

S·V·P News 9

Sudan Volunteer Programme

Registered Charity No 1062155

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The Comprehensive Peace Agreement continues, and education and reconstruction now have high priority. SVP's work remains in demand and we need volunteers who can stay in Sudan for six months or more. This gives them the opportunity to learn about Sudan and its wonderfully hospitable and diverse cultures, and to acquire & practice the skills of teaching English language.



Peace in Malakal: kids playing on an abandoned tank -photo by Sharad Venkat

a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the ninth issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of reports and 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: Ken Darmanin, Donald Vassell, Angus Dalrymple-Smith, Skye Wheeler, Eleanor Bell, Tom Law, Peter Bennett, Cleo Fychan, Dan McCarey, Eve Sawyer, Stefan Andersson, Erin Fiack, Nina Rendell, Guy Sheard, Dr Joanna Knowles, Matthew Clay, Lea Zeppenfeld, Franklyn Ogilvie, Vivienne Hadlow, Martin Wilson Ward, Helen McElhinney, Christina MacLellan, Aly Verjee, Harry Sandison, Johime Lee, Sharad Venkat, Beth Oliver, Magda O'Connor, Anna Harvey.

SVP thanks our members - we depend on your continuing support.

Ahmed Bedri

from Dan & Eve McCarey

We are now in Ed Damer which is three or four hours north of Khartoum. Our plan now is to teach here for about six months and then spend some time teaching in Khartoum. The bus stop in Ed Damer is about 10 minutes from the town centre, and when we got off the bus from Khartoum, it really felt like we were at the end of the earth. The only things you could see was sand and dust. Once we got into the town we realized that it is actually pretty big, with lots of houses made of mud brick, a couple of mosques, a church, a large market, and a football stadium, 31 primary schools, several secondary schools, and a university. Apparently, the football stadium is a little controversial, because when they have games they use the floodlights, which uses up all the electricity, and means power cuts for the rest of the town. The power also seems to go out most afternoons, which for us seems worse than the nights, as no electricity means no fans. The heat is pretty incredible. In the middle of the afternoon, when it's about 45 degrees and the sandstorms start it's not hard to see what our friends warned us of. But at least it's a dramatic looking! Two days ago it rained hard for about 20 minutes and some of the sand turned to mud for a little bit. Since, then this has been the main topic of conversation. (Oh, what a big rain! The weather is now like England, yes!) This might be the only rain they get all year, so rain for them is as novel as snow in London.



Ed Damer - photo by Dan & Eve McCarey

We've started teaching at the primary schools and may do some teaching at the university later on. The head of English teaching for Ed Damer has been very helpful. He wants us to teach at 11 different schools, so we've been going around doing one day at one school, and one day at another school, and so on and then when we've gone through the eleven we'll start over again. The last couple of days, the head of English, has sent us a car and a driver to take us to the schools and to show us where they are. We feel a bit like celebrities, as each time we get to a new school all the kids start running around shouting, *Khawaja!*, *Khawaja!*, (foreigner). Most people, especially, the young people, seem to have very little exposure to the English speaking world. A lot of them have relatives working abroad in the middle East, so most of their idea of the outside world is limited to Arabic speaking countries. When I asked one of the classes to guess where I was from, the only answer I got was Egypt. They are required to take English in school at primary and secondary level, but most of the students don't like English as they see it is as too difficult, and useless. One English teacher we met said he was very glad his student would be able to see some English speaking people, because his students didn't believe that there were actually people who spoke English. They think they're learning a language like Latin, that no one speaks!

The biggest challenge teaching so far has been the other teachers rather than the students. The other teachers, want us to teach directly from the book, which is very dull and badly designed. The English director, Khidr, has been good though, and has told the

teachers that our classes are communication classes, and we are free to teach outside the book. In All the schools we've gone to the teachers, have wanted to sit in on the lessons. So in addition to 60-90 kids, we also have about 6 teachers. This is ok if the teachers are quiet, but some of them bring their whips, pace up and down the aisles glaring at the kids, and answer all the questions themselves, with out giving the kids a chance to answer! In one class I put the kids in pairs to do a practice dialogue. The kids started to do it until, one of the other teachers started shouting at the students, *Be Quiet! Too noisy! Respect the Teacher!* I guess pair work might be a new concept for the Sudanese classroom.

more at www.eveanddan.net.

from Christina MacLellan

Where in Khartoum it is typically women serving coffee and tea, in Kassala its almost always men. Kassala is apparently famous for its coffee, I did notice that huge quantities were consumed, but more alarmingly was the amount of sugar! The small cups are literally filled with sugar and the coffee is poured on top, which makes for an intense burst of sugar and caffeine!

The main tribe in the area is Beja, where the men have longer, scruffier, and wilder hair, as well as wearing waistcoats, and carrying knives or swords around with them- the look is very rugged and fits in well with the idea of the tribe being one of the oldest in Sudan, and very strong warriors.

The women of this tribe are also quite different; typically having braided hair visible yet being covered in a very colourful tobe. Most were with facial tattoos and a very large nose ring, but I think this as well as very soft features and large eyes, made me notice just how stunningly beautiful they were.

Walking through the markets in Kassala was such a delight- lots of crafts made from palm leaves, beaded jewelry, men making *jallabiyas* (typical white robes worn by men) to order, as well as the wonderful food and fruit markets selling such a wide range of colourful things, with really appetising smells. But most prominent

is the smell of the ginger coffee, on every street corner, from before sunrise until 11.00 at night, there seemed to be huge amounts being consumed- handy that sugar is grown locally to keep up with the demand!

I spent my time in Kassala with a friend from Khartoum, and a colleague who is originally from Kassala, he introduced me to his friends who were so helpful and gave so much of their time to show me around- I am always amazed at just how hospitable and welcoming people are here, and this was no exception- it really is so very humbling, and something very special which I hope not to take for granted while being here.

Despite my lack of Arabic and the basic English we did really



Evening in Kassala - photo by Christina MacLellan

well- and it wasn't until I got back to Khartoum that I realised that I had only been in Sudanese company, and had not seen another foreigner while I was there.

Christmas

Christmas here is celebrated by the evident Christian community- mainly southerners, and with a huge cathedral in Khartoum, it was apparently standing only - so there was plenty going on. Similarly the 25th is given as a national holiday to all, despite the majority being Islamic. Still, I chose to take it easy and take the day to go to Tuti Island which is across the Nile and a 2 minute boat trip from the city. A real relaxation and place out of town to remember how it feels to be in the country- which always makes me happy!

So, as always a good time to reflect, and think about how much I am enjoying being here in Sudan, really am so grateful for the opportunity this has given me to learn so much about Sudanese culture from the Sudanese. Really do feel at an advantage to those working for large international organisations, who aren't allowed to use public transport, live in nice apartments working with other internationals, but surely have a different experience with benefits I'm not aware of. Just personally enjoy being able to hear from the students about their ideas, feelings, and so on, and meet such friendly and welcoming people who a lot can be learned from.

Really happy with the volunteering, and feel more focused now about what I want to do- mainly teach English, it really seems to be needed and try to give encouragement, and build confidence in people's belief in themselves. A lot of students have little faith in their future, after years of being let down. I just think they could benefit from some positive input, and I feel it plays a big part in their future.

In a village near the Blue Nile

Had been invited to visit a Sudanese friend, Arabisk's family at their village 3 hours from Khartoum, so spent the last couple of days there. Had such a wonderful time all in, was so nice to visit a family who were just so incredibly hospitable and welcoming to us visiting, and likewise with all the people in the village

who invited us to their homes, always with a drink and some food on offer, and thankfully Arabisk with his great translation skills we were able to show our appreciation. Were there for 2 days and can't count how many people we met, went to a wedding henna party the night we arrived, and the next day went to a village nearby with only 600 people, all from the Bedouin tribe.

Anyway so getting to the village was so refreshing, took a small bus from the road passing through farmland and canals which had been built by the British, the area is so lush with sugar cane, and other crops growing and lots of

donkey carts rode by kids, people working in the fields and just a lovely relaxed and peaceful atmosphere.

More at www.livejournal.com/users/tinainsudan

Sharad Venkat writes. I've been here just over a month now and I'm doing all right. I've started teaching and I'm learning Arabic and making a lot of friends. This is a really different place. I'm teaching at a few different places and between that and hanging out with people and exploring I'm seeing a lot of the city. There are not a lot of foreigners here but the volunteers are all pretty close and we get together in some form at least once a week. Arabic is a difficult language but I'm limping along slowly and picking up more - gotta know the language to really get into the culture here, though enough people speak enough English to help me out as much as possible. The people are wonderful... the nicest people I've ever met. Everyone goes out of their way to help you, make you feel comfortable. When there's not enough chairs they stand, they refuse to let you pay for anything when in their company, always inviting us to do things. Today I was teaching at this school... I ordered a tea before class and when I looked in my wallet I realized that I had exactly enough to cover the tea, which meant I had no money for food or a bus back to the flat. A couple of my students saw me looking for money I think. They had already invited me to have lunch with them but halfway through one of them comes up to me and gives me 500 dinar and says it is a gift from all the students! embarrassing but

true, they took up a collection for me! I only need 60 dinar to get the bus and try to give the rest back but they will not take it. Its a bit of a surreal world in that sense. Sometimes I'll meet a stranger as I get on a bus...he'll pay for my ticket. People always want to invite you over or take you out. Again on the bus, people give me their numbers and invite me over for food.

More at www.sharadv.com & www.flickr.com/photos/1978wasagoodyear

Guy Sheard writes: 'What are the differences between England and Sudan'. The favourite question of my students, and one that I've always had some difficulty answering. There couldn't be two places that outwardly have less in common, but nevertheless it soon begins

to feel like home. I've been living in the desert in a town called Shendi, 3 hours north of Khartoum since July 2005, The things that happen here on a day to day basis begin to form some sort of pattern after about 3 months. After this I found that every task, from buying something to finding my way somewhere, becomes easier, but never predictable. In many ways the appeal of Sudan is the contradictions inherent in everything you see and hear. The country's problems evidently stem from a degree of uncertainty in what is happening at every level, ending the current violence in Darfur seemingly as much of a mystery to the government as the recently concluded peace in the South proved for so many years.

But getting there in the end is a quality that the Sudanese have alongside their difficulties in organisation, and forgiveness for mistakes or misunderstandings is unconditional. Working in a country that gets rather hot evidently requires this attitude and it's something that comes to every volunteer in time. Getting things done requires good planning and foresight, skills that I have honed in my work at the university and something that will serve me well in the future. I've done everything from planning my syllabus and teaching, through to getting keys cut by a bemused looking man sat in the street with a box of new keys and a file. My placement has included me doing every task needed for my teaching and more besides, with an English film night once a week and a discussion group outside under the trees. Being in Shendi has also been something of an eye opener in becoming a tour operator, with the close proximity of the Pyramids at Meroe and the temples of El Nagaa and Mussarawat Es Sufra meaning I get regular visits from the new volunteers coming out here. Going into the market, organising the bus, negotiating a price and having banter with the bus drivers over their somewhat optimistic first quote after all is settled has become an enjoyable pass-time in itself.

Talking with the students and staff is always interesting, sometimes heated, but always good natured. My favourite moment of my own bemusement coming when the dean of the faculty brought to an end a seemingly fearsome row between himself and another member of staff over which was the better department, English or Economics. Such moments though at first baffling begin to fit into a pattern of good humoured rivalry and entertainment which keep things ticking along.

The students in Shendi hail from all over Sudan and talking to those who have seen the worst that the country has to offer in contrast to the outward appearance of normality of mobile phones, traffic lights, digital cameras and shiny new cars of Khartoum constantly gives reminder of the importance that your work entails. My talks with the farmer on the university campus, responsible for providing milk to the lecturers, are a microcosm all of my experiences here: his incredible suffering at the hands of others, the constant uncertainty in his life, his lack of opportunity, but his incredible desire to learn, amazing generosity, and willingness to forgive.



Street scene in Khartoum - photo by Christina MacLellan

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Please support SVP with your membership at £3.00 per month or £36.00 per year or £10.00 concessionary rate

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