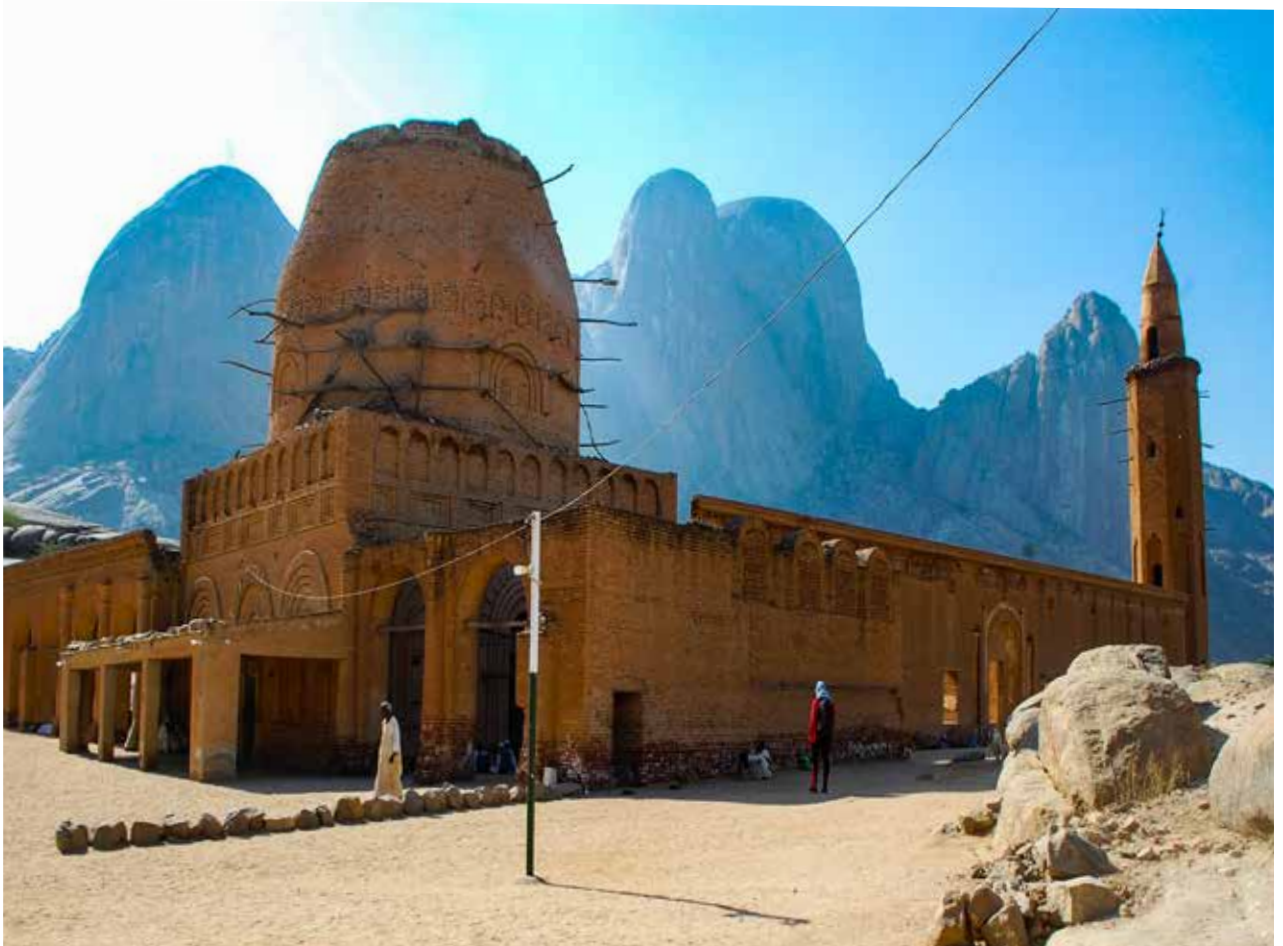


S·V·P News 23

Sudan Volunteer Programme Registered Charity No 1062155 March 2020

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 seven months or more.

*the Khatmiya
Mosque at
Kassala with
the Taka
Mountains
behind
photo by
Ben Hunter*



a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the twenty third annual issue of SVP News. It contains some stories from our volunteers in this year's programme and 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 Joseph Owens Daniel Coleman Peter John Seely Madison Bradt Julie Seidman Vladislav Bilan Cody Whitehouse Calumn Wilson Eleanor Gardner Matt Brainsbury George Burn Ben Hunter Joanna Knowles Reem EIDawi Luke Hatch Nicholas Leone Paula Greenspan

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

Reem ElDawi from the UK: *at Al-Neelain*

I was given a placement at Al-Neelain University, with around 100,000 students the largest university in Sudan in terms of student population and with a central location in Khartoum. I was really excited to be placed there as both my parents had studied there as well as several other members of my family.

On my first day I was introduced to Osama the executive in the vice chancellor's office, he would be my main contact at the university and arrange my classes with each of the departments. I was surprised by how young he was, I would later find out that he's in his early thirties and was newly promoted to his position.

Osama introduced me to a contact at each of the departments I would teach at. One of my placements was at the Stem Cell Centre where I taught teaching staff, masters and Phd students. After I finished my first class there they invited me out for a meal at The Nile Street. There I noticed that the relationship between the students and their lecturers was very friendly. They seemed to be comfortable around each other yet still maintaining a level of mutual respect. I found it quite unusual as it's not something I experienced in my time as a student in the UK. It is possible that this is only the situation at The Stem Cell Centre and not other departments, I cannot be sure yet, but either way I thoroughly enjoyed their company perhaps especially because being a fairly young volunteer I found myself struggling to befriend other teaching staff.

I was often mistaken for a student by both teaching staff and students. It was quite funny in certain situations, yet frustrating in others, for example when I entered the lecture hall for one of my classes and politely asked the students (in Arabic) to leave as there would be a class starting and they completely ignored me. I had to switch on the microphone and repeat the same phrase in English the second time which made them realise I was the teacher.

Nicholas Leone from the US: *Getting around*

One of my favourite experiences of living in Omdurman in Sudan was finding out how to get around, for at first public transportation is a bit intimidating. However, after several attempts, the buses became second nature. If the buses were filled, often times friendly individuals who were going in the same direction would offer to give you a ride. This offered a wonderful opportunity to strike up a conversation, and to truly immerse yourself into the daily flow of the community. While I did enjoy getting around by bus and as the invariable kindness and generosity of strangers, my favourite way to navigate the city was by walking. Walking to my university each morning allowed me to feel as though I was a part of this community, not merely a visitor. Each day, I grew more and more aware of what was going on around me. I wasn't viewing daily life through the windows of a bus; I was living inside it, becoming familiar with the morning routines of the community. As I strolled down the street, the sleepy strolls of university students surrounded

me as well. Everyone was en route. Shop owners were often engaging in their morning sweep of the dust they accumulated from the night before. Groups of students would hang out in their usual spots, chatting before heading off to school. Each morning, I'd wave to these students and we would exchange a word or two. We had seen each other every day engaging in our daily routine, and eventually, smiling and waving to one another became a part of our morning ritual. As I walked further, I'd see the same faces I saw the morning before, cooking up Tamia as well as Zeppoles for breakfast. I'd then give a familiar wave



Street Scene, Omdurman by Paula Greenspan

to the Syrian restauranter as I walked past on the way as well. I would strut past the same man selling cigarettes at his cart and glanced up as he was either listening to his FM radio, or fixing it depending on the day. I'd see an old man with his grandson, cutting up some vegetables to sell on their cart. Young boys with big carts would walk past me, heading towards their area to sell an array of nuts. My daily walks became one of the most important things to me while in Sudan, engaged in the daily flow of the local community shed light on how this area lived each and every day. I was able to live and experience the little things that made up each daily life in my area of Omdurman growing into a lovely collection of human moments. In the end, these little moments make me realize how similar we all are. During my walks throughout Omdurman, I never felt unsafe or uncomfortable, but simply part of this wonderful community. One of my favourite times of the day to walk around, besides in the morning, was the hour directly before sunset, when the intense movement of individuals trying to get home after a long day of work was exhilarating. I was able to skip all of the traffic by getting around by my own two feet. Sometimes, a large bus would make a risky move of backing up and attempting to turn around in the middle of a busy street. This would follow with the inevitable harmonies of a dozen car horns blaring and echoing throughout the street. However, in this moment, the stopped bus would halt the flow of heavy traffic into the middle of the street and act as a sort of cork. For just a few minutes, the street was empty as the bus blocked all of the cars from passing, and many pedestrians would immediately shift into the street instead of the sidewalk. This was one of my favourite moments. The streets, typically so crowded with cars, motorcycles, rickshaws and everything in between, were suddenly empty. I'd be able to walk right into the middle of the street, as the sun was setting, in a place where one typically never usually walks for

longer than a few seconds. It was a wonderfully freeing feeling. In the end, my daily walks to and from university were some of my absolute favourite moments of living in Sudan. It was an honour feeling a part of this community, and I wouldn't have traded it for the world.

Joanna Knowles from Western Australia: *Khartoum after the Revolution*

As my plane began the descent to Khartoum Airport in October 2019, I felt both apprehensive and excited. The last time I had been in Khartoum had been eleven years ago, in October 2008. Now, the Islamist Government of Omer el Bashir had been overthrown by a people's Revolution and I wondered what changes I would see and experience. Perhaps the Airport system would be less officious. Would the clerks be more efficient? How swiftly would the queues move? Nothing appeared to have changed! So that it took me about three hours to get out of the Airport. The traffic from the Airport to Omdurman was literally bumper to bumper and very slow! But I was delighted to be back in Khartoum!

However, at Khartoum University where I took up my teaching appointment, there were several obvious and positive changes. The most visible and the saddest of these was that the walls of the university buildings were covered with the photos and names of the Martyrs who had been killed during the Revolution. Hundreds of them! They were mainly unarmed male students who had deliberately and passively stood with the Professional Association and the Protestors during the demonstrations in the city.

The second and most important change was that the Vice Chancellor and all the Heads of all the Departments were new appointments, all of them people who had supported the Revolution. Throughout the University, in staff rooms, lecture theatres, offices, and canteens people were now openly discussing political matters and preparing for a free and open civil society. Approximately two months after my arrival, a series of trials commenced. These were held in the Court in Omdurman and were attended by crowds of civilians. Those who could not fit inside the Courtroom were gathered outside, blocking the traffic and patiently waiting for the proceedings to take place and for the outcomes to be announced. There was a massive Police presence and tear gas was used on more than one occasion to pacify the crowds. During these trials, many university lecturers and most university students were absent from the university feeling it was their duty to see that "Justice was done". They expressed their thoughts and feelings that those who had killed unarmed protestors should receive their due punishment.

Living and working in Khartoum during these months was quite disturbing although almost every Sudanese that I spoke to supported the changes that were taking place.. They were delighted with the Court's decision to execute those who had been found to be guilty of killing protestors. As an opponent of capital punishment, I found this attitude sad and also difficult to accept.

The advantage of the Mourada house for me was that it was located next to the Musicians Union and Club, where I spent at least three nights each week. There, I could socialise with various Musicians of all ages, drank tea and coffee, take part in

discussions related to both music and politics, and attended various types of performance. This was an excellent way in which to learn more about Sudan, Sudanese people and Sudanese music.

Nusayba Hassan Osman Awad from Omdurman: *A Day with a Khawajiyya*

It was middle of October when I met Madison (a new volunteer from Canada) for the first time. I was really excited but also very nervous. Although I had no fixed expectations, I hoped that I would be able to tell what kind of person she was just by looking at her.

Time seemed to stand still when I saw her for the first time, as if giving me the time I needed to get a true sense for who she was. Indeed, there was a lot to look at and make sense of. Madison was dressed in such a beautiful skirt and a long-sleeve pink shirt. Her hair was wonderfully braided, leaning to the left. The hair itself was covered by a splendid headscarf. Her facial expression was as curious as my own, but like me she was also smiling warmly.

An hour later, we took the bus to Bahri to visit a leather shop. I bought her a welcome gift, a bracelet that had engraved in Arabic script "Ajool hawl alalam", which literally means "travelling around the world". This was my favourite moment of the day as it was the moment that I started to feel the ice breaking between us.

The Shambat Campus of the University of Khartoum was our next destination. We found a lovely, quiet corner and sat for a cup of coffee (jabana) with a friend of mine. He invited us for a traditional tray of jabana with Sudanese aromatic smoke. Madison told the tea lady (Maryam) that the coffee was delicious and that she has a real talent for making it. As we left, we made sure to remember to thank her for such a wonderful coffee. The weather was glorious. It was lovely and cool so we walked around the campus for a little more than an hour. I guess Madison was keen to explore the green landscape that she is used to from her neighbourhood at home, but which is not so common in Sudan.

The day ended. I felt as if I had done a day-long English language speaking test. I had been careful to show a sensitive feeling for the language, choosing the right words for what I wanted to convey, and generally make sure that my English was as perfect as it could be. On that day, I had also tried to convey clearly that I wanted to build a special friendship with Madison. After almost two years of friendship, I think I can say I succeeded.

Luke Hatch from the UK: *The Malgat-less Man*

I don't think I'm a vain man but I have been got at by my sister one too many times to make sure I don't have a monobrow and look 'ridiculous.' So it was with that in mind

and a day free of lectures the next day, I decide to wander into the market in Atbara to see if I couldn't find some tweezers. Before leaving, I use an Arabic dictionary on my phone to look for the word for tweezers. Malgat.

I put my phone on charge and leave the guest house that I have come to call home.

"Malgat, Malgat, Malgat" I repeat to myself as I stroll down the road towards the railway tracks that precede the market. A man appears out of a side street and starts walking a little way in front of me. I guess he is a shepherd as he has a shepherding stick, which he slings over his shoulders, placing his hands upon it as if he were in the stocks. As I pass him, I see that he is clearly curious as to what I'm doing here. This is not uncommon in Sudan. The khawaarjaat (foreigners) are a bit of a wonder here, and it's not unusual to be stopped in the street and be greeted by a complete stranger. It is also not uncommon to have a friendly "khawaarja!" shouted at you from a rickshaw as you're walking the streets. Locking eyes with the man, I greet him. He greets me back and asks where I am from. My conversation with Faisal continues until the end of the road, when he points out his house and makes clear I am welcome to come around whenever I want. I thank him and head across the railway tracks.

Once in the market, I decide to head towards a group of three stalls selling perfumes, nail clippers and the like. Before I can even begin to browse the wares of these fine establishments, I hear someone behind me shout "hello!" I turn around to see a man at a cake stall beckoning me over. We proceed to have a funny but difficult conversation in a mix of broken English and Arabic. He says that he has a friend better at English than he and who will be able to tell me a lot about Sudanese history and politics. He asks if he can give me his number, to which I agree but explain that I have left my phone at home. He pulls up a chair for me and gives me a plate of Sudanese cakes while he gets a pen and paper to write down his number. I can't eat all five cakes at once, so he wraps them up for me and bids me farewell.

Across the way, my quest for tweezers continues. "Fee Malgat?" (Do you have tweezers?) I say to the youngish boy on the first stall. He looked at me bemused. "Malgat? Fee Malgat?" I repeat. Another boy comes to help. He wants me to write it down. I write it down in my best Arabic script. No response from either of them. A third man comes along and asks what the problem is. To be honest, this was not how I envisaged my tweezer-buying happening. I hadn't reckoned on three Sudanese guys helping me look for a pair of tweezers. The third man decides that what is needed is Google Translate. I inform the kind fellow that I don't have my phone with me. He gets out his phone but soon realises he has no credit. No matter. He pays the youngish boy on the stall for some mobile credit, tops up his phone, replaces the sim card and switches his phone on and off again. Finally, the man opens Google Translate on his phone and types in T-W-E-E-Z-E-R-S. The result: Malgat. None of the three knows what it means but as I start tugging the hair on my arm while dazedly repeating the word "malaqit", it seems one of the boys gets the gist. "Ahhh! Malasi!" he exclaims. They don't have it but maybe next door will. He comes with me as we ask for malasi. They don't have those either. We try the third stall along. On the phone, the owner nods his head at us to let us know he's listening. We repeat our now

familiar call "fee malasi?" "fee", he replies. Yes! He has some. Finally, my nightmare is over! I will no longer be followed by a brigade of helpful Sudanese while looking for a pair of tweezers! He reaches down into a pile of odds and ends and pulls out something in plastic packaging. Clothes pegs. They're clothes pegs.

I thank the helpers for their time and move on to a few more stalls. The hair on my arm is now starting to hurt a bit from the ever-more exasperated pulling I'm doing while trying to demonstrate malaqit. The responses range from confusion to amusement at the funny foreigner who is looking for such a very strange item. I consign myself to the realisation that I will be returning home from the market a Malgat-less man. Still, I have come back with experience and a story.

Paula Greenspan from the US: *Henna Day*

Full of excitement and curiosity, I rode in a rickshaw across Omdurman with friendly Nusayba, who teaches me Arabic weekly and had offered to change a boring weekend day into a fun, new adventure. We arrived on a small, unpaved street and entered a little household which I couldn't have picked from any other doorway. Curiously and a bit shyly, I followed along into a small room with a desk and computer. We paid 50 Sudanese pounds each, receiving a very nicely made receipt, and waited a few minutes on a nicely stuffed couch with a glass of cool water to sip.

Then I was led into another area where a woman sat on a stool with a small bowl and paintbrush. She asked me to sit on a bed nearby and I smiled and held out my hand for her. She slowly and deliberately painted a beautiful design on my hand, dipping the brush into the dark paste regularly. While she worked, I glanced around. A baby lay sleeping peacefully on another bed. All of the beds and stools were nicely carved and painted in bright red and shiny gold. A lacy curtain divided the area from the entryway, giving some privacy but allowing air and a soft light to enter.



The Henna pattern on Paula's hand

As the design unfolded down my index finger with cool, soft strokes, a younger woman seated nearby curiously asked questions about me, the Khawajiya. Nusayba patiently helped me understand and find the words to respond – excellent language practice. All smiled and praised my faltering attempts at Arabic. Afterwards, I sat for a bit with my hand propped on a pillow, quietly allowing the henna to dry while Nusayba had her eyebrows sculpted. Then we all sat together in a beauty parlor and shared some of the strong sweet coffee which, to me, represents the special hospitality in this country.

A soft musky smoke sweetened the atmosphere.

The baby fussed and was comforted by each of the women in the family in turn. They coaxed, patted, played, massaged, and fed him. He had recently fallen and hurt his mouth so he was a bit difficult to console but ultimately quieted as conversation continued to flow variously in Sudanese, Amrika, and English. It became clear that these ladies were originally Ethiopian and had all gone through the same process of learning Arabic that I was experiencing. They sympathized and one used a sentence almost directly out of my book, saying that Arabic is difficult. One shared an amusing story from her early time in Sudan: She'd been working as a household helper and the lady gave her a plate of leftover food in a bowl, gesturing that she should take it out and showing the directions with her hands. This young woman, doing her best to understand, took it to the neighbors to share. It turned out to be food scraps, not fit for people, which she was meant to set out for stray cats and dogs! We all laughed and agreed that mistakes are the best way to learn.

I stored this anecdote away for my students, along with my own storehouse of personal embarrassing language missteps. I always hope that sharing amusing stories like this will help them relax and step outside their fear and shyness. If they see that people forgave and later laughed, perhaps they'll be a bit quicker to commit, forgive, and learn from their own mistakes. I find language comes to life as it's used as a tool to communicate – to connect, share, laugh, sympathize, or exchange ideas.

Life continued to unfold around our conversation with hair treatments, children playing, the sharing of a bowl of watermelon chunks, wonder at the fluency with which Nusayba conversed in English and interest in her Turkish textbook. Finally my henna droplets turned to flat dry marks (with just a few tiny smears showing that I hadn't been patient and careful enough). We peeled and washed my hand carefully and departed with an invitation to return again for more extensive designs. This mark will remain on my hand and arm for a few weeks but the smile will be in my heart and memories for much, much longer.



A vegetable shop on the way to Medani - picture by Ben Hunter

Ben Hunter from the UK: *On the Train to Medani*

The clean interior of the train feels disconnected from the city. Rusty trainyards, children playing in rubbish. You could be looking through a window into a different world if it weren't for the broken tannoy. The man at the station looked a bit surprised to see a foreigner buying a ticket to Medani, especially one travelling on his own, and he laughed when you asked if the train would be on time.

Soldiers, policemen and uniformed men walk the aisle. The broken tannoy is replaced with tinny music. You make eye contact with a man inside a white car. He nods, and you wave back. A brief smile crosses his lips before he turns to the driver and you pull past.

The music is coming from a TV you've only just noticed. The screen shows a home movie of a wedding, a small girl is singing and an older man is dancing. Then it's gone, replaced by another. You wonder whose weddings these are. Staff of the Sudanese Railway Corporation? Perhaps.

There's no way of knowing, and you turn back to the window as the train stops. It's another station, seemingly abandoned and yet several passengers depart. An old train rests beside you, and half finished buildings lie beyond. Nile Petroleum is advertised in unreadable letters.

You wait five minutes, then ten minutes. People filter in and the air conditioning becomes colder. The screen has changed again, this time displaying a concert. It's louder than before, but you've stopped noticing as it fades into the background.

Children play in an abandoned building and a dog yawns at the tracks. Women in bright tobés wait next to the road for a bus and men drink coffee next to piles of broken bricks. As you stop again, two boys bend down to examine the train and



The train to Wad Medani - Ben Hunter

you wish you could hear their conversation.

You're moving again, faster now, and the concert is quieter. Scorched, blackened piles of rubbish surround a circle of young boys playing football. A goat market flits past alongside bales of hay as a boy sits on a rock and watches you. Everything seems forgotten, as if it'd all been put down and left with no real thought.

Another goat market, more children playing in the dust. A furniture workshop, a cemetery with small gravestones and a low wall. Two small girls, smeared with dirt and oil, play next to an abandoned lorry. Two more children roll tyres through the sand. Another goat market, more traffic jams. Women wait next to a road for the bus.

The concert has gone. Now it's just a singer's image and her voice. A man silently sits atop a pile of dust and you wonder what he's thinking as you roll past. An onion market, red shards carpeting the floor. Your ticket is examined by a man who welcomes you to Sudan. You turn back to the window and you're moving through a construction yard dotted with hills of coloured dirt. White, beige and a deep red. You begin to leave Khartoum and the buildings get smaller and further apart. There's more rubbish, and fewer children.

You notice a group of young male students have sat down next to you, all of them laughing and sneaking snuff into their upper lips. You remember that you have nowhere to stay in Medani and so perk up the courage to ask them about hotels. They look as bemused to see you as the ticket man but are gracious in their advice. There's one near to the station, they say, but it might be expensive. More questions follow. Are you really travelling on your own? How long have you been in Sudan? What's your plan for Medani? How can we get to Britain?

You answer, and you're grateful for the company. You've left Khartoum behind and the train is slipping past villages of half-built houses. You pull in to Medani long after the sun goes down,

it's dark and the hotel is indeed expensive. Your friends find you another one and once again you're grateful for the company.

Paula Greenspan: *A Lively Breakfast*

"Excuse me, Teacher?" my student tentatively asked at the end of my morning class, as I was packing up my bag. "My friends and I want you to eat breakfast with us." So I walked down a dusty street behind the university with a small group of students challenging each other to use only English for this event, their questions and conversation slowly becoming more confident and excited. They asked about my family and my reasons for coming here. They were sometimes apologetic for inconveniences here, sometimes filled with frustration, and yet they always showed enthusiastic spirits, curiosity, a great desire for self improvement, and pride in their unique culture and country.

As we talked, we meandered toward a crowded area of open-sided tents filled with vendors. We collected enough stools with colorful woven seats so our group could sit in a tight circle, as neighboring diners obligingly shuffled aside to make room. We rinsed our hands from a small jug and the students expressed concern that I wouldn't like the meal, or that it wouldn't agree with me. Fortunately, I was able to reassure them that since my first two weeks, when I had several bouts of sore throat and stomach disruption while adjusting to this new environment, I've felt fine and enjoyed all of the foods with no ill effects.

When our Ful (beans) arrived, it came in a large bowl and was placed on a plastic stool in the center of our laughing group. It consisted of chunks of bread, torn roughly and coated in fuul (beans), tomatoes, and other savory ingredients. Students ran to get extra oil and a small bowl filled with a potent chili sauce. We ate by hand from the common bowl, dipping our portions into the extra sauce and puddles of oil as we desired. We sipped from a shared cup of cool water as we chatted and ate. My generous hosts made sure that I had eaten my fill, and of course they refused to allow me to pay my share.

As our meal came to a close, they curiously inquired about my progress in learning Arabic and quizzed me on the words I've been practicing from my homemade flash cards. They grinned and corrected my pronunciation, seemingly enjoying the reversal in roles and the sight of their teacher struggling. I am the first to admit that I've been rather a poor student but they assured me kindly that I was doing fine and they'd love to help me practice any time. And, in fact, one followed up the next week by creating a list of common phrases in Arabic for me! We departed in plenty of time for me to get to my next class with a full and happy tummy and a smile in my heart.

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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