

Bob's Gambian Gallivant

I finalised my packing and checked I had everything I needed and set off for the airport. En route we drove through a snowstorm and the wind was blowing force 8. Not an auspicious start and it was with some trepidation that I walked across the apron on to the plane that would take me from Shetland to the mainland and onward toward my destination. Take off was similar to going up a helter skelter the wrong way. 3 flights later and I was in Norfolk to meet my grandson for the first time. That meeting would be significant in other ways later in the trip.



A day later and I am on the train from London Bridge to Gatwick. It is the commuter train and whilst I am full of the usual pre-trip excitement and trepidation my fellow train travellers are engrossed in their smart phones (checking them every other second to see if someone has texted/emailed or posted something on social media) or their laptops where they are completing some unfinished priority task that will help them shin up the greasy pole a little more. I lead a much more laid back life on Shetland and whilst I keep in touch with friends etc I have more than enough time to check out of he world on a regular basis and look at the wonders of what we are surrounded by. I wonder how often these commuters have such precious moments.

Arrive at Gatwick and check into hotel. Find some food and then an early night as it is a 5.30 alarm the next morning. Get to check in just before 6 and meet up with the intrepid band who will be my fellow travelling companions for the next week. We are an elite group of 9 riders very unlike my previous experience with Enduro Africa where we were 75 strong. With everyone checked in we hit the breakfast cafe in departures with Drew (our paramedic) keeping an eye on the departure gate. We eventually amble over to discover that we are nearly last. There are no toilets close by and 3 of us (myself included) decide on a last minute dash before the getting to the desk with the nice lady asking her boss if they were still allowing boarding. Luckily the answer was yes. As it turned out we were not last but more of that in a minute.

Usual bus transfer to the plane, which was by then nearly full. Happily there was more than sufficient storage space to stash our hand luggage. Due to weight restrictions it is usual to wear your motocross boots onto the plane thus saving a few kilos of weight allowance. I carried mine but had left enough space in my rucksack to stash my trainers if someone in officialdom was going to insist that I could not carry my boots onto the plane. By that stage I had managed to board 4 flights carrying my boots and no one had batted an eyelid. Just shows what a brass neck can do sometimes!

The flight was uneventful in that the plane was relatively new and comfortable. It was quite thrilling to be flying at 36 000ft and following the coast of Africa. I was particularly taken with the dunes of Morocco as we flew past Agadir. These held a special resonance for me as I have booked to go there in 2016 on another motorcycle tour although this one is a holiday rather than a fundraising trip. I sat next to Gambians on the trip. One was quiet and reserved and had been a finance director at the Ministry of Health and knew of Riders and had worked with them. The other was exuberant and was telling everyone around him that he had not been home for 9 years and no one knew he was returning prodigal like. He had pushed the boarding time even more than us. He explained that he had fallen asleep on the Gatwick Express and ended up back in London. He managed to get back to Gatwick and check in after the designated time. Just to put the icing on the cake he then managed to get lost in departures. Our last minute splash and dash was insignificant in the circumstances.

Whilst we were able to see the coast of Africa and the Moroccan dunes clearly from 36 000ft the same could not be said for Banjul our first point of contact with the Gambia. I should make the Point that the word "The" is very important when referring to the country. We descended through a thick bank of fog and then emerged into a sun kissed vista. The pilot brake tested everyone once we had landed with a somewhat sharp burst of deceleration once we were on terra forma again. Looking out the window I had a wry smile as the usual African embrace of health and safety was on full display. The apron was thronging with ground staff. None of them had ear protection although I did glimpse the odd flash of high vis. A young female policewoman escorted us on the bus to the terminal. I know that they say you are getting older when police officers appear young. I don't think I am that old just yet but the general consensus was that this young lady was probably a school leaver as she could not have been more than 16. Obligatory Ebola screening in the terminal. As usual I picked the slowest moving queue for immigration which was successfully cleared even by one of our intrepid band who had forgotten that he had a £20 note in his passport. Yes Andrew it was you!

Having collected our luggage we then had to navigate the usual hustlers offering the best exchange rate for currency and the beggars that littered the route to our transfer bus. Once on the bus we were treated to the ubiquitous tourist commentary. This one was actually quite interesting and informative. So what can I tell you about The Gambia?

The Gambia is about 500km long and 25km wide at its narrowest and 50km wide at its widest. Seventy per cent of the population are farmers who grow all their crops using rainfall as there are no irrigation systems in the country. The rainy season is concentrated into the period July to September. There are no exports to speak of and the main currency earner is tourism. 2015 saw a bumper crop of millet and watermelons. We arrived on 1st December and all of the watermelon crop which was just being harvested would have been eaten by the end of December. Having sampled it on many occasions whilst we were there I can tell you it was delicious.

The rest of the day was spent settling into the hotel where we would stay for 2 nights before heading up country. The first evening was pleasant with good food, a very relaxed atmosphere and a good briefing and greeting from Gary and Jennie from Riders. I will say this again at the end but I cannot thank enough Gary, Jennie, Drew, Ali and all the Riders team who looked after us royally and made the trip what it was.

Day 2

I was up bright and early and raring to go. We were picked up by car and taken to Riders HQ at Kaffeking. The purpose was two fold being to pick up our bikes and to meet some of the Riders team and see what they did.

We were introduced to Auntie T or Therese Drammeh. She is the former Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Health and was instrumental in getting Riders initially involved. When she retired she was persuaded to work for Riders for 3 months and is still there some 13 years later. The Gambia is the main headquarters for Riders in Africa and it is from these humble buildings that so much good work is organized and arranged. Auntie T gave us a potted history of how Riders has evolved and the many successes it has had. One of the main problems in Africa is that donor agencies are very good at providing initial support and vehicles. However, those vehicles can be inappropriate for the areas to where they are to be deployed and spares can be hard to come by or will be too expensive. Allied to this is a lack of expertise or willingness to stay on top of the maintenance programmes. The Riders approach has been so successful that many of the aid agencies now specify that they will only assist certain programmes if Riders is involved with the upkeep maintenance of the vehicles. This is often contrary to normal practice where a tendering exercise will be undertaken. This is a great testament to the track record that Riders has and gave us all a great sense of joy to be associated with them and their efforts.

Next up were introduced to our motorcycles for the trip. We knew that we would be riding Yamaha AG100's. These are very basic two stroke 100c machines. I was presented with the keys to the second new motorcycle I was to ride in Africa having been fortunate enough to have been given a new bike when I was in South Africa in 2007. The ability to maintain these bikes simply was shown later in the trip when Sal and the boys from Riders were able to change two pistons that were holed on two bikes within about 2 hours.

I was very impressed with the overall set up at Riders and the array of machinery they maintained. This ranged from motorcycles through 4x'4s, ambulances and buses. I was glad to see that health and safety was suitably absent with one of the female mechanics wearing some very nice fake crocodile pumps. It was good to see that vehicle maintenance was not just a male preserve. Having grown up in the automotive industry (my dad ran a garage) I was very impressed to see the engine of a Ford Ranger stripped right back to the crankcases and in the process of being rebuilt from the bottom up so to speak.



The idea was that we would have short acclimatization ride to get the feel for the bikes and then we would leave Banjul with a police escort for the first foray into The Gambia. A short lunch of chicken wraps was consumed and away we went for our first ride. First impressions of riding the bike were that first gear was to be dispensed with as soon as possible. It could not be avoided completely as the shift pattern had neutral at the bottom of the gear change unlike in the UK where neutral is between first and second. After a short time messing around we returned to Riders HQ to get on with the first ride of the trip. Wherever you go in the world there is always unexpected hospitality. This was one such occasion. We returned to find that Ali, a programme director at Riders who was also to accompany us in the support truck, and his crew had organized a lunch of chicken yassa for us. Our plates were overflowing and we could not finish them but an unexpected pleasure nonetheless.

There was the a further short delay as the police car that was to be our escort had to be refueled and the police driver had to be similarly refreshed. As we were waiting Gary expressed the desire that the police driver did not just bugger off and expect us to keep up. It turned out to be a forlorn hope.

I have done some crazy things in my time but chasing a police car through the streets of Banjul on a 100cc bike that had not yet been run in is certainly up there with them. The police driver had a fairly innovative way of clearing a path for us. He simply drove down the middle of the road scattering traffic every way.

If a car was coming towards us and he thought that the driver was not getting out of the way quickly enough he adopted the simple expedient of moving completely into that lane and driving directly at the approaching vehicle. There is some helmet cam footage of this for you to watch. Needless to say the pace was what might be called spirited but not one that we were ever going to maintain given our lack of power. The driver got so excited that he actually forgot that we were going to be stopping at the museum at the village of Tanjeh and he went sailing on whilst we went into the museum. He did eventually return.

The museum is a kind of model village and we were shown the major elements of village life. First up was the Bantaba Tree. This is a central part of any village. It is a large tree with overhanging branches that provide shade. It is where the villagers meet and when disputes are settled and justice dispensed. If an issue I brought to the Bantaba Tree it has to be settled before anyone can leave and the settlement has to be by consensus. We also observed all aspects of village culture and superstition. My wife is a potter and spinner so I had to ensure that I took plenty of photographs of the local crafts and products. A number of young men were weaving. This was interesting in that they sat in a frame and used the feet to drive the loom. Stones held down the yarn. It was explained to us that only men were permitted to weave and even then it was only certain artisanal families who were allowed to work at this craft.

Following our tour we were entertained by some of the children of those who kept the museum. Children the world over are always delightful and they still range from the intensely shy to the precocious.



It was then time to get back to the hotel in Banjul. Following negotiations with the police driver the pace on the return journey was a bit more sedate. It may just have been my senses betraying me but I did feel that the closer we got to the built up areas and more potential casualties that the pace did increase. I could have been mistaken on this but we got back to the hotel without any incidents. Quite what the package holidaymakers who had been lounging by the pool all day made of us was hard to judge but we lightened up the bar for a little while with a well-earned beer.

Dinner was preceded by some cabaret. First up was a guy who was nicknamed "Mr. Piano man". I couldn't reveal who came up with this but her name starts with J! To say that this was entertaining might be pushing the bounds of taste but he was clearly making a good living playing well known songs all delivered in a Stevie Wonder style. In the spirit of adventure I had barracuda for dinner. Very tasty and a bit like scallops in texture and consistency. The after dinner entertainment was much better comprising traditional drummers and dancers. We went to bed all looking forward to the next leg of the journey and to get going into the real heart of the Gambia.

Day Three Banjul to Pakalinding

Up early as usual and ready to get going on our trip to the north and east of the country. The cases were safely loaded into the truck that would be our bag carrier. We returned to Riders HQ for final checks and goodbyes and to meet with our illustrious police escort again. Our trip out of Banjul was a little more sedate but I couldn't help thinking that another chase was just bubbling below the surface.

We left our escort and had our first experience of proper off road riding today. We were going to meet Jacob one of the community health nurses and she was going to take us to a clinic that she attends regularly. The off road riding started off as a dirt road and then became deep sand and we also had our first taste of fes fes. This is a kind of exploding sand as when you hit it a cloud of fine sand is kicked up. I enjoyed the riding immensely as it ranged from paddling to get going but then I was able to hook fourth gear, sit back and hang on for the ride. Got some good helmet cam footage of Gary riding with a trainee health nurse as pillion. He used the crash bars as footpegs but as we both discovered later if you were not careful the exhaust could burn through your boot as the natural position for your foot out the boot in contact with the exhaust.

En route to the clinic we had an impromptu stop at a school that was along the trail. This resulted in the usual mayhem that happens when a group of unknown westerners turn up. After a bit of initial reticence the kids were soon engaging in high fives and smiling for the camera. When we got to the clinic the place was buzzing. The clinic is attached to a school so we were soon once again swamped by kids who wanted to say hello and generally lark about. We exchanged customs in that I taught them how to high five and they in turn taught me how to "tough shake." This comprised of making a fist and then exchanging a not too violent meeting of fists with your opposite number. Great fun was had by all. It was interesting talking to some of the older boys one of whom had killed a

scorpion. He told me why this was a good thing to do. As ever they were fascinated to see photos of themselves on digital cameras and they wanted to know how my CCTV camera. This was my helmet cam. Interestingly, the police at more than one checkpoint also referred to it as a cctv camera. I don't know how much surveillance takes place but the phrase was an interesting one from my point of view.

Having enjoyed ourselves on the dirt roads we then had the pain of tarmac for 140km. You know what they say about pleasure and pain! Upon arrival at our accommodation for the night at Pakalinding we were introduced to another experience. I am quite happy to rough it and have done so on many occasions in my life. This was easy roughing it in that we were staying at what was once a good road lodge but had fallen into disrepair following the death of the guy who had managed it. The accommodation itself comprised traditional round houses with an en suite toilet and bathroom. We ranked ourselves based on the state of facilities in our individual huts. Mine had a toilet, shower and wash hand basin. The plug did not work mainly because it was not connected to the mains and a short length of flex was testament to his fact. The bed was clean and there was a mosquito net which was handy. The food in the evening was very good. It was chicken and rice with assorted vegetables including guava, potatoes and tomatoes. As ever, dinner was washed down with a few well-earned beers to clear the dust from our throats.

We had a reasonably restful sleep although the local wildlife let us know it was there at various stages and we were woken at 5.20 a.m. for morning prayers by the local muezzin at the mosque. This would not be the first time that we were so wakened.

Day 4 Pakalinding to Santi Karantaba

The day got off to an interesting start. I have eaten some interesting breakfasts in my time especially when I used to go camping as a teenager. I recall breakfast of cream of chicken soup and cremated sausages even now. Today's breakfast was up there with that. We had lukewarm chips with cold fried eggs and baked beans. Unfortunately the cooking facilities were not geared for larger groups. There was plenty of fresh bread, jam and bananas so at least we had our fair share of carbs and protein as we later joked.

Our first port of call was Farafeni which we reached via the ferry. This was the usual heartening experience where health and safety dare not mention it's name. The ferry had ramps welded on fore and aft and where they hit the riverbank that was where disembarkation would be. The fact that you had to ride through water and up the bank simply added to the experience. We joked about the normal briefing that we usually experience on ferries. On this occasion they simply pulled the chain across and off we went.

Farafeni was the usual riot of colour smells and general mayhem that seems to prevail in all African market towns. We stopped off at a hospital to see then work they undertook. Again it is interesting to see the standards that apply and the

very good work that is undertaken in what we in the west would regard as unsuitable facilities. We were shown the hospital pharmacy as well as some of the wards. Drew commented that the drug regime was on a par with what he dealt with on a daily basis.

Next to the hospital was a fire station. We had to refuel but as soon as we had Stav was off down to the fire station to exchange greetings with his fellow firefighters. He is a firefighter in London. Photos taken with a promise to email them once we had returned home.

We then got going on the road heading for Santi Karantaba. As the kilometers ticked off I began to wonder if the Romans had ever visited The Gambia as the roads were arrow straight. Even where there was a bend it was just a gentle curve and you could see all the way through it. Today was probably the hottest it had been and this was to have consequences for us. I was just behind Dave when the tell tale puff of smoke exited the exhaust to indicate that all was not well with the piston in his engine. Luckily we had a spare bike so a swap was made and off we went again. That didn't last for very long as Charles suffered the same fate as Dave. Unlike Dave Charles was to earn himself a nickname for his mechanical antics. Thereafter he was known as "full throttle" due to his response when he was asked how much throttle he had been applying just before his engine gave up the ghost.

At this point there was much discussion as to what the potential causes might have been. This ranged from bad petrol (we had not long filled up) to a lack of lubrication. There was, however, no doubt that there were definite signs of the piston crown on the spark plug. Our suspicions were later confirmed when the engines were stripped. The general consensus was that the seizures were probably as a result of the heat and the speed we had been travelling at. The remedy was to adjust the oil pump to put more oil with the petrol and put a cup full of oil in the petrol tank as well. We also reduced speed. We now had 2 bikes on the support truck and Dave had to ride in the back with them until we met up with the truck later in the day when he could borrow another bike.

The second bike had stopped at a settlement by the side of the road. Naturally we engaged with the locals who were interested in what we were doing. We in turn took an interest in their settlement. We spoke to them under the shade of the bantaba tree. I spoke, through Dave, to one of the elders and he agreed that I could take some video in his compound but not within the actual buildings. I understood that eh did not want me to be poking around in their private areas. Dave explained that it was customary to offer something by way of a thank you. I didn't have anything left at this stage other than money so I gave him 100 delassi. This is about £1.50 but the reaction from the gentleman was truly humbling and reinforced to me again just how lucky I am.

Later in the day we stopped at a café near a military checkpoint. We engaged in conversation with one of the soldiers who was in there taking refreshment. This was to have an interesting postscript but more of that later.

Lunch was taken at Wassu Stone Circles. This was a wonderful experience. The guide explained that the stones are the burial place of kings. It has been partially excavated but the bones have been left in situ once samples had been taken. Although the stones are not as tall as at Stonehenge this site is the equivalent of that place but it was interesting that there was impenetrable grass growing through some of the groups of stones.

On any trip you have to react to what occurs during the day. The delay caused by the engine blowups had cost us time resulting in the need to review whether or not we would have time to ride the 85km of dirt ride that we had been looking forward to. For those of you who have not been to Africa and in particular near to the equator you have to realise that the day is roughly divided in two hence the mention of the equator which derives from "equal." There is no dusk in Africa. It is either light or dark. Whilst we were considering this we received word that the ferry we were to get at the end of the dirt road to our accommodation for the night had broken down. The decision was made for us and we crossed the river at Basse which then left us with a short road section to our destination. As we approached the settlement we were overtaken by a pickup with a Riders logo on it. In the flat bed were 4 musicians playing us into the accommodation for the night. An unexpected surprise and the music and dancing continued for quite a while when we parked up for the night. The guys had drums, whistles and a single string instrument that looked like a single string fiddle. Some of the local women gave us a demonstration of their traditional dancing and the young leader of the band showed us some incredible moves.

I am quite good at dad dancing and have embarrassed my family on many occasions. However, when I see dancing in Africa I am always awe struck by the lithe moves and the ability of the dancers to move their limbs in ways that we can only stand back and admire. It is always a pleasure to see people enjoying themselves through music and dance. I spoke to the leader of the group after they had finished about music and how happy he was to live where he did.

Whilst all this excitement was going on Sal and the local mechanics from Riders had set to in stripping the two afflicted bikes. New pistons had been picked up from the local Riders depot and within 2 hours one of the bikes was up and running. The piston for the second bike was not the right size so a new piston would have to be acquired in the morning and the engine finished. It was testament to the dedication of these boys that the job was undertaken mostly in the dark with the assistance of only head torches for light.

We then had an excellent evening meal washed down with the ubiquitous local beer. Charles was presented with the holed piston from his bike too much laughter. The band played a bit more. Retired to bed and had a very good sleep which was again brought to an end by call to prayer at 5.20 a.m.

Day 5 Santi Karantaba to Pakalinding

Awoken at 5.20 a.m. by the call to prayer. Tossed and turned for a while and then decided to get up. Quite a restful start to the day with a number of us

writing up our diaries. Breakfast comprised freshly baked bread from the local market together with jam and tea/coffee. Very nice and just what we needed to get us going.

The day improved significantly when it was announced just after breakfast that the ferry had been repaired and we would be able to ride the dirt road after all. I was not the only one to experience feelings of bliss, ecstasy etc at the prospect of 85km of dirt road. We set off with a smile on our faces and headed off to pick up the ferry. Once across the river we started on the dirt road slowly with everyone taking it easy. This road is one of the last that has not been tarmacked and whilst there are proposals to tarmac it which is disappointing from a riding point of view it would be churlish to say that it should remain as is for the entertainment of thrill seeking westerners. What we were faced with was miles after miles of glorious dirt road that went from a basic dirt road to deep sand, ruts, large holes into which you could disappear and then re-emerge and fess fess.

It soon became clear that some of us were getting a little trigger happy and gradually the pace at the front increased. This was mainly as a result of Nacho and Helios deciding that they would pin it and see what happened. In these situations when you are riding in the dirt there are only two things you can do. The first is to ride alongside the leading riders so that you can see where you are going and thus avoid crashing. The second is to ride at a safe distance behind them so that you can see and thus avoid a crash. As this was not a race the vast majority adopted the second method but even then when a rider in front hit the fess fess it could be difficult to see by the time you reached that spot as the air would still be pregnant with dust.

On a road like this you can either take your own path or follow someone else's on the basis that you can see if they had to evade something. At one point I followed the path of the rider in front. I suddenly saw a hole that I would normally have simply jumped just by accelerating. However, I was aware that Charles was close behind me and he would not have seen the hole in time. Brakes were jammed on. In and out of the hole I went with limbs and bike throwing various shapes. I thought I was taking route one over the handlebars at one point but held on. When I came to a stop the handlebars had moved in the clamps and were now right up against the headlight cowling. I must have held on for dear life! A couple of minutes adjustment and we were fit to go again. In the meantime Charles had seen what was about to occur and was able to take evasive action.

Whilst we were enjoying ourselves we did stop regularly to ensure that we stayed in touch with everyone else. However, some of us did have a bit of a detour. Whilst very welcome and enjoyable it resulted in a lost 40 minutes which would have consequences for us later in the day. We confirmed that we were going the wrong way when we spoke to a young couple on a motorcycle coming in the other direction. We followed them back to where our turn off should be and were reunited with our fellow riders. As we followed them I reflected on the fact that we were suitably booted and suited whilst their only concession was to wear a crash helmet. They stopped briefly when we got to our turn. It was only

when they were pulling off that we realised that nuzzled between them was a small baby.

Our lunch stop was a project run by some Peace Corps volunteers Derek and his wife Jamie. Derek gave us a potted history of the Peace Corp and how it attracted hippies. He described himself as a Cuban hippy. He worked as a ranger in America and had started a project in The Gambia working with bees. This had two different objectives. The first was to provide a source of income for the community by selling the honey and other related products. The second was to establish some new forest to combat general deforestation.

Jamie is a qualified nurse and she has been working in a number of health projects with the local health care workers who are of course supported by Riders.

We were given a talk on the honey project and told of the plans for a visitor centre in the middle of the forest that is being planted. After lunch we were able to ride through the forest. Lunch was a wonderful dish of rice, peppers, onions, sweet potato and river fish. They were whole and so it was necessary to ensure that the bits you did not want to eat were removed. We used spoons although fingers would have been acceptable. Whilst we were waiting on lunch we were encouraged to relax. Both Nacho and I took this to its logical conclusion by examining the inside of our eyelids. However, in my case I was also clutching the spoon that we were to eat with. Somewhere out there is a picture of this event. Needless to say I had to endure some witty remarks.

The commercial aspect of the bee farming is working well. Derek and his merry band had a supply of hand cream, lip balm and sap all made using the beeswax and honey as their basic elements. We bought all of the stock they had on display.

As we left the forest and making our way on to our next destination I was struck by one thing that Derek told us of the history of the Peace Corps. It is part of the American Army and was set up in the sixties as an antidote to the aggression of the mainstream army. However, the commitment is not what you might think as its funding is the same as for the us military band. I was left wondering how much more good work could be done if a change in emphasis were to occur.

This was a frustrating day from a technology point of view. My helmet cam was playing up and kept thinking that it did not have enough battery. Even worse, as I discovered when we were at the site of the visitor centre, was that my still camera had decided that it had had enough rough treatment and was not going to work any more. Ultimately it was confirmed that it was beyond repair.

We re-crossed the river going towards our second stop in Pakalinding getting off the ferry around 5 p.m. What should have been a quick refuelling stop turned into the usual riotous interaction with the local children who simply appeared from nowhere. We eventually got away knowing that we still had a race to cover 120 km to our destination for the day. It was inevitable that we would lose

this race as dark is at 7.p.m. and the bikes were simply not quick enough to cover the distance in the available time. On any trip there is always a day when you have to dig deep. This was that time on this trip. We set off going as quickly as we could. Eventually we had to stop, as our dark goggles simply did not provide sufficient light. Most of sue were able to put on glasses or simply ride without goggles. As darkness fell we became a very tight convoy behind the support truck. 6-volt electrics do not provide daylight type lighting. As we rode along I never thought that I would be grateful for the fact that the road was straight as it made the riding so much easier.

We finally arrived at Pakalinding at 7.45 p.m. having set off at 8.30 that morning. A long day but a satisfying one. There was much hooting of horns as we went into the lodge with much back slapping and well dones by everyone. A real team spirit!

Most of us decided to avail ourselves of the food that had been prepared for us. Nacho and Helios had other ideas. As ardent Barcelona supporters they were whisked off to the local town to watch the game which was being streamed into the local cinema. Helios caused a bit of a commotion as he decided to take a photograph on his phone but didn't turn the flash off. His fellow watchers were apparently not overly impressed.

Meanwhile back at the lodges we were being entertained by some local musicians and dancers. We had all experienced African singing and dancing before and we were soon looking at each other quizzically as the sound was incredibly muted and we wondered if this was some local tradition. As it turned out there had been a death in the village and the entertainers did not want to make noise so as to disturb those who were grieving. The entertainers did not wish to cancel as they needed the money. Their endeavours were brought to an early end out of respect but we were all pretty tired in any event. Another reminder for us of the fragility of the local economic conditions for some who despite the local traditions still needed to earn money to eat.

Day 6 Pakalinding to Boboi Beach

I awoke the next morning with great anticipation of the culinary delights that would be placed in front of us for breakfast. This morning we were given boiled potatoes, 2 hard boiled eggs and spiced onions. Helios and I exchanged bemused opinions as to just how hot they actually were. Needless to say we did not feast on too much of them. The supplementary bread was very welcome.

Our first stop today was to be a solar project that had been a Riders project. Ali had been project director and he gave us a history of how it had come about and what it had achieved. The building was amazing comprising a water tower that had two guest rooms incorporated into it so that the community could get some supplementary income from travellers. Ali explained that the water was taken from a very deep source in the ground and they had drilled under the water table so that the water was less likely to be contaminated. The solar panels on the roof drove the pumps to extract the water. Ali explained that the cost was circa \$100 000 dollars. Other agencies could not understand how it could have been done so cheaply. Ali explained that whilst they wanted to give the villages water they also had to have ownership of the project. Whilst Riders paid for tradesmen like bricklayers and plumbers where they were required the villagers had to dig the trenches and lay the pipes both from the water tower but also into the houses. Each house was given two taps. One in the kitchen and the other in the bathroom. The difference this has made to daily life is for many of the villagers is incomparable as the women no longer need to spend a good part of their day going to the well for water. There are obvious health benefits to a clean supply of water as well.

As we were close to the presidential palace we decided to take a detour as there was good dirt road that circled it. To get on this road we had to negotiate a military checkpoint. Having been through a couple of military checkpoints we knew that care was the order of the day. Nevertheless this one was of a different magnitude. On a platform about 10 feet in the air was a very late machine gun. The soldier behind it began shouting at us. Initial trepidation turned to relief when he walked out from behind it and we then discovered that eh was the soldier we had been speaking to earlier in the week. He was excited to see us again. We were just relieved to be on our way.

We duly had fun riding the dirt road and the stopped at the front of the palace gates. It was amazing to see the goods on offer in this location. I went to photograph a couple of bedsteads that had been carved out of wood. The guy who made them engaged me in conversation and was offering to organize to freight one home for me. I eventually politely declined but I could admire the workmanship that had gone into these pieces of furniture.

Lunch was at Boboi Beach. The original intention was then to get on the beach and ride back towards Banjul for as far as we could get. However, the tide and time were against us. We concluded our day riding the quick route on tarmac back to the hotel arriving about 5.30. Everyone was straight into the bar. By this stage of the adventure our riding kit was starting to show signs of where we had

been and having ridden through the ubiquitous fes fes we were not exactly attired like the tourists who were enjoying some winter sun. After a couple of well earned and ice cool beers I then endured the luxury of a bath to get rid of the inevitable dirt acquired en route.

The after dinner entertainment was really good. A troupe of African dancers and entertainers led by an albino mesmerised us with their energy and enthusiasm. At the end of their display they came among the audience looking for volunteers to drag up for the usual audience participation. For some reason unknown to me I was volunteered. How could I refuse to dance with a young scantily clad lady I asked myself as I engaged in my usual dad dancing exhibition.

Day 7 To Kartong and back

Kartong is the most southerly settlement in The Gambia. En route we stopped off at a clinic from where some of the Rider's supported community health workers operate. It was humbling to see the lack of facilities but the good work that was being done by the equivalent of our GPs. The surgery comprised a single table in a room with drugs on the table that could be instantly dispensed. The main area where work is undertaken is testing for various diseases. Malaria is a big issue. We were shown how a malaria test is undertaken. The results are available in twenty minutes and appropriate action can then be taken.

We then went out with a community health nurse. One of the visits was his monthly visit to a village reached down a twenty minute ride on a dirt road. Easy for us in the dry season but it was not hard to imagine that it would be a struggle when the rains were at their peak. The purpose of the visit was to check on the progress of a baby who was suffering from malnutrition. Upon our arrival there was the usual interaction with the children. Managed to video Stav and Drew trying to show the young kinds how to play Frisbee which was left with them. The mum and baby duly arrived and the scales were unloaded so that the baby could be weighed. For some reason we all tuned into a vibe that all was not as it seemed. I could not bring myself to video this encounter as I had the sense that here was a story that was not straightforward. The first clue was the reaction of the child when it was out on the scales. It simply sat there stock still. That is not what babies do. It transpired that the baby had put on weight and now weighed six and a half kilos. Based on this the health worker was able to work out how much supplements the baby would get in the next month. These are energy bar type biscuits.

When the work was done we asked how old the baby was. It turned out this was not a baby but an 18 month old child. We were shown the weight chart. At birth it weighed just over 3 kilos. By the age of 6 months it's weight had dropped to 2 kilos but was then on an upward trajectory since then. The child's brother had suffered from malnutrition as well but was now at school. The health worker was determined to ensure that this child would also survive.

The mum was standing with the child and I asked if I could take a photo on my phone. That photo will haunt me for the rest of my life. I showed her the photo and

she then smiled for a second photo. The contrast was significant but the original was the more natural one. It turned out that she had a learning disability and also suffered from epilepsy. A number of us wondered how many challenges a person needed in their lives but once again the ability of a regular check by a medic on a bike was making a significant difference but it also reinforces just how trivial some of supposed problems actually are.

There was a postscript to this as I was speaking to my daughter later that day and she had just taken my grandson to be weighed. At just 7 weeks he weighed half a kilo less than the 18 month old child.

The next stop for lunch was a reptile farm. We were introduced to The Snake Lady who was a young, confident and relaxed individual. I don't mind admitting that I have a phobia about snakes and whilst nearly everyone else was happy to handle the snakes there was no way I was going to do that. I had tried in the past and I didn't really fancy having a large snake around my neck in circumstances where I could act irrationally. We saw various snakes including the spitting cobra. Our host explained that if you were unlucky enough to get venom in the eye it could be washed out with water. However, if water was not available she explained that urine was just as effective and concluded this was the only occasion when it was socially acceptable to pee in your neighbour's eye!

Finally we got to ride the beach back towards Banjul. Plenty of photos and videos before we got going. The riding was fine until we reached the site of a new mosque being built by the beach. The tide had not gone out far enough which gave us some hard riding through deep sand and rocks to get around to the next part. We got as far as Tanje. It was impressive to see the piroques lined up on the beach and in the sea. The colorful decoration was wonderful. We had to leave the beach here a bit earlier than we had hoped but a great time had been had by all.

Our final port of call was back to the riders HQ to hand back the bikes. We met up with Jacob again who had been asked to lead us home. What she didn't know was that she was going to be given one of our "new" bikes as hers was now 5 years old and had covered a lot of miles.

It was then back to the hotel having left behind a pair of off road boots and body armour I did not want to take back with me and which would be put to good use. That night we had been invited to a barbecue at the house of Auntie T's son. A lovely evening as a lot of the mechanics and other staff at Riders HQ also came along. Jennie was taken off and dressed in a traditional Gambian costume. Everyone mixed with everyone else and all with plenty of dancing and larking was having a great time about.

Just when we thought it was all over there was a lull in the proceedings where DJ Gary was in the house. He called us all up individually and presented us with the number plate of the bike we had ridden. There was a further surprise as the Riders staff had also made us a very special batik banner as a memento of our trip.

Our final morning was taken up with a shopping trip to Banjul craft market. Managed to get all my Christmas shopping done in just over an hour. Result!

It was then time to get back to the airport for the flight home. As we were going from the bus to our plane Drew thought that he saw his case being loaded on to a plane that was destined for Stockholm. The ground staff assured him that he need have no worries. Needless to say when we got back to Gatwick and there was no sign of Drew's case we started to enquire if he knew how much a flight to Stockholm would cost. He did look somewhat worried as the number of bags diminished on the carousel. Just when he was about to give up hope his case appeared. It was the last one onto the carousel. With farewells exchanged it was off to the hotel for me for a good nights sleep before flying home to Shetland the next day.



Reflection

On the plane home I sat and thought about the experiences I had just enjoyed. This was the second time I had ridden motorcycles in Africa and both had been in support of Riders. I would happily go on another adventure and I hope to do so in the future. So what did I make of my trip to The Gambia?

One of the things that amused me was that I had used my horn more in one week than I had in the whole of my driving life. Liberal use of the horn to warn people and animals of your approach seems to be a compulsory part of driving. I was also struck by the ever-present mobile phone with roadside advertising of the various tariffs available. Even in the poorest areas they were much in evidence and I reflected on how these things have been so assimilated into our society that even where people struggle to eat they are still seen as an essential accessory.

The people were very friendly and welcoming. Being associated with Riders gave us a certain cache and it was wonderful to see the recognition everywhere we went. They truly are seen as part of the essential infrastructure of the country. The children were brilliant with no inhibitions. Just like children everywhere. I

was reminded of my previous trip when seeing the children and their variety of school uniforms and the thirst for knowledge.

The presence of so many checkpoints tells its own story but at least medical care is virtually free although the daily grind to feed families carries on. This was brought it no sharp focus for me on the train from Gatwick to London where I overheard a conversation where someone was trying to explain to a person on the other end of the phone how to put a deal together without putting any money into it. There was talk of mezzanine and waterfall agreements. I wondered what the world was coming to when some had no choice but to grind out a daily subsistence.

I will continue to support Riders and will try to raise money to be used to fund the various projects they are involved with throughout Africa. I would like to go back to The Gambia at some stage but hope that other trips will be organized so that I can yet another part of Arica and once again do a little bit to help my fellow citizens of the world.

If you feel so motivated my JustGiving page remains open. Just type in Robert-Mc-Geady and follow the link. Thanks for reading and for your support thus far.



