap in time and I can't help but smile.

From Andy Lawrie: The University of Khartoum, once among the foremost in Africa, is where I was placed. Dr Hala, the Director of the English Language Institute, welcomed me to her rapidly expanding and respected operation. Improving the spoken English ability of post-graduate students' has proved rewarding beyond anything I imagined. Contrasting the confidence and language proficiency of my students this January with October last year fills me with joy. They needed to be gently reminded that making mistakes and occasionally hazarding a guess (and possibly losing face in front of both teacher and class) are essential steps to enhanced learning outcomes. A non-intimidatory atmosphere where students are steadily nurtured is conducive to the free-flow of existing memory-pool access; this arena was previously denied by the constricting barrier of fear. Buoyed by the realisation that

English is not so tough and they can speak English already, the subsequent desire to improve ability via reading and practicing (and watching TV!) is increased.

Manchester United played Chelsea recently in a big league game. A Sudanese friend led us up some (health and safety defying) steps behind a shoe shop in Souk al Arabi. We paid 30 (UK) pence to watch the game on two big TV's. The atmosphere was electric. Roaring animated discussion regarding the minutiae of play made us feel like all the men who sport 'Rooney' or 'Drogba' shirts in dusty Khartoum were present! I no longer view British football supporters as being sufficiently passionate about the game . . .

Stepping into a tuk-tuk the other day I had to squeeze into my seat due to a large teddy-bear tied to the back of the driver's seat. Inscribed on the bear's chest was 'I LOVE YOU'. Repeating this loudly - over the sounds of manic traffic - to a previously unsmiling man probably near the end of a 16 hour shift, won the responding yell of 'I love you too!' Accompanied by a beaming Sudanese grin of course! When I return to the UK after being away from home for any length of time, it is always these seemingly insignificant moments that I recall with greatest fondness. I am extending my time with SVP in Sudan so I can carry more of these memories back to the UK.



Shaddia & her tea house in Omdurman - Joanne Lewis

SVP needs your membership to support our efforts. No wages or rent are paid in the UK.

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