

S·V·P News 2

Sudan Volunteer Programme

Registered Charity No 1062155

October 1998

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IN July 1998 twenty SVP volunteers assembled at Heathrow and set off for Khartoum. This was SVP's second summer of operation. Ahmed Karrar had accepted the arduous task of being coordinator in Khartoum, responsible for meeting the plane, getting everybody to the hostel accommodation, answering all sorts of questions and seeing that the schools and colleges were ready to receive them. It turned out to be a demanding job for Ahmed and also for his wife Dr Amani Osman and the other members of SVP Khartoum. Our thanks go to all who helped and gave so much hospitality to our volunteers.

Again there is much to be learnt from the experience of this programme which will be relevant to future plans for SVP. But as before we can be sure that there is a great demand for our volunteers at all levels of education, and that SVP has many friends in Sudan eager to help and support our expansion and improvement in service and expertise.

Emily Pegg
with a
group of
happy pupils



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A note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the second issue of SVP News. It contains extracts from a few of the many reports received from our volunteers in this year's summer programme. We hope that these may encourage others to join us in this really worthwhile work, not only by their accounts of their teaching but also stories of their experience of meeting and travelling with Sudanese. SVP thanks all the volunteers who took part: Morwenna Banham, Christine Chappell, Sarah Cohen, Avery Davis-Roberts, Caroline Driver, Alexandra Marsland, Gopali Mulji, Emily Pegg, Amy Scott, Wendy Young, Paul Bartlett, Adam Dawlatly, Matthew Green, Craig Hart, Stewart How, Hugh Riddell, Ashish Shah, Richard Sherrington, Simon Whittaker, Edmund Wyatt.

SVP could not exist without its members and supporters. If you would like to help or keep in touch please become a member and come to our meetings and receptions. There is more about SVP on the back page.

Ahmed Bedri

A Trip North by Hugh Riddell

At a quarter to six on a Thursday morning I found myself in Khartoum North bus station. Small as it is, the pressures in Sudan's capital city can bring one to the edge, so my plan to hit the road North to visit some obscure pyramids had become a matter of some excitement. For me anyway. My Sudanese friends could think of nothing worse than bouncing for four hours on a converted cattle transporter to find a pile of stones surrounded by sand and when put like that it does sound a little perverse. Nevertheless here I am at a quarter to six drinking tea with a soldier who says he comes from somewhere near there and who is swearing on his life these pyramids long predate all that pharaoh nonsense. He insists on settling the bill and I am led to the 'right' bus and then to a different bus where I am introduced. Now that all my fellow passengers are discussing my itinerary amongst themselves the bus becomes a hive of information. Any plans I had made are collectively scrapped while theories as to the whereabouts of the pyramids fly thick and fast. The back row advises a change at Kabushiya, the driver assures me of the back row's stupidity and my neighbour smiles and mutters the Sudanese answer to everything: "Mafi mushkilla".

Five miles into the desert a sandstorm falls out of the sky. Although a normal Khartoum fixture I was not ready for the desert 'haboob'. A violent crosswind leaps through the empty windowframes and deposits its cargo of dust

on everything. My neighbours draw their headscarves over impassive faces and offer sympathetic shrugs while I splutter like a newborn rubbing my eyes with the back of caked fists. My alarm grows as I register that our driver is completely unfazed by the now near zero visibility. I sit up alert to every jolt or lurch exasperated by the serenity of my neighbours who have brilliantly become their galabias. Can't we stop and wait for it to blow over? Why won't he settle for second place behind the donkey cart? And what am I doing here anyway? Occasionally I catch a glimpse of the desert stretching far away and I remember how Osman had laughed at my plan to look for something beautiful in the desert. The Sudanese have no illusions about their country.

Four hours later and the bus has stopped. I assume we have broken down for this is evidently not a bus stop. I sit patiently with the others until I realise the others are waiting for me to get off. I point into the sandstorm: "pyramid?" The Sudanese are confused: can this khawaja still intend to get off a perfectly decent bus to muddle about in the sand all day? As if it was the most normal thing in the world, I sling my rucksack and climb down giving my fellow travellers my stiffest upper lip and heartiest wave. Of course this is what I intended!

The road is receding seemingly without my moving. Sand is creeping across the tops of my sandals and whipping my eyes. I stand motionless, facing the way the driver pointed as he drove off. Yes, I'm sure it was that way.. I feel like a clown with my bread and my water filter cup: as if they can save me now, I sigh, and am considering a melodramatic posture of hopelessness in the sand. Suddenly I confront a man digging the sand outside his square house. For a moment both think the other mad: why does this man walk in the desert like a camel? But why does that man dig in the sand? Having no time to clear up such problems I set to waving all arms and describing pyramids in the air endlessly repeating the name of a 'nearby town' in such a way as to assure him of my insanity. Overjoyed I see recognition light his face and before long he has set me on a distinguishable path.

The minaret of Beggarawiya was a heavenly sight. It beckons me towards a town of long low brown walls beyond which rise the palms of the Nile. Nothing stirs. A wandering goat turns its floppy ears to me then joins a tethered donkey in some shade. But then I hear the unmistakable screams of break time. There are two



The pyramids near Beggarawiya

schools in this town: one for boys and one for girls. I have stumbled straight into the latter. The courtyard evacuates in terror, skipping ropes and arguments are dropped, the school scuttles for shelter and peers back at a bemused white man. However, initial confusion soon gives way to ordered hospitality. Guides are mustered, food and water presented and a bed is

offered. Children reappear, gather and smile and I am loaded onto a donkey cart bound for my precious pyramids, thanking God for Sudanese generosity.

After half an hour of wishing I didn't have such a bony bum my two young guides clasp my arm and point at some shadowy forms in the distance. Gradually as many as ten stone structures distinguish themselves from the dust, looming from a proud desert ledge. Small and very alone, discovered and forgotten many times over, the pyramids impress by their strangeness. Together we climb one as a sign that our mission is complete and successful.

My day careers on, taking me almost by accident to Shendi; where a man presents me with the keys of his house and then returns to work; where, buying a coke, I am swept up by a passing mob of students and taken home for a huge meal prepared by invisible mothers and aunts who reveal themselves only as I depart; and where at sunset I am shown the favourite cadaver of a medical student before a final tea at the onion market on the river's bank. I slink 'home' to find my host already snoring in the courtyard. Soon I am snoring with him wondering who on earth he is.

