

S·V·P News 12

Sudan Volunteer Programme

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The global slow down has so far had little effect in Sudan, but English language skills have become ever more necessary for those wanting jobs. Growing traffic congestion in Khartoum has increased the urgency for placing our volunteers out of town. SVP needs volunteers who can stay in Sudan for six months or more.



Sufi
dancing
on Friday
Hamed el
Nil
Omdurman

*photo
by Henry
Donati*

a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the twelfth annual issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of extracts of stories from our volunteers in last year's programme. We hope others will be encouraged to join us in this worthwhile and necessary work. 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:
Christopher Kidner Tim Davies Christian Sandjord Tom Nickalls Joanna Zaliki Knowles
Mariam Abdurahman Ali Elena Tuparevska Andy Watkins Edward Jackson Henry Donati
Katherine Knight Sam Marrero Leanne Smith Jeff Benson Pat Rousset Serge Rousset Harriet
Cross Charlotte Stemmer Nicky McCreesh James Ryan Linda Palmer Tom Files Amelia Charles
Zoë Cormack Fatma Mahmoud Kholood Khair Don Sloan.

Dear SVP members - we depend on your continuing support.

Ahmed Bedri

A Race Meeting In Nyala, South Darfur by Joanna Knowles
While living and working in South Darfur in 2008, I had the honour and the pleasure of being invited to attend a Horse Racing Meeting. The official invitation was elaborate and beautiful and the occasion was colourful and entertaining.

The Race Track is located on the outskirts of Nyala, in an enclosed area of desert, and races are held there on alternate Fridays. I was taken to the Race Track by a Nyala University car and was invited to sit with the Press and the Governor of South Darfur.

It was a Gala Event, with a band playing military music at various intervals during the day, a large group of women dressed in bright tobies running onto the track and making the traditional trilling sound after each race, and a huge crowd of male spectators shouting and cheering with each race.

The official dais had several trophies and ribbons on it and many officials were in attendance, ready to present these to the champions. The first few events were women's and men's running races. I was amazed to see that many of these competitors were running bare footed although the track consisted of rough sand and stones!

Then they had the horse races, with the male jockeys sporting brightly coloured silk outfits and riding bare-back on beautiful horses. Finally, there were the races in which white robed men competed in the traditional Darfur races, brandishing whipping sticks.

At the conclusion of the day, the trophies and ribbons were presented to the winners of the various events and this was accompanied by speeches, cheers and music.

Tim Davies in Atbara, the city of fire and steel.

With temperatures in the 40s for around eight months of the year and the hot winds blowing in off the surrounding desert, it's certainly fiery enough. However, most of the steel these days is just sitting there, disused, a relic of days gone by when Atbara grew up out of nothing to become the hub of Sudan's dynamic rail network. Now, despite the couple of thousand workers who jump on their trademark bicycles to be in work by the time the 8 o'clock siren wails, the trains passing through Atbara in a day could be counted on the fingers of two hands, maybe even one.

For older generations, there is a real sense of nostalgia – for days when the rolling stock still rolled and the workshops were a hive of activity, for days when the power of Atbara's railway workers' unions made governments sit up and take notice...even sometimes for the colonial era, when the British imposed strict discipline, but when honest toil was rewarded and the best rose to the top.

Though much of its past glory has faded, Atbara's strategic importance as a major town between Khartoum and Port Sudan, as well as being the gateway to a huge new hydroelectric dam project, mean it's far from dying. And its rapidly-expanding Nile Valley University was where I spent a year teaching, based mainly in the medical faculty – a leafy compound originally built as a colonial secondary school.

Teaching was a bit of a battle against the over-filled timetable, large class-sizes and simply the need to keep thinking up interesting lessons for mixed-ability classes. And then of course there was

the fact that the students had welcomed me so warmly and bought me breakfast so many times that I didn't have the heart to be strict when it came to attendance or homework – it just seemed a bit patronizing! But as well as the lessons which fell a little flat came plenty of wonderfully enjoyable classes aided occasionally by personalities as diverse as Oprah Winfrey, Simon & Garfunkel and Cliff Richard.

It's safe to say that although I learned a lot from my role in the classroom, the real enjoyment for me was what went on after teaching had finished for the day. Directing a play in which I appeared as a cannibal wizard and coaching a talented but very nervous debating team were certainly highlights, but in all honesty the bulk of my time was spent sitting drinking tea, eating beans or



The race meeting in Nyala- photo by Joanna Knowles

just chatting. After a few months living and getting to know people in Atbara, my social life became a wonderfully relaxed chaos of cycling around visiting friends in different parts of the town. A monotonous lifestyle? Well, no, not really. There was always a new restaurant to stumble across, a new stall-owner to chat to, new Arabic vocabulary to try out. And I lose count of the times when I cycled home through the empty streets at night with a sense of satisfaction, feeling enriched, touched or simply amused by someone I'd met that day or simply having enjoyed an entertaining evening with old friends.

And when not in Atbara? Catching a glimpse of other volunteers' universities, visiting students in their home villages, sleeping under the stars in the desert, gorging sugary cakes by the Nile, going to weddings, going swimming at an embassy, staring out over the rooftops of Khartoum, attending music concerts...for a country where there really isn't much to do, it was somehow quite an action-packed year!

Chance Meetings and Invitations by Pat and Serge Rousset in Khartoum: *The people are genuinely lovely in Sudan and welcome you into their homes with a generosity that is embarrassing. We seem to have lost this generosity in the West where we tend to be suspicious of the 'foreigner'. In Sudan, it's what makes the whole experience worthwhile. One weekend, we decided to take a boat over to Tuti Island at the confluence of the Blue and White Nile. We walked through a village and across parkland until we came to a group of*

people eating under the trees. As we were hungry, we went up to the women we thought were selling food. We were given a huge bowl of fuul and tabouleh and when we asked how much it was, they laughed and said it was free. Apparently it was a large family gathering having a picnic! We were treated like royalty and enjoyed tea and conversation in the shade of the guava trees with the locals for a several hours. Coming back, we came across a young man, probably a refugee from the south, who was washing his clothes. He had dug a hole in the sand and inserted a plastic sheet to form a kind of bowl. With a piece of soap he had worked up quite a lot of suds and was scrubbing shirts, trousers and underwear. He then rinsed his clothes in the Nile and dried them on the banks. They were pristine. He didn't speak much English but invited us to have chai with him. Sometimes

English they knew. We were welcomed with open arms in the local cafes where we especially appreciated the coffee. Kassala is famous for it – Eritrean and Ethiopian coffee beans served in tiny jugs with a spoonful of ginger and filtered through palm fibre – the elixir of the gods. These cafés are great places to meet and talk to the local people.

Nickey McCreesh writes: Over the Eid holidays two other volunteers and I visited Shendi, two or three hours north of Khartoum, to attend the wedding of a friend's relative. In true Sudanese style, we were treated like royalty for the three days we spent there. On arrival in Shendi we were taken for a boat trip along the Nile, the cool breeze over the water proving a welcome relief from the afternoon heat. The boat dropped us off

some way from Shendi and a short walk through fields of sugar cane and date palms brought us into the small village where we were to spend the first night. The next day, we travelled to another village, and another set of relatives. We spent most of the day visiting countless aunts, cousins, and in-laws, repeating the same basic phrases of introduction in broken Arabic: our names, where we worked, whether we were married, and what we thought of Sudan! At each house we visited we shook numerous hands and were presented with sweets and glasses of soft drinks or sugary tea.

In the evening we attended the wedding party itself, which was held in a large open area in the centre of the village. On two sides men in identical white galabia sat talking. The other two sides were a sea of colour and movement: women in

rainbow coloured tobés and sequins, and impatient children. As the evening progressed more and more people got up to dance, clicking their fingers and clapping their hands. We joined them, and were soon surrounded by a crowd of young girls, eager to dance with the foreigners. The bride and groom arrived half way through the party and we looked up uneasily as they were welcomed by a haphazard lighting of fireworks.

On the final morning of our trip, after another round of house calls to say goodbye, we set off for the pyramids at Bedraweya. Rising out of an expanse of smooth orange sand, the cluster of pyramids and engraved rooms are a photographer's paradise. We explored the site for as long as we could before, driven off by the scorching sun and burning sand, heading back home to Khartoum.

Zoë Cormack writes: *I arrived in Dalanj [also spelt Dilling-ed] just under two weeks ago. I already have an office and I have starting teaching the final year students and running evening classes for staff. So far my classes have been good humoured and energetic. The students here are so interesting to talk to and we regularly go for tea to tell jokes, swap stories about Sudan and England and they help me to learn Arabic. Despite being nervous about teaching I find I am enjoying it.*

While I am not fulfilling my commitments at the University I have been exploring this bustling and cosmopolitan town. On Mondays



The Café at Jebel Totil photo by Serge Rousset

Sudanese generosity can seem unsettling to us Westerners. One day we were on our way back from a rather disappointing walk along the White Nile. It was very hot and dusty and we were not relishing the walk to the bus station in central Khartoum. A car stopped and the driver asked if he could give us a lift somewhere. Trying not to sound too overjoyed, we accepted his kind offer and as we were chatting, we asked about the fishing boats we had seen on the Nile. He immediately made a detour to show us the fish market on the other side of the Nile. He then proposed to take us home – completely the opposite direction to where he was originally going. Despite our protests he insisted and as we drove through a small restaurant area he stopped and invited us to eat with him! He seemed so disappointed at our refusal that we thought we had broken some social code, so we eventually accepted. We ordered fish, which was delicious, but not sufficient as far as our friend was concerned, so we ended up with half a grilled chicken each AND a crème caramel for desert. It was the biggest meal we had eaten for a long time. He then took us right back to our house, bid his farewell and disappeared into the night! There is no hidden agenda with these people. It is their duty to make the stranger feel welcomed. In Kassala where we went for a few days' holiday, we met one of my students in the souk who took us to his father's restaurant. We were juiced and dined like royalty. He also accompanied us (and paid for a taxi) to the local beauty spot to watch the sunset from a small jebel. We ended up like the Pied Piper with an army of kids following us down the mountain, trying to practise what little

and Thursdays the market explodes with activity, as these are the days when people from the surrounding Nuba Mountains come to buy and sell a variety of crops and livestock. It is a fascinating mix of people and the drama of it is exhilarating. I have already met many people who have offered to take me to visit the villages and I can't wait to take up one of these opportunities. I'm really overwhelmed by how much there is to discover and the six months I will spend here look set to be very busy."

James Ryan writes: My Sudanese experience: Having spent four hours on a coach from Khartoum staring into the vast and mesmerizing Sudanese desert, I arrived in Atbara on a typically hot October afternoon. Being energetically welcomed at the university by staff and students, I instantly became aware of the extent of Sudanese hospitality. While Atbara is famous for its now decaying railway infrastructure and as the site for one of Kitchener's infamous battles, it is the kindness of its people that will always remain in my mind. The daily routine of having breakfast with students beside the Nile, tucking into a scrumptious bowl of Bush or Fuul, is always a great start to the day. Although I sometimes try to pay for breakfast, my friends consistently oppose such attempts. The hours spent chatting with students by the river has undoubtedly been as valuable as the lectures in both improving my Arabic and improving their English. When not at university, my friends have ensured I've got to see a lot of the beautiful countryside surrounding Atbara. One of the many memorable day trips was a visit to the small village of Alfatlab. Having made the short boat journey across the Nile accompanied by my friend Hassan and the goats and sheep making the same trip, we walked through the green countryside and arrived at a school in the centre of the village. We were instantly invited in and shared in yet another delicious breakfast. I could not get away with just visiting and chalk was promptly placed in my hand as I was directed straight to the classroom. Although the eleven and twelve year olds initially seemed shy and reluctant to answer my questions, it soon became apparent that their standard of English was very good and they had a wonderful sense of humour. The debate over which Khartoum football team is superior was particularly fierce. Returning from the school later in the afternoon having been vigorously thanked for my short lesson, I realized the extent to which Sudanese kindness and hospitality extends out of town and into remote villages like Alfatlab.

I've had many other enjoyable trips around the Atbara area and a New Year's picnic with about ten of my friends was another highlight. Although I was initially unsure why one of my friends was dragging a sheep down the road as we walked to our location, I soon realized having asked about our plans for lunch! After consuming the poor unsuspecting sheep, we were lucky enough to meet people celebrating a wedding party in the local village and we joined in with the exhausting singing and dancing. The fact I had no idea what we were singing about, didn't stop me from being placed right in the middle of the dancing circle and embarrassingly the centre of attention.

Atbara itself is just one expansive and chaotic suuq (market) and like most Sudanese towns, it's a challenge walking through town

avoiding cars, rickshaws and a full assortment of animals making their way on the dusty roads. Travelling on a rickshaw is wonderfully entertaining and the way the drivers suddenly dart off road, shows how the surrounding terrains are often smoother than the bumpy roads themselves! Despite the few infrastructural problems, it is important to note how safe I've felt in Atbara and how fond I've become of the city. Walking back from university in the evening, exchanging Sudanese greetings with any stranger I pass, I appreciate the contrast with Britain where an enthusiastic greeting of a stranger would probably provoke a look of unease. Talking to so many people around the market, I've been frequently invited to peoples' houses to drink tea and to discuss my opinions of Sudan. I



Henry & friends

always assure them to their great surprise that the Sudanese are generally friendlier than the English. This usually prompts modest denials of their generosity. Such openness of hospitality is perhaps less in a big city like Khartoum and I've certainly appreciated being out of town, fully immersed in local Sudanese culture and part of a close-knit community. I'm frequently asked if I will return to Atbara in the future and I genuinely hope I do to see all the friends I have made and again experience that Sudanese hospitality. Inshallah!

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Sudan Volunteer Programme

34 Estelle Road, London, NW3 2JY
tel 020 7485 8619 david@svp-uk.com
please make cheques payable to SVP