

S·V·P News 22

Sudan Volunteer Programme Registered Charity No 1062155 March 2019

English language skills are ever more necessary for those wanting work in Sudan or abroad. SVP has continued its policy of placing volunteers outside the capital. We need volunteers who can stay in Sudan for six months or more.

the Nile near

Dongola

photo by

Daniel Starkov



a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the twenty second annual issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of extracts of stories from our volunteers in this 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:

**Damian Kruz Samuel Ginty Jacqueline Merrill Chloe Brooks Jack Garnett Sara
Katona Amena Elbadawi Daniel Starkov Henry Bishop Wright Aliza Earnshaw
Alan Earnshaw Sam Coutts Andrew Napier Sandra Ivanov Casey Edgarian Joseph
Owens Daniel Coleman Peter John Payne-Seeley Madison Bradt Julie Seidman
Vladyslav Bilan Cody Whitehouse Calumn Wilson**

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

Ahmed Bedri

Sam Coutts / UK

I began my teaching at Omdurman Ahlia University. My first impression was how genuinely excited both students and teachers were to have a native-speaker working there. I was incredibly lucky to have an excellent support network in Mohamed Elhafiz and Farah Dawaina. They helped so much from day one - offering teaching advice, mentoring and including me in numerous social outings.

My role was to coach the first-year students by going over everything they had learned in their lectures to make sure they could keep up with their course. What I wasn't prepared for was the sheer mixture in ability level, ranging from those who couldn't write their name in English to some who were fluent. Organising students and finding innovative ways to explain English language concepts with little Arabic was a daily challenge and incredibly rewarding to see how much everyone progressed through the year.

Laura Attwell / Australia

Before coming to Sudan to teach English I had studied Hausa at SOAS in London. The heart of Hausaland is the region between northern Nigeria and southern Niger, but there are Hausa communities spread throughout West Africa and in Sudan, and Hausa is a lingua franca in West Africa, with 60 m speakers worldwide. The Hausas have been in Sudan for over 400 years, some settled in Sudan after they stopped there on their way to Mecca for the Hajj, others went for trade, and the British employed many to work in agriculture in the Gezira, and there is still a large Hausa community there today.

Shortly after arriving in Sudan the SVP volunteer coordinator put me in touch with Idris Abdullah, who became my 'Malam', Hausa for teacher. Idris introduced me to his family and friends and took me on walks round Khartoum and Mayo during our Hausa lessons. I learned vocabulary on my own and then used the lessons to practise spoken Hausa with Idris and the people he introduced me to. There were many instances where we got stopped on the street by Hausa people who heard us talking and wanted to join in the conversation! This gave me the opportunity to learn how to communicate in everyday Hausa as opposed to the formal, old-fashioned Hausa that I had been learning before.

Sandra Ivanov / New Zealand

Much Sudanese dancing is characterised by movement of the shoulders, clicking one's fingers to the rhythm of the music, with basic footwork to keep the timing. There are different types of dances in each tribal group across Sudan, and also special dances performed at weddings and ceremonies. I was introduced to the Ratina Crew, a pioneering group of breakdancers in Omdurman, promoting hip-hop dance and culture in Sudan.

News spread that a dancer from New Zealand was in town, and I was given the opportunity to teach at a 'zumba' studio for girls and women - teaching hip-hop, salsa, and even Bollywood. During my last three months, I had a regular

following of students step into the comforts of four walls to express themselves in a way they were unable to in their everyday lives. I challenged them with new ways of moving their bodies, new music, and hoped to give them a sense of freedom to further explore their identity. For me, the most satisfying thing was transforming the shy and bashful ladies at the start of each lesson into confident performers, who ended up being surprised by their own abilities, walking out of the studio with their heads held high and smiles on their faces. I was able to experience Sudanese life and culture in a unique way that I will always treasure.



Idris Abdullah - Laura's Hausa teacher

John Payne-Seeley / UK

I walked down the streets of the town of Atbara that was to be my home for the next eight months. I felt like I'd just stepped onto the surface of another planet. Everything, absolutely everything, was different a crazy fusion of traditional and modern. I saw donkey-drawn carts sharing the mud roads with Chinese battery-driven motorcycles - shepherds navigating their flocks down main roads with mobiles stuck to their ears, traditional, mud-brick buildings shoulder to shoulder with modern reinforced-concrete hotels and hospitals.

As the first time I've ever lived abroad and taught English abroad, I'm halfway through my eight-month stint teaching English at the Faculty of Education at the Nile Valley University. The first months from October were busy. I was charged with teaching first-year undergraduates 'English Proficiency' and 'English for Biology and Chemistry' and second-year undergraduates 'Advanced Composition'. I specially enjoyed overseeing the English Club, chatting to them outside the classroom, and visiting them in their homes when the opportunity arose.

Calumn Wilson / Scotland

On this day we found ourselves exploring the wonders of Meroë, the ancient capital of the Kush. As the endless desert seemed to consume all in its path, Meroë appeared like an oasis in the distance, defining an otherwise barren landscape with magnificently intact pyramids that rose out of the desert and once drew all from far and near.

We walked half a kilometer into the desert we climbed one of the numerous dunes, finding ourselves alone and unbothered by the masses of tourists that would flock to such a site anywhere else. The weather was cool and a gentle breeze swept the foot of the mountain. These Nubian pyramids had a distinctive black sand texture, and filled the entirety of the hill. Across a short valley another set of pyramids stood. In total over 200 pyramids of varying size existed in such close proximity. Inside we witnessed hieroglyphics depicting any manner of ancient custom or religion. Dotted on the hillside every pyramid contained a different story, and while unable to comprehend the significance of these stories, we were transfixed by the exceptional detail that accompanied every carving.



Tea by the Nile at Dongola - photo Sam Coutts

Daniel Coleman / Italy & Ireland

The sun approached its zenith as we waited in the dusty petrol station for a passing bus. 4 hours north was Wadi Halfa, Lake Aswan and beyond it, Egypt. 5 hours south would bring us back to Dongola, the capital of the Northern State and my home in Sudan. We were leaving behind Abri, a settlement on the banks of the fertile River Nile which is well-known for its large population of crocodiles.

The verdant ranks of the palm trees give the entire scene a sense of unreality, a startling incongruity with the waterless desert, which remains within sight. The pencil-straight asphalt roads leads back into the rocks, which seem to converge over our heads, darkening the sky, like a dense forest. We pass the gold mining town of Absara, where we spent a night. Metal detectors aloft, their voices indistinct and fading behind us, the miners shout a greeting. We wave back and watch their slanted figures recede into the hazy, heat choked distance. We stop for tea at a desert outpost. The warm tea is restorative and we sink into the rope beds scattered around the kettle, a welcome relief from the hard back of the pick up. We stare at our oil stained trousers ruefully. The driver laughs and hands us an empty sack to lean on and keep our clothing away from the petrol sloshing around the back. We climb back on, then promptly back off, as the vehicle requires a push in order to encourage it to start. The engine responds and we leap on. We pass the ruins of Egyptian temples, including one erected by Amenhotep who searched for answers in the sky and who reputedly was the founder of the world's first monotheistic religion, a Sun God cult. The precarious slopes and flat top of the giant Jebel we clambered up days before looms before us. Night falls and constellations emerge, chasing each other across the darkened sky, piercing the dark fabric of the universe.

Daniel Starkov / Russia

The plan was simple: we take a bus from Dongola to Al Ghabah, a village across the river from Dongola Ajuz (or Old Dongola), then cross the river by boat, walk around the ruins, go back and catch a bus to Dongola to be home by night.

The adventure starts when the bus drops us in the middle of the desert saying we've reached our destination. The sandstorm is strong, and nothing can be seen on either side of the highway, only sand. Which way do we go, where is Al Ghabah and how do we get on the boat to get to the Old Dongola? While we're trying to figure out the answers, a boy of around 12, who was the only one to get off the same bus as we did, approaches us, and tells

us to follow, which we gladly do. A mist of dust is all around, so I keep wondering how the boy knows his way at all and doesn't seem to mind the sand getting in his eyes. It's important to mention here that it's another miracle of Sudan: you might not know where to go or what to do; there will always be a friendly stranger to help you out of trouble.

In some 10 minutes of walking, we get into a village. There's no rush trying to figure out what is our next step, we simply follow the boy who, of course, brings us to a food place. We get a huge bowl of ful, and start to eat. Being the only foreigners in the village, we attract a lot of attention. People get to the doorstep and stare at us for a few minutes, and once we start speaking Arabic to them, they explode with warmth of excitement, and greetings. Someone sees me take a picture and feels curious about the camera, so I briefly explain how it works and hand it over so it goes around with some guy trying to capture all of his friends for my good memory. And that's another magical thing about Sudan – you trust the people around you.

While my camera is taking a tour, the boy lights up a cigarette. He's already paid for our food despite all our remonstrances, and we're having a small talk. He seems proud of his newly acquired foreign friends but, most of all, acts very adult and independent. We finish the tea, my camera comes back to me, so it's time to go. The people I've met and the friends I've made, the places I've been to and the stories I've lived – all of it makes me miss Al Sudan greatly and reminisce about it almost every day, in glimpses, flashes and moments, to stay with me forever.

Eleanor Gardner / UK

I had been invited to the wedding by a Sudanese friend and my new neighbours were her young, bejewelled cousins with elegant, long dresses and her mother and aunts shimmering in beautiful wedding 'tobes' - long, colourful fabrics criss-crossing the body and especially popular among married women. There are three parts to a Sudanese wedding, over two days. Firstly, the contract-signing at the mosque by the groom and witnesses. Secondly, the traditional 'jertig' where only women and the groom are present. The bride wears red and dances for her husband. I'd been invited to the main event, the huge Western-style reception.

The bride arrived at the top of a fairy-tale staircase in a stunning, white dress, led down by her father. We watched on live-action screens, all mesmerised as she met with her new husband under a rose-laden archway. Together they took their seats on a glitzy chaise-longue and greeted delighted relatives with hugs and



Ancient ruins in Nubia photo Daniel Starkov

kisses and gifts.

After eating, my friends and I joined many of the bride's friends at the centre of the excitement and danced with a mixture of clicking fingers and clapping to high-decibel Ed Sheeran 'Shape of You'. As the music turned to the Sudanese pop song 'Habibi Taali (Habibi Come)' the atmosphere racked up a notch and the groom was crowd-surfing the room.

Madison Bradt /Canada

The bus to Sinkat from Port Sudan had been short, but the hour early and I surveyed the busy bus station with cloudy, half open eyes. I jumped off the bus and the smell of exhaust roused me enough to ask for directions to the main souk. Quickly discarding the idea of walking, I flagged down a rickshaw. We bumped along the road, past a brilliant mosque and a few beautifully painted doors. We arrived in the souk, and after clumsily questioning a chain of affably confused people in broken Arabic, I managed to find what I'd been looking for: a ride to Erkawit, old hill station of the British colonial elite and a place about which I knew nothing beyond what a paragraph in the Bradt guide *[no relation]* could tell. I sought out tea and tamiya (falafel) for breakfast, and had time to chat to a few school boys. They were interested in the foreigner, and pleased to try out their stock of English phrases. In short order, I was informed of their names, favourite football teams and the number of brothers that they had. When it came time to depart, I found that, as is often the case in Sudan, my bill had been taken care of by another patron. He brushed off my thanks and gallantly helped me into the back of the pickup, extracting a promise that I would come find him if I were ever back in Sinkat. The boxsi had an array of seating choices, but I was waved towards a bag of animal feed by one of the other passengers. I straddled it, one hand clutching the side of the truck for balance, the other gripping my backpack. It was about ten minutes on the paved road towards Khartoum before we turned off. On either

side of the road, grey dust and desert, littered with sparse scrub and interspersed with small villages extended to into the low, rocky knolls on the horizon. Giant cactus that can grow as large as a tree and their sudden appearance made the transition into green all the more startling. There were a few people; women in bright, single colour tobles walking next to the road and a few boys chasing after glossy coated goats.

Eventually, the boxsi rattled to a stop next to a large mosque. I hopped out of the back and came around to the driver's side window. Erkawit," the driver told me. He drove away, and I stood in the middle of the road, trying to take in the green. But this was something else, a vast carpet of green that rumbled and curved into hills—a horizon where earth and sky met as green and blue. It was somehow shocking, disorienting. And it was cold. Not just the cold of the absent sun in the desert night, but damp, settle into your bones and stay, cold.

There was mist in the morning (the mist is what nourishes the plant life in the area, which has adapted to collect it). It was shocking, after months of heat and dust.

I spent a day there, had tea with the town's resident English teacher and his students, walked between village and wandered through narrow valleys, over the low, sloping hills. Tiny purple flowers sprang up between the rocks, and grass grew casually—everywhere, just everywhere. I sat and watched some of the best fed camels

I've ever seen graze; their sandy fur alien, unnecessary here. I couldn't stay still too long though, because it was genuinely cold. Cold enough that I wrapped myself in my extra scarf and pulled on a second shirt and bought coffee to keep my hands warm. It was made spice with ginger, a syrupy with the half inch of sugar in the bottom that I stirred in as extra girding against the cold. I savoured the weather, the raw cut of the wind, the ache of the damp creeping into my bones, but by the time the sun started to go down, longing for the blanket of warm dust in Sinkat.

SVP needs your help

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 better, ask us for a banker's order form. No wages or rent are paid in the UK.

Sudan Volunteer Programme

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