

Gambia.2016 – The Genieri Trip Report/Saga.

The trip was a life experience to put it mildly. It was made all the more worthwhile by experiencing the great depth of Gambian hospitality and kindness. Their appreciation of what you have enabled us to do via your donations is boundless. They are almost overwhelmed.

We first collected a bunch of stationery items in Banjul and made ready for the journey of about 175Km. from the coastal fringe into the heart of Gambia. Should only take about 3 hours (mmm!)



The South bank road is truly excellent and initially great time was made, with expectations of easily getting to Genieri in the daylight. However (there had to be a however!), about 80Km into the drive we were treated to the very best of Gambian breakdowns, just to add a wee bit of spice to our lives. Very loud bangs, jammed gearbox, multiple holes in the crankcase, oil all over the road, cabin filled with oil smoke and a well seized engine – the Full Monty.

It happened not too long before nightfall which was a bit of a concern, but a great Gambian guy towed us the 60km. from the breakdown site to the local Police Station for them to look after the jeep, and we got there just before we ran out of tow-rope from breakages.

Then he simply delivered us to the village safe and sound, no charge “I didn’t help you for money” was all he said before continuing for another 250Km. into the very east of The Gambia. This gentleman actually phoned us a few days later to offer us a lift back to Banjul on this return journey, but we declined it as we had the jeep to get back and it was a bit too early in any case.

The breakdown was of course terminal, we knew it, and really looked forward to towing the knackered jeep back to Banjul with a back-up car at the end of the visit. Bush tom-toms were ablaze trying to make arrangements.



And so to Genieri – made it, and so glad to be there, tired, dirty, sweaty and hungry, looking forward to luxury (?) accommodation under a big Baobab tree, water from the well, pit toilets and not too many Lesser Spotted Gambian Bedroom Spiders. Magical – we had the best suite in the village, all compliments of the villagers (they refused payment for food or lodgings). An interesting village meal and a night’s sleep (broken only the braying of a seriously irritated donkey) saw us through to the morning, and a village cooked breakfast of onions, chips and bread.



All we had to do now was get into Soma (8Km.) and buy the foodstuffs that were the real focus of the activity.

And only just in the nick of time. Rice was down to half a bag (maybe 2 or 3 days), and they only had that because they had reduced the school's feeding schedule to every 2nd day. Pity we've no vehicle and the village tractor is out on a job. Again we were saved by a kind Gambian, this time a local taxi owner - who provided a car and driver for just the price of the petrol.

The driver did take a bit more than he was due, but on discovery of this he was provided with some local attitude adjustment therapy (kinetic variety).

Purchased

25	50Kg. bags of rice
5	20 litre drums of cooking oil
1	20Kg bag of onions
3	20Kg bags of potatoes
2	Boxes of Stock cubes
3	Mixing basins
1	Plastic mug
18	Small plastic school chairs

Traders kindly discounted the goods as it was charity based, not by much, but they did try to help, and that's so typical of The Gambia. Some nasty negotiations followed and a not too kind lorry owner eventually and reluctantly delivered the goods to the village, to be greeted by a screaming bunch of gleeful children. Looks like I'm getting the hang of this haggling business. Pandemonium of noise and laughter.

These little guys can reverse Entropy, or - from mayhem came order. They can also shift 50Kg. bags of rice.



20 minutes from a standing start and all the goods were sorted, waiting for the statutory photographs. The lorry driver was not invited, and sulked off to his next job.





The upshot of it all is that the whole school population now has a guaranteed meal at least 5 times a week until the end of the school year, which broadly coincides with the start of the harvest. It may even be a little better than that. The Headmaster feels secure enough from a supply perspective that he's considering putting on a breakfast of porridge on Saturdays and Sundays, to ensure that kids have something to eat at least once per day.

He's going to do the arithmetic and he'll let me know. We've got some spare money in the till for emergency aid eg. poor harvest, but if they're a wee bit short this surely has to be the thing to do with some of it.

Lunch tomorrow promises to be interesting. How do you cook a full meal for 76 children, plus teachers (see below).



You need a Jainaba, a Sophie, a great big pot, some logs for a fire and an oar. Simple! And that's just how it happened. No fuss, no bother, just a giant pot of rice, onions and potato.

It all makes me think that we (the "developed" world) have forgotten how to do things simply and cheaply.

These guys could teach us a thing or two.

And so the children can eat.



There was a surprising amount level of discipline, with the little guys patiently waiting in line. Lots of excitement of course, and what were probably celebratory portions duly handed out, about 130gm. of rice, 15gm. of onion and half a potato per head. Sounds pitiful, but it's actually enough for a single meal.

They really did enjoy it, and of course there was nothing left at the end. Not surprising really, with all the kids shown below well fed. Each child now also has a pencil, rubber, pencil sharpener and a seat – another first.

It seemed that they were almost as gleeful to have these things as they were to have the food.



Great - only the return journey and the broken jeep to contend with.

The back-up car did arrive, compliments of another exceptionally generous Gambian from Bakau. He made it available for us, with driver, and again just for the price of the petrol. An aging Volvo Lambda positively roaring into the village. Such a pity that it broke down after about 8 miles on a short shopping run in Soma at 80 mph and accelerating hard, driven by the Bakau's own Boy-Wonder. "It's the coil" said Boy-Wonder, "it gets hot". Never a moment of doubt (especially self-doubt). He proceeded to "cure" the problem by wrapping the entire coil (including the leads) in a towel and pouring cold water over it. No-one had told him that the coil produces large quantities of high voltage electricity to make the spark plugs go, **and coils don't like water**. Waste of time talking to him, so he was relegated to failed driver. Fault assessed as a vapour lock in the fuel system, cured by keeping the load modest and keeping fuel running through the system. This character was renamed Club Foot, consistent with the delicacy of his driving skills.

A few days later the jeep was collected from the police station, complete with the local Police Inspector who tapped a lift to Banjul. We hopped from tow-rope supplier to tow-rope supplier until we got to home base (Club Foot was in action again in the towed vehicle, and rope breaks were getting really boring). The charming Inspector gave up the task and changed to a passing bush taxi along the way.

A hotel - heaven indeed - beds with sheets and toilets with tiles. You may think that our transport troubles would be over by this time, I was cynical enough at this stage to doubt it. And I was right.

On the last day, just one mile from the airport the Volvo's brakes failed completely, and we came to an undignified halt having crashed through the barriers of a military check-point, albeit at low speed. Many awkward moments we have had in our travels, but this really took the biscuit. It's the AK47s and GPMGs that make me a wee bit nervous.

But no worries, after issuing a right royal bollocking to our driver, the officer in charge said that he hoped we had enjoyed our visit to Gambia, and that his only real concern was that the car was safe for us.

Check-in, Airbus, Home. Done.

BEFORE



AFTER



Would we do it again? Just can't wait.

Jimmy and Sophie Houston