

Farakunku Lodges May Newsletter 2016

Hello to all our guests ...we hope you are now enjoying some decent spring sunshine after the miserable winter in Northern Europe. It was great that so many of you came to enjoy our sun and warmth here in The Gambia over the last six months. With so many repeat guests, it was like welcoming friends to stay for much of the time. We also met many new guests and, very often, they were 'birders' who had discovered us at the Rutland Water annual Birdfair. We will be there again this August, back in Marquee 1 in the same position as previous years, by the entrance/exit, but now numbered stand 21 (not 19 as before).

It's the end of our eighth season and now we have time to catch up on maintenance before we leave for UK early next month. Some of you will already know (from our Facebook page) about the bush fire that burnt down our largest thatched shelter in the tree/bird sanctuary. A spark jumped the wall and the whole thing was ablaze in seconds. Thankfully no-one was hurt and with great local help we had the whole structure doused, cleared, cleaned, rebuilt, thatched and painted within two weeks, in time for new guests to enjoy. The scorched trees around the shelter seem to have recovered already and are sprouting new growth. Nature is wonderful.



Our groundsman Sekouba, decided to help with costs by offering to thatch the shelter for us but then had a nasty accident when one of the rafters split under his weight (dodgy timber) and ended up in hospital for 2 nights with concussion, cracked ribs, the end of his toe sliced off and severe bruising of back and shoulder. It was a frightening time and could have been a whole lot worse but he has fully recovered and is absolutely fine now. We also have a new groundsman, Alif, who replaced Alvin early in March, and he has proved to be a great asset.

Several of our guests this season spent a morning at the nearby Art village at Tunbung and produced a range of lovely tie and dye and screen printed tablecloths. I have been painting some pictures for the lodges as well and even sold a few to guests! I am hoping to have a small studio built in the corner of the tree sanctuary next year, where I can leave paints and equipment out without having to pack away all the time. If guests fancy a morning painting alongside me, perhaps that would be something to plan for in future.



Since we closed at the end of April, Moses and I have been taking a few good, long walks together...the weather is perfect. We've found some new trails that will be added to the collection for guests next season. At the moment the cashew trees are full of cashew fruits so we can simply pick them up and suck the delicious juice. The cashew nuts are being harvested and roasted so will all be on sale for the visitors next season.



We're also enjoying free time to visit Moses' Orange farm where we are now growing lots of vegetables for sale at the local markets. Our two full time gardeners there are doing an amazing job along with lots of help from local ladies and our own two groundsmen from Farakunku who have been going voluntarily with us to dig and weed. The land is fully plumbed and runs on 100% solar power with a bore hole and solar pump to provide a sprinkler system, hoses and 5 small holding tanks/reservoirs with water.



There have already been plenty of cucumbers sold (several sacks) and now the peppers, chillies, tomatoes, aubergines and okra are all developing well. Almost a third of the whole acreage has been taken up with the vegetables which are between all the orange trees. Our first oranges have appeared so we are hopeful that next winter we will see our first crop. It's all a far cry from the original untamed scrub and bush growth just 3 years ago.



We have now acquired two young dogs for the farm. They came as puppies from the animal refuge, and are now trained to bark at intruders. It's hard not to treat them as pets as they are so cute ...especially as Moses named them David and Betty after our two lovely guests who have been coming to stay at Farakunku every year!



I have been making all the jams, marmalades and chutneys ready for next season with the mango, grapefruit and oranges that are available now. I've also made lots of cucumber relish... a new recipe...very fiery and great with curry or cheese and tomato baguettes!

The *Farakunku Foundation* children's charity continues to expand its remit for helping children in Education. For a further second school term, it has been able to continue helping the Tujereng Community Nursery School with a feeding programme to give the children a mid-day lunch. Visiting the school at lunch time has shown what a difference this has made to the well being of the children. Each pupil is asked to bring two sticks of firewood every Monday to be used as fuel for the wood burning stoves...a real community project.



The Foundation has also helped by paying the salary for one teacher; and ensured the water supply is paid for the next year (after a worrying time when their one tap was disconnected for more than a week due to a small payment arrears)



I have been visiting the school recently to launch a reading initiative, using 'real' picture story books for the children to share and look at each morning on arrival. This is followed up with the teacher selecting one book at the end of the session to read aloud and use for teaching points and discussion. I have used *Handa's Surprise*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Baby Elephant* so far, but need many more books to ensure that each class has enough. So far, I have boxed up enough for just 2 classes, each class has about 40 children and there are six classes! If any guests are planning to return next season, perhaps they would be kind enough to look out one or two simple picture books in good condition (not lots of text) appropriate for nursery age African children?!



I must say it is strange to be back in the classroom promoting literacy again and teaching action rhymes and songs...it's ten years since I retired from teaching in Devon!



The sponsorship programme of individual children to be able to receive an education has continued, thanks to the generosity of many of our guests...we now have 75 children with sponsorships. It is great to know that local children are really benefiting from our presence here.

The birds in our gardens are beginning to get their bright rainy season plumage although there is no sign of rain yet (no mosquitoes and no frogs croaking.) With all the flowering trees and shrubs looking their best now it is a very colourful time of year. We always wish guests would consider coming in April as it has the best weather (not too hot) and fabulous flora ...perhaps we can persuade you for another visit! We also reduce our rates for the whole of April! As I write this on the veranda there are bronze manikins, red fire-finch and vivid yellow weavers at the water cup and bowls, bright blue glossy starlings in the tamarind tree, two woodpeckers on the African tulip tree and a Violet Turaco has just flown over! Truth!

We do look forward to seeing some of you again next season (we're already getting a few early bookings) and will probably see some of you at the Birdfair. In the meantime we thank you for your support as well as all the lovely comments on tripadvisor.

Best regards to you all
Heather and Moses