

Gambia week 1, in detail & 22 in summary (October 2005 – March 2006)

It was a good flight back to Gambia, take off was just 1 hour delayed – customs choose not to charge us on the charity items we brought in because our Gambian staff knew them – Gambia is very much a who you know society and small cash to help the process run smoothly, only this time we didn't even need small cash.

Kabs was his usual welcoming self - apart from having fallen earlier in the week, during a bad rain storm and hurt his hand, (eventually I got him to have it x-rayed - he had broken a bone and went to the hospital to have it put in plaster and has to spend a week on very light duties and NO driving.)

My compound (Gambian for your home pad) was immaculate thanks to Filly and not just inside but also the garden. The builders started work (the Sunday before I arrived) on the second phase of the house I am building, it has a living room with a good sized veranda, a kitchen, toilet and shower downstairs and a back porch, it is essential during the rains to have a covered area. Although not accessible from inside the house there is also a small generator & water pump room and store.

Upstairs and this is where the builders are now starting there will be two bedrooms and a steep stairs to the flat and tiled roof. The builders have all the upstairs walls built and now the wood workers will make the shuttering for the reinforced pillars and what Gambian builders call the first ring this is at the level of the top of the windows and doors and is a concrete lintel running all round the walls – hence a ring, then there is a further course of blocks and on top a second ring. This ring then provides the basic fixings for the reinforced concrete floor.

Concrete block buildings like this in Gambia are only one block thick so progress at this stage is very fast.

The other major event of the 1st week was the end of Ramadan marked by a festival to celebrate the end of fasting – In the UK fasting was very easy, I seldom bothered to get up before sunrise to have a drink or anything to eat, but was certainly clock watching for the last 30 minutes until it was time to have a drink and a light meal. In Gambia where it gets light earlier and dark later – (we still have sunshine at 6.30 each evening in November) and the by 10 each day the temperature is in the mid 30's – so having a big drink and my Gambian breakfast at 6.00am was essential. This was a litre and a half of coffee or tea – half a Tapalapa which is a Gambia bread stick sliced length ways and toasted with butter and delicious Ginger marmalade – very similar to deep rich thick cut Dundee marmalade but without the whisky cask processing – delicious.

Breakfast sets me up till about 2pm, and at that point I feel about the same as the 30mins before the UK fast breaking, but with another 5 hours to go. Definitely time for an afternoon siesta of 4 hours and 55 minutes with luck, followed by a hot litre of Chai tea – taken especially from UK for this very purpose.

Only 5 days of it AND I'm saying I will never do Ramadan in Gambia and it's true – next year the festival will move 10 days forward so will end on Tuesday 24th October, so I think Monday the 23rd of October will be my arrival day in time for the end of Ramadan festival. Actually fasting during Ramadan makes the festival really special because you have actually done something to celebrate and when a whole country has done it you can

imagine the place has the atmosphere of Trafalgar Square on New Years Eve – without the drunks – it is very special.

Well all of that is now over and we are getting back to business.

GTS members Ian and Hilary arrived on Friday - & fortunately on Thursday I went to visit the Manjai compound that GTS uses as it's most basic accommodation – It definitely needed 'seeing to' after the rainy season. The builders had been in to do the roofs of the store and toilet and shower and the shower had all been tiled and so had the yard at the back – the house had been painted in side and out, the builders and decorators had moved out and the furniture been moved back in – Ready for the guests.!!!

By Gambian standards it was a very 'des res' – by European standards it needed a total clean everywhere and thank God for Filly – I took her there at 9 the next morning & made a list of everything essential that was needed then went into Serekunda (the local town) to do the shopping.

Ian and Hilary arrived dead on time at 5.30 and with the job half finished Filley and I left at 7. (If there was ever a time we prayed for a late flight this was it, but I think the flight was actually early, Hill & Ian were more than understanding but also very tired.

We got back at 9.30 the next morning and I prised Filley away at 4pm – “I think another day will sort it out” she said – Ian and Hilary were 'delighted' !! They had thoroughly enjoyed Filley all day and now want her as their house keeper for the six months of their stay. I know in six months this house will be perfect in every detail just like my house is.

Well that is pretty much the sum total of the week – a fairly typical Gambian week really – it has been nice visiting all of the super markets that Adam and I visit for the 'restaurant shopping' and it was really touching that the first question ALL asked was how is 'Adams' we heard he had an accident – 'we didn't believe it he is such a nice boy' – accidents in Gambia are generally considered the direct result of divine intervention and generally happen to people who are not nice – and need punishment. So anyway that's Adams punished for past and future misdemeanours we hope.

We have had to delay the reopening of the Bar and Restaurant until Adam gets here in late December and hopefully I will have it totally ready to start as soon as he sets foot on Gambia soil – a wedding for 40 guests on Christmas Day – lucky boy!!

The staff are all very well rested and all want to wait till we re-open rather than find other jobs – I had a staff meeting today Friday and it really is like a BIG family – part of the charm of the place is that the staff are 99% of the time smiling and amazingly friendly, even with no customers I could feel it today – a magic atmosphere that most visitors love but just can't quite put their fingers on.

It is very very good to be back.

That was week one of my 23 week stay. Here is the rest in summary

During the visit we achieved what amounted to 4 major building programmes, 3 at my compound, a major project on each of the 3 buildings and one at the GTS restaurant.

We now have 2 en-suite rooms in the original guest house and a totally self contained house with sun roof for four people. Making 5 double rooms for GTS and GETS members visiting Gambia.

My house, now has 3 additional rooms upstairs with a new bathroom and tiny kitchen opening onto a roof patio.

The building work at the restaurant, project 4, entailed demolishing the old Dardeema building and building a very nice stairway to the upstairs restaurant, the removal of the old office and rebuilding and refurbishment of the new office, The difference is staggering.

On March 24th Filley and I got married at the Justice department in Banjul, we had hoped the building would be finished, but it was very far from complete as our wedding photos show. Another addition to my Gambian household is 'Charlie' the Gambian dog that adopted Filley during the rainy season. Charlie is a very cool dog.

Seedia, the watchman at the compound, since late 2004 left during this visit and was replaced by Ousman, (who also left shortly after my return to the UK) We now have security from the Uncle Sam Security Company.

After 23 weeks of building and very little else (and it was still not completed when I left on the 30th March) I left Gambia with very mixed feelings of sadness but also relief. Ian and Hillary very kindly saw much of the final work completed and Filley supervised the painting and decorating of the whole compound – inside and out and then cleared and cleaned everywhere & finished the garden by the middle of May.

It was my hardest and longest visit to date, it was devoted to building and very little time was spent on the charities, apart from frequent meetings with visitors and brief visits to most of the projects. Kabs as usual was of immeasurable help and the whole GTS and GETS team kept the work moving forwards, while I built – Thanks to them all.

I will retire from my UK job in August 2006 and move to Gambia in September 2006. I am considering returning for a few months each year to help at The CLA GameFair and visit family and friends, but essentially I will be based in Gambia and working on the development of the two charities. In the first year I will be focusing on the curriculum implementation and specifically on the language work prepared by Cliff Parfit and the reading and writing work prepared in Gambia by Jo.

Francis
GTS and GETSuk

As a footnote, I would like to pay tribute to my former wife & close friend, the mother of our 4 beautiful children: Toby, Adam, India and Owen. Without her enormous support and understanding GTS and GETS would simply not exist. Our divorce, just like the 30 years of our marriage was a joint co-operative effort with no acrimony – she has now moved to Dorset, very close to the sea and we continue to enjoy our children and talk at length about each others many interests To an extraordinary wonderful and generous woman of spirit in every way.

Helen Glynn