

## WHAT TO EXPECT

Liz had invited me to The Gambia to meet my sponsored child. I had never been to Africa before and so it was to be a new experience.

My very first impression at the airport was total chaos - but, then so are a lot of Greek airports.

We arrived at our accommodation, which was very clean and much bigger than I had imagined. The next day was a rest day and I couldn't believe how friendly the Gambians were. The staff all came up and introduced themselves and once they knew my name, that was it, I was greeted personally each and every time they saw me. Sunday was the big day when I met my child, Samba Ceesay. We walked to the school along roads of sand with family compounds each side. Being the weekend there were a lot of people around and all were calling "Hello. How are you?"

We reached the school and the Headmaster brought Samba in. (Samba has moved on from nursery school to primary school). He was dressed in his very best and almost certainly new clothes, but his sandals were pink with flowers on them—how many English boys would have worn them! Far more importantly than the way he was dressed; the poor little boy was absolutely terrified! As much as the Headmaster tried to get him to speak, he was too overwhelmed to say anything. After a while he went back into the playground but sat on the bench for a while recovering before he was able to play with the other children. After a while, Liz and I took some photographs of the children and when it was time to leave, the children walked back with us, holding our hands and talking to us all the way.

Our next visit was on Tuesday when the children were at school. It was so sweet to see. There were three classes, grouped according to age, with the children sitting four to a bench, which would take only two children in the UK. As soon as they saw us they were distracted and started to wave to us and shake our hands. After they had settled down we had a tour of the classrooms and each classroom showed us what they had learned, with one classroom giving a rousing rendition of head, shoulders, knees and toes.

Now a confession! I do not consider myself to be good or at ease with children I don't know. These children were so lovable and happy that it is impossible not to be totally uplifted in their presence. One little girl seemed totally taken with me, that I heard myself saying I want to sponsor Sainabou Joof.

Sponsoring these children is probably one of the best things I have ever done, and I can assure you, your sponsorship money is much appreciated and valued.

Written by Julie Paine