

S·V·P News 17

Sudan Volunteer Programme

Registered Charity No 1062155

March 2014

English language skills are needed more than ever by Sudanese graduates looking for work either in Sudan or abroad. 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. In collaboration with the Sudan Ministry of Education we are developing a programme for volunteers to teach in secondary schools.



A
village in
Nubia
photo by
Robert
Dvořák

a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the seventeenth 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 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:

Rebecca Glade Tanya Williams Susanna Miller Rebecca Mallinson Christin Weigt Tim Young
Tom Wharton Sara Ali Marthe Broadhurst Jonathan Larkin Vanessa Volland Jonathan
Hargreaves Patrick Halling Robert Dvořák Kate McIntosh Polly Steele Mark Ozanne Eva
Khair Dylan Watkins Piran Treen Caroline Hammargren Simone de Monerri Sahar Haq
Kathryn Bruce Ryan Brenner Rachel May Simon Conrad Yuleina Carmona Alec Thurnham
Matt Foster Dan Morgan Stuart Perks

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

Ahmed Bedri

Kate McIntosh in Australia writes, “Things progressed rather quickly after my application was accepted by SVP. I was living in Italy at the time and there was paperwork to organise, a flat to pack up, a stream of medical checks, goodbyes and last coffee meetings. It was easy to imagine I was simply going on any other trip. Sudan in my mind still seemed very far away, undefined and unknown. By the time I was preparing to leave Sudan about 11 months later, my initial trepidation had given away to a sense of familiarity and acceptance.

People greeted me by name on the street. I had grown accustomed to bargaining with rickshaw drivers and vegetable sellers. I also had a wonderful circle of friends and adopted family, who accepted my strange foreign ways and helped cushion the effects of culture shock. The morning call to prayer, parked donkey carts and men in white jellabiyahs and turbans have become part of the daily fabric of life, as have spontaneous neighbourly visits complete with deliveries of mint tea, biscuits and soup.

Home for me in Sudan was Ed Damer, a dusty town about four hours north of Khartoum, where I have been working in various secondary schools in the region as part of a pilot programme by the Sudanese Ministry of Education to help improve English levels.

Sudan’s real treasure is its people and their extraordinary capacity for hospitality and kindness – and this is even more so in a regional area like Ed Damer, not usually accustomed to foreigners. I assumed a kind of celebrity status in town and was never short of lunch invitations or offers of tea. It was not uncommon for strangers to wordlessly pay my bus fare and slip off before I had a chance to thank them.

Living in Ed Damer has also given me a wonderful insight into Sudanese life and culture that I simply wouldn’t have received on the same scale in Khartoum. I would certainly encourage future volunteers to consider a posting outside the capital if they have a chance, as there is an even greater need and local people will appreciate that you came to their community as a volunteer.

Like anything in life, you have to take the good with the bad, but in Sudan even a bad day is usually an interesting one. If you approach things with patience and an open mind, Sudan will reward you with wonderful friendships and a truly life-changing experience.

Jonathan Hargreaves from the UK: “Where does one start with such a great experience?” Of course, Sudan’s many qualities - such as the innate friendliness of the people, (localized) peace and quiet, and lots of good food and drink - so differ from the otherwise accepted external image as to now be clichés, especially among those with prior knowledge of the SVP. For that I must apologise for re-treading the same old ground. And yet to me the simple and not so simple acts of generosity by Sudanese, both rich or poor, Arab or African, never failed to pleasantly shock, even at the point of compromising my closely-guarded Anglo-Saxon-abroad personal space.

Some memories nonetheless stand out. But, whether getting driven home at 4am from a party in a cement mixer, relying on local ingenuity amid

Khawadja incompetence to fix a flat while roadtripping to Kassala, or enjoying the privilege of sharing Eid al-Adha with Rami in his home village - where street corners would seemingly reveal scenes not out of place in a Tayeb Salih novel - I had a uniquely superb time.

I hope too that some of my students at central Khartoum’s Comboni College conversely enjoyed the experience of having a bumbling, disorganised non-teacher attempt to teach them some of what he himself learnt over the years. Of that I am not so sure - partly because I was not able to stay as long with SVP (just three months) as I would have initially liked to. On the other hand, I think the impromptu English poetry classes, mass debates, or lessons on famous assassinations in global history were at least refreshing, and ‘horizon-broadening’; in my opinion the foremost element of the SVP ethos.”



At Karima Kate McIntosh

Kathryn Bruce from Scotland writes: “I cannot help missing the buzz of downtown souq arabi. I loved the fact that all essentials were within reach, the mixture of sweet and sickly smells, the constant throb of vehicles and people and picking your way between street wares and prayer mats where men worship throughout the day. I am very glad I was able to live there, albeit very briefly, as I felt it gave me a better understanding of Khartoum’s heart.

Trying to teach someone from scratch when you cannot speak their language is immensely difficult but with the use of some photos and a lot of mime acting, I was able to communicate some basics. We managed to learn numbers, the pronunciation of the alphabet and even draw basic family trees (I spent a lot of time pointing to a picture of Kris, my brother, saying ‘I have one brother’). It was brilliant to see how delighted she was when she managed to tell me ‘I have four brothers and three sisters’, even getting the plural correct! I shall ensure I have far more photos and prompts for our next lesson as she is incredibly eager to learn and I would love to help her if I can.

This afternoon I had a fantastic conversation class regarding crime and punishment. I was a little bit nervous, recognising that the subject could be controversial but the resulting discussion was fascinating. Using a role play one of the other volunteers prepared and kindly shared with me, I asked the class to consider the feelings and potential actions of various people at a crime scene, including the victim, the witnesses, the perpetrator and the perpetrator’s family. The following discussion was both thoughtful and insightful and we were able to discuss a range of emotions and terms that really tested the students’ vocabulary. This class continually impresses me and I think they are really enjoying stretching their knowledge, with students often staying behind to ask further questions and continuing to build on what they have learnt.

After class, rather than go home and eat in Burri as usual, I asked my second year class where I could get good, Sudanese breakfast food nearby and they pointed me in the direction of the tarpaulin covered restaurant area next to the university. I had walked through this place a number of times and found it crowded with a nice, busy atmosphere but had been a bit overwhelmed by the absence of menus so had not eaten there. Just as I stood pondering what to order, a group of my first year students invited me to have breakfast with them. So it was I had my first experience of ‘Bush’. Served in a large silver bowl it comprised lots of ripped up bread with fuul, hard cheese and some sort of leaves mixed through it. As was to be expected, it was eaten family style with the right hand and my students

seem amused to find I really enjoyed it. As I ate (messily I might add!) I was quizzed about Scotland and its cultures, food and ways of life. I answered the questions between large mouthfuls of food and really enjoyed sitting and chatting with them.

Another really wonderful day was spent it with my adult conversation class venturing out of the city centre on a trip. Our destination was Jebel Oulia – the site of a huge dam, over 70 years old and, according to the signage, built by a Glasgow engineering company. My class have been promising a trip for weeks and this did not disappoint. The large expanse of water glittered in the sunshine, dotted with small boats from which men bathed and fished. There were fresh fish sellers galore – raw and cooked, allowing you to literally pick your fish, watch it be gutted and then fried (the children could clean them ready for cooking in seconds) – and people selling sweet treats for children and adults alike. A large expanse of sparse woodland to one side of the dam provides a popular picnic destination for families and a venue for people coming to pray.

Simone de Monerri from Germany & England writes:

Christmas in Sudan was a strange affair. It was my first time in 25 years to spend this holiday away from my family, but I had made this sacrifice when choosing to come to Sudan to teach the winter semester at the university.

I had never before thought of having a 'hot' Christmas, but am always game to try everything once.

I would at least escape the run up to Christmas, which is quaint and traditional in my home of Germany, and brash and in-your-face in my country of origin, England. It seems to get worse every year, with shops even beginning their Christmas advertising campaigns at the end of August! The only place that Christmas was present in Sudan was in the few ex-pat shops and restaurants, who saw the chance to make an extra buck, as well as in international friends' houses.

The day before Christmas Eve, my Swedish housemate Caroline's parents flew in from Austria, bearing yuletide gifts. This was my first real taste of home, for they had brought spicy ginger biscuits or Lebkuchen with them, their smell stirred a well of memories within me. They had also brought with them luxuries such as cheese, smoked salmon and dark chocolate.

We planned a small gathering for Christmas Day, and set about turning our flat into a winter wonderland and creating a Christmas feast. We found candles and tinsel, and I fashioned some lanterns and an angel out of paper and plastic bottles. Caroline made red and white paper hearts; traditional Swedish Christmas decorations. One friend brought with him an artificial Christmas tree, which was the pièce de resistance. We made canapés of smoked salmon and goat's cheese on crackers and cheddar cheese on digestive biscuits, arranged bowls of fruit nuts, and stuck cloves into the oranges to give off a spicy scent.

The one obstacle we faced was what to do with the Gloegg, the special mulled wine spices. We had not managed to locate any wine, and decided to experiment with an alcohol-free version using hibiscus tea or karkaday, whose taste, when brewed for a long time, is like blackcurrant

juice. This was surprisingly successful.

Everyone brought something with them and we ended up with a spread of international dishes, from baklava to fried fish and pizza. The main meal, an Asian stew of chickpeas, tomatoes and mango, also went down well. I had baked the Scottish butter biscuit shortbread for the occasion, which was a bit with our Sudanese friends, who told me there was a very similar biscuit popular across the Middle East.

This became an exchange of cultures with many different Christmases in the same room bringing Christmas to Sudan and giving our Sudanese friends a taste of the big European holiday.



Three girls - Kathryn Bruce

Robert Dvořák from Czech Republic:

Eid al Adha – one of the most important Muslim holidays - was approaching. All the hotel guests had already left to stay with their families or friends, even the employees were packing their bags. Only I didn't have a place to go. There was no other guesthouse within hundreds of kilometres, and no transport . . .

'I'm leaving – like everybody else - and the hotel will be closed until next week,' the owner confirmed. Then quickly added: 'But you're from far away, so if you want, just stay. Here – take the keys.' - a more than generous offer from someone who had only known me a few days.

My earlier backpacking trip to Sudan had not lasted more than a month. But I could still remember the omnipresent hospitality, friendly atmosphere as well as the unique landscape, and so it did not take much to make me fill in the SVP application to volunteer!

For my placement as a volunteer I asked for Delgo, a small town in the far north, where everyone knows everyone, the donkeys are still parked in front of the houses and nothing has to be locked.

Most of my working hours are filled with teaching at the local college and other schools in the region.

Accommodation in an old traditional house among the palm groves is an experience in itself. I am staying with three Sudanese colleagues, who have become great friends, always ready to help - especially with my Arabic. However much the foreign visitor tortures Arabic grammar, in Sudan his linguistic attempts are always welcomed with gratitude and enthusiasm. Meanwhile local textbooks keep a student's motivation up thanks to absurd dialogues and model sentences like: 'Mum, what's the

long thing over there? - That's a giraffe, my boy."

When living in a small town, it's easy to join in the usual activities of neighbours and friends – work in the field, baking bread, fishing in the Nile. Maybe because of the simple living conditions, many Sudanese appreciate food more than a sleep. It can happen that with all in the house asleep, suddenly at midnight the neighbour bangs on the door and announces the serving of late refreshments. In Europe he would not encounter such a positive response . . .

Many afternoons and evenings are filled with festivities and celebrations, the most frequent occasion for a party being a wedding.

Weddings in the capital tend to be show off events - with expensive cars, halls filled with tables, a music band and only a small space for dancing. Many guests take their seats and spend the time watching or chatting.

Village parties require a more active approach. Often no tables and chairs are available, all the guests must go and dance - whether they want to or not.

And celebrating Christmas in Africa? Under the moonlight the sand's colour turns white

and the countryside resembles a snow covered plane. Then you just have to find the right palm tree and decorate it.

Whenever there's a chance, it's easy to take a backpack and set out for a trip. I have always felt safe and welcome in big towns as well as small villages. The only moment when my friends and I had to walk around armed with sticks was during hikes in the Kassala mountains. Some of the local baboons with sharp teeth are all too often ready to taste part of your supplies.

Sudan, until recently largest African state, remains an extraordinary mosaic of cultures and landscapes. 'How many countries are all these pictures from?' some of my friends asked when I showed them photos from Sudan.

One day you can ride camels in the desert, stroll in the shade of palm trees along the Nile, a little later dive in the Red Sea or trace wild animals in the savannah of Dinder National Park.

And - where else in the world are visitors allowed to camp near the pyramids or wander around ancient temples at midnight?

Because of the people's friendliness and unforgettable landscapes the right question for most SVP volunteers is not whether they will miss Sudan or not after they leave. The question is how soon they will start missing it. And start planning to come back . . .

Polly Steele from the UK:

"A long distance bus journey in Sudan is usually accompanied by the soundtrack of a recorded concert of a Sudanese singer, a religious lecture or the same inexplicable comedy show where one man speaks in a squeaky voice. I and two other volunteers found ourselves on such a bus headed to the town of Kassala on the Eastern border of Sudan. On the way, the bus stopped at a service station, which consisted of a small cafeteria and

a couple of stalls. As it was our first trip on our own out of Khartoum we had no idea how long the bus would stop for or how long it would be until our next stop. Not having eaten for a long time Marthe and I eagerly ordered some Fuul and Tamiya. As soon as we had taken the first bite we heard loud musical tune of the bus calling us back to resume the journey across sparse desert landscape. This was not a big problem, we were sure to receive some honey flavoured cake on the bus and our next meal would probably not be long . . . yet Marthe and I were sad to leave our fresh bowl of fuul.

Back on the bus we muttered under our breath about the unfairness of the world! Why had we been allowed one bite? It was almost worse than none. Time passed, the bus remained stationary and we got more annoyed- we could have eaten our lunch! In a moment of hunger induced anger I jog up the bus aisle and out of the bus to the cafeteria where I scan the room for our abandoned fuul and bread. The waiters catch my look of disappointment as I realise they have cleared it all away and embarrassed that they caught me dashing back for a bowl of fuul, I run back to the bus,

just as it is about to leave.

None of this was particularly remarkable and could have happened anywhere else in the world but what happened next typifies the many times I have been struck by people's concern and willingness to bend over backwards for you in Sudan. As the bus was pulling out of the stop, a waiter came running out and waving, running in front of the bus. As he climbed in and scanned the seats of the bus

grinning, we realise he is heading for us with four fresh fuul sandwiches.

Kassala was great; we spent a day climbing the mountain and met the people living in the village on the other side. One evening we met some men riding their horses in the dry river basin (al Gash) and they let us ride their horses for a little while along the river basin.



Sufi Dancing Simone de Monerri

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

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 ask us for a standing order form

Sudan Volunteer Programme

34 Estelle Road, London, NW3 2JY
tel +44 7910 940 819 david@svp-uk.com

www.svp-uk.com