

Gambia

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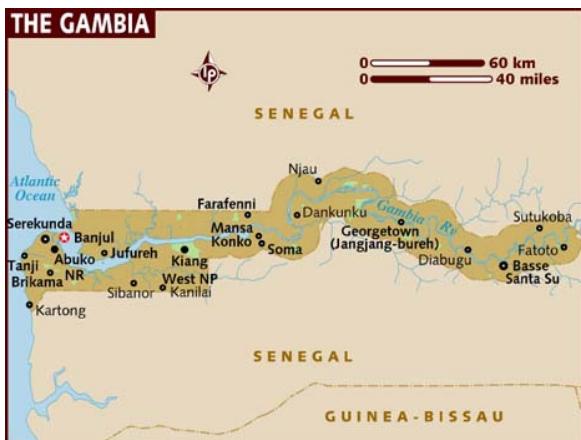
THE JOURNAL

THE TEAM

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INTRODUCTION TO THE GAMBIA



The Gambia is located on the West coast of Africa. With a population of only 1.5million, it is one of the smallest, and poorest, of the African countries.

The capital city is Banjul. The Gambia celebrates its independence on 22nd July and we visited Arch 22, which was erected to commemorate this occasion.

Society and Culture

The Gambia has a very youthful population, with ages 0-14 making up 44.5% of the total population. During our visit we came across many of the local children, often along roadsides sitting idle. They were incredibly friendly and often confident enough to approach the jeeps. Many of them displayed their athletic ability and ran after the jeeps for an impressive amount of time. Their knowledge of Manchester United was also quite incredible!



We were lucky enough to visit Albert Market, a traditional market place selling an assortment of items, from local produce to wooden carvings. The market was lively and bustling and often it was hard to navigate through the labyrinth of alleyways and stalls. In contrast to this, the Senegal Craft Market that was located a few minutes' walk from our Senegambia hotel, was a lot less busy. On some occasions we were the only visitors and shop owners were desperate for us to be their first customers to 'bring them good luck for the rest of the day.'



The everyday clothing of the Gambian people was mostly traditional African style dress. We were encouraged to cover up when amongst locals; knee-length shorts, shoulders covered, to respect the Muslim traditions.

Economy

The Gambia is a very poor nation and is heavily dependent on agriculture. This leaves the country particularly vulnerable should there be a drought. The Gambia has no natural resources and we were told that there is only one coal-fired power station to provide electricity for the whole country. Therefore, power cuts were frequent and we experienced this during our stay at Tendaba Camp.

One of The Gambia's main industries is tourism however this has not yet been fully developed.



Food

A variety of local cuisine was on offer to us at each of the restaurants that we visited. The Chicken Yassa dish and Meat/Fish Bena Chin were particularly popular. Rice is a staple food in the Gambia and was on offer with most dishes. We were told to be careful about our diets, as salads and dairy products are not always of a high standard. However, this issue still led to many heated debates! Fishing is another industry in The Gambia and so a variety of fish were also usually on offer, such as Ladyfish and Bakau.

The food is often smoked using fuel wood as the energy resource. When visiting the Adult Literacy Centre we were able to see the large pots they use to prepare the food.

Religion

The Gambia has a 90% Muslim population. We were told on our journey to the Senegambia that although this percentage is large, integration and marriage between Christian and Muslim faiths is very common.

Antonia and Mehreen

MAMA TAMBA NURSERY SCHOOL

Tamba

Tamba is involved with the project Malvern in the Gambia. He is Lamin's brother and the project co-ordinator. Tamba is also the Headmaster of Mama Tamba Nursery School. The Mama Tamba Nursery School is located in Illiassa, it is fundamental to the community as it is the only source of education for under 7s. Mama Tamba provides a crucial building block in education. This is also part of a national initiative to educate children from a young age.

Tamba has an incredible demeanour with all the children who go to Mama Tamba. He remained completely in control throughout all our time at Mama Tamba. Tamba knew all the children's' names and seemed to be able to interact with them all on a very personal level. All the children obviously really respected him and he commands authority with ease.



Lessons

On the day of our lessons we arrived at Mama Tamba Nursery School, to hear a chorus of singing (*twinkle twinkle little star*) from every classroom. Each pair was allocated a classroom and Tamba carefully split the children into mixed aged groups.

- In one classroom Livy and Gabby had a play-doh extravaganza! All the children were very eager and keen to get praise for what they had produced.
- Outside in the sunshine Antonia and Elsa played parachute games and other sports day themed activities including awarding special medals to winners.
- In the newly painted dining room Sophie and Mehreen made pasta jewellery with some very excited children. (When we went back the next day the children were all still wearing their pasta necklaces!)
- Jess and Liberty first coloured in Alphabet Letters and then played a variety of ball-name games and sang classic nursery songs, such as *Heads, shoulders, knees and toes* and *The Wheels on the bus*.

All the children were very eager and happy to be a part of our lessons. The children also seemed to be very intrigued by us. Many of the children wanted to hold our hands and be picked up and held.



Liberty and Lucy

Painting at Mama Tamba's Nursery School

Withington has recently raised money for the building of a dining room at Mama Tamba's Nursery School so that the children can have a place to eat in shelter from the burning hot sun. It was therefore half the group's job to decorate the newly built dining room and the kitchen and kitchen store along with it.

When we first arrived outside the nursery school, via jeep and on the dusty track outside, we were all greeted extremely warmly as usual by the fascinated local children. The children were extremely excited, screaming, running and doing anything else to get our attention so that we would simply hold their hand or give them an empty water bottle that they could fill up to take with them to school. After we had all had numerous pictures with the children, "high-fived" them and, in the case of some members of the group, put them down after having cuddles, we went inside to get to work for the afternoon.



Under the fantastic instructions of the team leader Kardia we were all able to get to work decorating. Firstly we had to white wash the rooms in order to create a base layer before painting on the beautiful pictures and scenes. Although it is arguable whether the team ended up with more white paint in their hair and on their clothes than actually on the walls, the white washing was done



in no time at all and then Kardia set to work outlining her designs in pencil on the walls. Kardia drew various objects such as butterflies, flowers, fruit, numbers and alphabet letters but of course, her most spectacular masterpiece was the African sunset across the whole wall in the kitchen. Naturally those of us who were slightly less arty in the group were not allowed anywhere near this masterpiece with paintbrushes but we set to the other little pictures with great gusto making them vibrant with

the use of all the colours of the rainbow. This particular part of the painting process could have been slightly quicker if it had not been for our great enjoyment of painting the fingernails on the hands that kept getting stuck through the walls of the dining hall from outside, in an attempt by the local children to "touch a white person". We drank lots of water so as not to get dehydrated and kept morale up working as a team and in no time at all the dining room looked beautiful and the other half of the Gambia 08 team were back from the banana plantation to marvel out our handy work (with a little help from the teachers of course).

When we had finished the painting, it was time for us to experience one of the first of many generous actions from the Gambian people. A local farmer brought us all watermelons and chopped them up into enormous, succulent pieces for us to have as refreshment after our hard work. We had also brought our bags into the school so as to leave some of the school supplies that we had brought from England in the school over night, ready for the next day's teaching. The bouncing balls in particular created much fascination with the headmaster's daughter Kadijah and after she had overcome her fear of "the big red round thing" she, with the help of Elsa and Liberty, ended up bouncing to new heights!



Before we left the nursery for Tendaba Camp that evening the school had one little surprise for us. The children of the nursery gathered round to sing us a medley of songs. All the songs were in English such as "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star", "1, 2, 3, 4, 5", "a big one, a very big one" (apparently Lucy's personal favourite) and "one little finger". All the songs were sang with great enthusiasm and volume, sometimes the children did not even sing the right words, they certainly didn't know what they were singing, but the point was that they sang with great enjoyment and some of the biggest smiles we had ever seen. It was very moving and an experience that we will never forget, particularly

as we were lucky enough to experience the same songs at other points of the trip as well.

We then all loaded our things back onto the jeeps again and prepared for the jeep ride and journey to the camp where we would be staying for the next few nights. Tired and exhausted but with a great sense of fulfilment we waved goodbye and departed for a well earned rest.



Lucy and Liberty

ADULT LITERACY CENTRE

For the teaching activity, six of us were to teach the local women at the Adult Literacy Centre, built by a previous Withington Girls' project. We taught in three groups: Dalia and Natalie were under the mango tree; Alana and Kardia on the veranda; and Lucy and Diana were in the classroom.

We arrived at the literacy centre not knowing what to expect, and at first there were no women there, but Miss Browning assured us that they would be coming. In the typical Gambian laid back style, the women arrived one by one and in their own time. We later found out that the women do not go to the Literacy Centre during the dry season, as they are too busy working with the crops.



Waiting for the women to arrive.



Dalia and Natalie teaching under the mango tree.

Natalie and Dalia taught the women the days of the week in English and helped them write the words on whiteboards. All of the women found it difficult to hold the pen correctly and even harder to actually write the letters. We wrote the individual letters in the sand from which the women copied onto their boards. It was a shock to see how long it took them to write only one letter. No matter how many times we told them that Thursday followed Wednesday, they continued to chant 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,

FRIDAY!' Chanting the days of the week turned into yet another period of 'spontaneous dancing' and within a few minutes everybody had joined in (Mrs Pickering particularly enjoyed it!) At the end of the lesson, we handed out 'well done' stickers which the women particularly liked. It was clear that they were proud of their progress – they'd clap and cheer every time they wrote a word correctly and remembered the days in order!

Kardia and Alana taught their group of women basic conversation and hobbies in English, with the help of Nikki to translate into Mandinka. The women enjoyed using the whiteboards to practice writing themselves, but mostly they enjoyed turning the lesson on hobbies into a song. Spurred on by Nikki, the women clapped and chanted 'I like singing, I like dancing, I like cooking etc', so enthusiastically and loudly, that the women in Lucy and Diana's lesson stopped to see what all the noise was!

Kardia, Alana and Nikki teaching on the veranda.



Smiler, Lucy and Diana teaching in the classroom.



In the classroom, Lucy and Diana taught a larger group of women numbers in English. We started with two women, were shortly joined by four more, and then more and more arrived throughout. With Smiler's help translating into Mandinka, we counted with the women up to 50. When we realised that the women could already count to 50, we split into two groups to practise writing the numbers on the whiteboards. Some of the women could do this

easily, but others couldn't quite coordinate the lines they needed to draw, so we helped them. Every time that the women spelt a number correctly they would 'high five' Lucy and Diana, until one women got so excited that she burst into spontaneous dancing, and soon everyone had joined in! After writing the numbers 1-10 on the whiteboards, Lucy and Diana decided to teach the women Smiler's favourite English song: Doe a deer. The rest of our group returned from their teaching at Mama Tamba Nursery during this, so by the end everyone was singing along.

We were all impressed by the women's multi-tasking skills: they came to the lessons with babies on their backs, and managed to continue writing and clapping along with the songs whilst breast feeding.



Preparing the cloth for tie-dying.

After teaching the women, it was their turn to teach us: how to tie-dye. We were all given a piece of material, (though Gabby did what seemed like a two mile trek to get hers). Some of us realised we were being a bit too ambitious in our designs when we realised we would have to stitch along the templates we had drawn. Luckily the women were more than happy to help us, especially those of us who were less skilful at the sewing! We also improved our Mandinkan vocabulary: 'scissorle' = 'scissors'.

A group of us led by Miss O'Neal entertained the local children, who weren't at school, with The Hokey-Kokey, Ring-A-Roses and The Conga. Tamba made his own tie-dye, but kept telling us it was a secret. When he unveiled it, his tie-dye said 'WGS'. Tamba was proud it had worked, and we were all touched by his gesture.

We went back the next day to collect all astounded by the magnificent helped us wrap our materials around and Smiler even risked damaging his sarong! The women then set up drums, to start some more Gambian us struggled to coordinate dancing sarongs simultaneously, which was who had taken off our shorts!

Reluctantly we left the women, but ceremony happily with our new

our tie-dying, and were colours. The women us to wear as sarongs, street cred' to wear his seats for us, and their style dancing. Some of and holding up our worrying for those of us

headed to the opening handmade sarongs!

Modelling the finished product.

Dancing!



Diana and Dalia

THE BANANA PLANTATION

We arrived at the banana orchard after a brief visit to Mama Tamba nursery. It was quite bare, there were a few large trees with native fruit and two or three banana trees that had already been planted. The ground was really dry and hard so the men from the village had pre dug small, circular holes and fertilised them with chicken manure so we could plant the trees more easily. After watering each hole we planted a tree in each.



We gathered water from the well, quite successfully, using a bucket and string from a well that the local people had dug deep into the ground. This actually required quite a lot of skill as you had to get the bucket swinging before it hit the bottom so that the water would go in.

Each tree was labelled with a letter from the alphabet, Tamba, the headmaster from the nursery school, said this was so the children could learn the alphabet and ecological studies together. After finishing the planting of the banana trees we helped to plant cucumber seeds and tend to runner bean plants. The garden we helped to build would provide food for the children when they were at school ensuring they received a balanced meal each day. It was nice to see that our efforts would continue to help the children after we'd left.



After the work we rested in the shade and had some water. The children who had been watching us work ran into the garden and climbed trees, they picked local fruit, one grape like fruit and another, called the baw baw, had a wooden shell and was had a rich, chewy fruit inside. The outer shell was used to make musical instruments. Next we visited the garden next to the nursery garden, this



looked much more like a traditional vegetable garden, and it had square patches of lots of different vegetables such as bitter potato, bitter tomato, peppers, chillies, onions and rice in the rainy season. Women were looking after the garden and there were lots of children helping them or playing with each other. Their whole life was self-sustained, it was so different from our life, where we just walk into a supermarket and buy the food, the food we saw being grown was cooked for our lunch. It was an entirely different way of life, and an amazing experience.

Elsa and Alana

THE OPENING CEREMONY AT MAMA-TAMBA NURSERY SCHOOL



We had gathered at Mama Tamba to witness the opening of the newly built and newly decorated dining room. Everyone welcomed the protection provided by the dining room roof from the hot Gambian sun. Three rows of chairs had been carefully set out for us to enjoy the ceremony, and it was with slight embarrassment that we took these seats, as the local people of Illiassa were leaning into the dining room, whilst we were seated. Tamba, the headmaster looked very smart indeed, and it was clear that he had made the effort to impress us with his suit, tie and what appeared to be recently polished shoes.

As we were working with Gambian time, the proceedings were slightly delayed and showed no sign of beginning any time soon, which was nothing new. Tamba had seated the children in their seats, and they began to sing for us, the first song being "A big one, a very big one, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5!", which was closely followed by "Twinkle twinkle little star" which they sang on repeat for almost ten minutes, until Tamba politely asked them to be quiet.

When everyone of importance had arrived, the ceremony began. Women had given up their seats in the shade to the elderly men from the village, who sat next to the school governors. Tamba spoke first and thanked us for the hard work and effort we had put into raising the money, and then planting the bananas and decorating the dining room.

A local primary school headmaster then gave a very moving speech about the work that has been done in the village. His spoke very passionately about the importance of educating the local children, as it is up to them to educate the elders of the village. Notably he said "Education is the life of a man", where he stressed the importance and the appreciation of the work that we and others

have done to help progress education in the village so the children are able to have a good start in life.

There were speeches from respectable members of the community, including the local Imam, who made a few members of the group cry, with his heartfelt message.

It was time for us to entertain the locals, and so it was with great energy, enthusiasm and skill that we launched into our two songs complete with Kardia playing the guitar. Our rendition of "Catch a falling star", complete with actions went down well, as did our rendition of "Stand by me" as everyone enjoyed the clapping that was involved.

After we had successfully entertained the locals Miss Browning presented the plaque to Tamba after her speech and she and Mrs Pickering jointly cut the ribbon to officially open the new kitchen and food store area. We also gave him a folder to keep all his work in, which is friend held close to him for the rest of the day! It was then time for us to receive gifts from the children. Each member of the group was presented with a carefully prepared Christmas card from a different child in the class. The cards were beautifully decorated with glitter and inside there were special Christmas wishes and New Year greetings. The cards took the children three weeks to make as they had to learn how to use scissors to cut up the card and how to use the stencils to write the messages. It is fair to say every member of the group was touched by their gift, particularly as the front of the card bore the message, "I wish you good luck, I am proud of you". There was a lot of crying and "welling up" between the team members, as the ceremony really was very touching.



At the front of the rows of children there was a very sweet little boy who kept on crying because he obviously needed the toilet but knew he wasn't able to go...Smiler had to take him as he was too scared to leave the ceremony.



Despite the huge amount of effort that appeared to be going into the opening ceremony, there seemed to be a lack of order to the day – which was most notably, demonstrated when Smiler walked straight through the middle when he needed something.



Natalie and Sophie

VISITING THE BABY CLINIC IN ILLIASSA

On our last day in Illiassa, we had the opportunity to visit the malnourished baby clinic, what was to one of our most moving experiences. We arrived in the morning to the warm welcome of the Roman Catholic nuns who volunteer and run the clinic. The Roman Catholic influence was very dominant in the clinic and we saw religious pictures on the walls and were allowed to visit the beautiful chapel within the clinic.

The first thing that struck us as we entered the clinic was the pride that was taken in its presentation and maintenance with beautifully landscaped gardens and fresh clean rooms. However, the second thing which we noticed was a less cheerful image. There was a group of children sat in an enclosed area and it was the silence of the children that was most striking. There were few toys for the children to play with and we were surprised to see a metal bed in the corner which could have been dangerous.



However, it was great to see a teenage boy who had chosen to give up his free time to come into the clinic and spend time with the children and he was more than happy to join in with the games which we initiated. Within a matter of minutes the atmosphere had completely changed and there was laughter and the sound of happy voices – both from us and the children. We showed the young boys, keen to be active, how to play games in the small space they had – and we witnessed some excellent football skills! We also had the chance to speak and play with a girl called Mary who was twenty years old. She particularly enjoyed us tickling her and she laughed a lot when we did this!

Whilst some of us were entertaining the children, others set to work on decorating the clinic with the snowflakes which had been made before hand by Withington Junior School and Lady Barn House School, so that the clinic was brightened up and given a festive feel! Some girls also had the chance to see some of the babies and found out that for the last year mothers could now stay with their children during the day. The sisters also told us that 13 of the children were orphans, most of whom could return to extended family once they were 10 years old. We also experienced the mothers' open, trustworthy natures as they happily took their babies from their backs and allowed us to hold them and witter on about how cute they were!



After several of us had to unwillingly part with the babies who had fallen asleep against our chests, we went into the kitchen to help feed them. They were all sat down at a table with a bib and given a generous portion of rice and chicken. It was fantastic to see how healthy the appetites of the children were and most of them polished off the entire contents of their plate! Most of the children we saw looked a lot younger than they actually were due to malnourishment in the past and it was great to see them filling their tummies with lots of protein!



Finally the time came to leave the clinic, which was met with some tears from all of us, as in a matter of hours we had bonded with the children at the clinic, but from what we had experienced, we knew they were left in good hands.

Livy and Gabby

LAMIN'S COMPOUND

The group received yet another warm and friendly Gambian-style welcome when we reached Lamin's compound. After an educational egg-collecting session at the poultry farm, we were given a quick tour as we made our way to the house. Everybody marvelled at the beautiful banana trees, whilst also noticing the generator – the compound's independent and sole source of electricity, something which we are not used to seeing in the UK.

On entering the gated compound, we were introduced to Lamin's wife, Mariama, and his four sons as well as other members of family and staff. There was a strong sense of pride as we were welcomed into the inviting and clean living room of the house, adorned with a variety of African ornaments, rugs and other furniture. The set-up was interesting; with the kitchen positioned in an outside hut, so as to not overheat the house with the large fire used for cooking. The atmosphere was happy and relaxed and we all enjoyed a delicious traditional Gambian meal prepared by Mariama.



After dinner a small impromptu award ceremony took place. Much to her delight, we presented Mariama with a T-shirt emblazoned with the word "COOK" and to Tamba's wife, confusingly also called Mariama, we presented a selection of soaps. In return, each member of the Withington party was awarded with a certificate as a token of gratitude for our work and fundraising. The ceremony was concluded with a warm and appreciative speech from Nikki leading to a spontaneous outburst of song and dance – nothing out of the ordinary! The evening drew to a close and after fond farewells our spirits were high resulting in an enthusiastic sing-song for the duration of the return journey home.



Livy and Gabby

TRANSPORT IN THE GAMBIA

The Jeep

The majority of our time travelling round Gambia was spent ricocheting around the backseats of two open top jeeps, driven by the gorgeous and wonderful Nikki and Camera. Bouncing along the bumpy, often unpaved, dirt roads of the main towns and the even more treacherous country roads - more often resembling 'sand pits' than infrastructure - we all kept in high spirits with a veritable playlist of upbeat songs which we belted out at the top of our voices, regardless of passers-by, who, for the most part, seem to highly enjoy and appreciate our valiant efforts at 'Kelly Clarkson', 'Jojo' and 'Black Eyed Peas'. Diana especially, the previous thought-to-be mild-mannered Westlife aficionado, revealed a surprising '*gangsta*' streak during her meaningful rapping to 'Where is the Love?', complete with aviator sunglasses, hand actions and 'serious' pout. Nikki especially enjoyed joining in with our singing, particularly when we regaled him with frequent renditions of his very own song, an adjusted version of 'Hey Mickey' by B-witched, which he bopped along to whilst powering down the Gambian highways. Smiler was also keen to get involved in our music making and we gradually taught him the words to 'Doe a Deer' from 'The Sound of Music', a song that would become a particular favourite of his! Actions soon followed.



Although obvious to us all that Nikki took great pride and care of his jeep (who can forget his decorative 'paint job'?), this devotion, sadly, was not always enough, and the not-so-faithful jeep broke down numerous times in spectacular style. On the sides of roads when it had run out of water; in the queue for the Ferry to Illiassa with a trail of impatient cars behind us; and on the edge of the river banks by the canoe to Tendaba Camp, we all banded together to help Nikki give his 'baby' a helping hand (well, really, more of a good push!) to revive her.

The open-topped nature of the Jeeps meant that we were able to take in all the surrounding scenery and atmosphere whilst on our travels through the different regions of the Gambia. We took most opportunities to 'tan' but when the mid-day heat became a little too oppressive the covers were a welcome relief. 'Good Hair' was really not an option when travelling in the Jeeps. The wind would whip by so fast that, without sunglasses, we would need to squint in order to see. Contacts and dust" (I discovered), did not make a good match". Neither, surprisingly did Livy's head and



heavy luggage, which she found out to her detriment when she was left nearly concussed after a confrontation between the two.

Whenever we stopped, whether on the streets of the Banjul or along more rural roadways, children would appear as if from nowhere. We gave out a few empty water bottles (with more than a little trepidation, as this often caused fights to break out) and pens and pencils to the majority. The cage-like structures of the Jeeps served as an unexpected climbing frame for Elsa, but also for some of the local children who at one point swarmed towards one of the Jeeps, climbing up the sides in such numbers that we could no longer see, only hear, the Jeep's occupants! Finally, after some stern words of warning from Tamba, the children dispersed leaving a rather dishevelled, pen-and-pencil-less group of girls behind. A valuable lesson had been learned by all.

The Ferry

Waiting for the Ferry was an experience. Whether it was in the dead of the early-morning, or in the afternoon heat you could pretty much guarantee that there would be insects: small, buzzing, biting flies, which luckily, when they flew into the mercifully open-topped jeeps, could fly straight back out again.

The Canoe

Whilst at Tendaba Camp, one of the methods we used to travel back to Illiassa was to take a one-hour canoe journey across the River Gambia each morning and evening. To lighten up the journey, Nikki would get up and do a variety show for us, singing such hits as 'Sonam Mariamma', 'I Like Dancing, I Like Singing', and of course, 'Hey Nikki'. This provided us with much entertainment, especially his unique dancing skills.



On one occasion, we were almost stranded in the river due to low tides of the water levels in the early morning. In order for us to get off the canoe, we had to use very mathematical methods of balancing the canoe out by jumping onto a rickety-looking rusty boat. Although it looked a bit dodgy, it was our saving grace and we all managed to get onto the side of the bank safely.

We probably all agree on the fact that Mrs Pickering enjoyed the canoe journeys the most. She even 'bagsied' a seat next to the captain so he could tell her about the birds!



The Donkeys

One of the main methods of transport in the rural village of Illiassa was donkey-carting. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to try out this transportation method, but from what we could see, donkey-carting was probably a more normal form of transport than an electrical motor vehicle. Donkeys are known for their hard-working attitude, although I have to admit those Gambian donkeys did look a little bit over-worked.



Kardia and Jess