

Monday 9th February 2009, Freetown, Sierra Leone

The flight in, over Dubai and London, was uneventful. The BMI-operated flight to Lungi, the international airport of Freetown, Sierra Leone, was a bit more interesting, as I was situated way in the back and sat across the aisle of a big bloke in handcuffs, accompanied by a Sierra Leonean and a British security guard, and an Indian medic. My guess, at first, was that this was a criminal wanted for war crimes or something in Sierra Leone, but as we arrived in Lungi, the guards took off his handcuffs and I saw him standing among the crowd waiting for his luggage. By the time the “criminal” got his bags, the conveyor belt stopped, signalling the end of the luggage, and at the same time, the fact that my bag had not arrived. My colleagues bags did arrive, and he joined me as I spent the following half hour filling in forms with a helpful but inattentive official. We were then shown the way out through customs, which went very smoothly for me, having nothing at all to show, but meant that Gavin, my colleague, had to turn over all bags he had. Outside we found a guy with our names on a plackard, and followed him to get the hovercraft transfer to Freetown on the other side of the bay. We stepped on a bus to the terminal, and then waited a bit along the beach for the craft to arrive. It arrived the way all hovercrafts arrive, in a hail of blowing sand and spray. The trip across was very fast, some 20 minutes. Freetown, at night, looks like a well spread out city, covering the hillside as far as the eye can see. The hovercraft actually makes landing quite close to a few hotels along the bay, one of which we were taken to by our driver for the rest of the time, Mohammed. The hotel was signposted with Chinese characters, making me suspect it was built and run by Chinese. This all became more and more obvious as Gavin, who comes from Hong Kong, pointed out all Chinese-made bits and pieces (doors, lights, sinks,...). The hotel also seemed a bit in disrepair, with lights not working, a conspicuously near empty swimming pool, a big boiler in the bathroom that did not work, a Chinese television set with indecipherable Chinese remote control and so on. Not that we cared too much, as we just wanted to eat something quick and then sleep. Not surprisingly the restaurant too had a Chinese menu, but that did not stop us from eating well, although Gavin did think his Chinese dish was not as he “expected” it.



The hovercraft from Lungi to Freetown



The swimming pool at Bintumani Hotel, Freetown

Tuesday 10th

The first day in Sierra Leone was spent running around Freetown to see about my missing luggage, and to get me some clothes in the interim. Now, getting clothes in a “modern” shop already gives me the creeps, but shopping in downtown Freetown, somewhere in the back of a dark and overstocked and chaotic shop using a dim torch light is definitely not my caper. I quickly identified a passable pair of shorts, a T-shirt and dug into a heap of socks and underpants to uncover some beauties for emergency use. I also got some sandals from the side of the road, and we were then off to Lunsar. Lunsar’s raison d’être is a 30-year old iron mine. The hill that makes up most of the old mine, Masaboin Hill, dominates the landscape to the south, but whatever infrastructure the mine ever had put in place has by now largely disappeared. There is the main road, a tarmac stretching east-west that connects Lunsar to Freetown, two hours away, and there are the old buildings that allude to a better past, but now, Lunsar has no electric power and for the larger part no running water. The office does have power, with a large generator running 24 hours a day, making sleep nearly impossible for people around the area (I guess). We were told by Jason, the Project Manager here at Lunsar, that the preferred hotel of the “expat” staff is in Makeni, a large town some 100 km east of Lunsar (40 minutes drive), but that there was no room available until the 12th. We were offered a room in the office and would soon experience first-hand how bad the generator would be. The permanent power did mean that the wireless internet, installed in the office would be available 24-hours a day too! After lunch we therefore immediately set about emailing and reading the news online. The rest of the day we were shown around the office a bit and got to meet the large number of staff, a lot of them so-called security, who were sitting around chatting all day. We also met two Australian “security officers”, who were also sitting around doing, as far as I could see, nothing much. They did say they would prepare the guys who would work with us, and would look after our security, but as they were sticking around the office all day I could not imagine how they would contribute to our security while mapping in the bush. The people so far seemed pretty nice anyway. We tucked into our beds, freshly made up with new sheets, pillows and blankets, pretty early as we were still a bit tired of the trip. The night was spent in short stints of sleep interrupted by waking moments, sweating in the sweltering temperatures of tropical Sierra Leone. The air conditioning that was mounted in the wall of my room was on three-phase power and could not work.



The Marampa Iron Ore office in Lunsar

Wednesday 11th

We were assigned a driver and a car to go out for a reconnaissance trip to the southern part of the tenement. The car was a 4WD-looking car, but the automatic gear stick and lack of buttons with High or Low Range on made me suspect it was no 4WD. We soon found out as, when we got to a ferry, the car got stuck and needed to be pushed. Lucky enough most of the tracks were reasonable and we had no further problems. As we were driving around we stopped in most villages to ask for directions and find rock outcrop. This strategy was largely effective and we were often directed to good exposure, so that by the end of the day we had a good idea of the rock types in the region. We also were pleased to see that we were welcomed everywhere, and that the local population was very friendly and helpful. Our driver, Mohammed, also seemed to know what we were after and helped a lot in explaining to the villagers what we were looking for. In the late afternoon we stopped in Lunsar to buy some cold beer of the local variety (Star Beer), and got back to the office around 1700 hrs, where the two Australian blokes in charge of security were anxiously waiting, with mobile phones in hand. They told us they were worried and that we should have called in to say we were going to be late. We exchanged numbers and promised to be better behaved in future. Soon after, they all left to Makeni, as there was to be no driving at night. We were left alone in the house to have supper and turn in early to try another night in the heat.



The car on the pontoon across Rokel River

Myself and Gavin Chan, with villagers

Thursday 12th

Today, with a bit of luck, my suitcase will arrive! I get into my now dirty clothes and get ready for our second car-traverse. We get assigned a “better” car, as we had mentioned that yesterday’s transport had no 4x4. We are now assigned an old Landcruiser troop carrier that probably served during the civil war or something. Our driver was also changed, and we now are taken around by a strapping fellow called Maurice. The day is spent up north in the tenement, again with the aim to get an idea of access, and map out rocks along the roads. We now also have two workers, who by now have been vetted by the security officers. Because of that we do a bit more walking about to get them warmed up, and spend a pleasant day. As we noticed before, our arrival at villages is invariably met with approval, and we are never short of help to find those outcrops. The driver and field assistants seem to be able to communicate well with the locals, so that we are often brought to outcrops of rock that would otherwise be difficult to locate. Because of the anxious attitude of the security officers last afternoon, we manage to get in by 1630 hrs, to the general approval of the guys in the

office. It also means we have a bit of time to enter our data and organise the samples. Another positive is that my suitcase has arrived and is now blocking the passage to the kitchen. We will also be sleeping in the “Wusum” hotel in Makeni, the best establishment in that town, which is frequented by the numerous UN agencies and Aid workers. After a wonderful dinner we get a lift in the rental car of the security officers. We squeeze into the car and because we have not much in common to discuss, we make the trip mostly in silence. The little we do discuss is with the older guy of the two, John, who seems to have worked in Zambia in the 70s and 80s, I assume as a mercenary to train Zambian troops. John is married to a “Rhodesian” woman (a white Zimbabwean), and appears to have been active in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and more recently all over northern and central Africa. In conversation he seems quite pleasant, but there is something faintly “mercenary-like” about him all the same.

Makeni is a large town in between the granite hills of Central Sierra Leone. As we drive through, we notice the stark contrast between Makeni, a real city, and Lunsar, a dead city. There’s lots of commerce going on, the roads are full of motorbikes, and the sidewalks crawling with late evening shoppers. The Wusum hotel is situated outside the centre, along a dirt road that hosts various Missions, Catholic Schools and NGO buildings. As we drive into the hotel we are greeted by a large and grotesque, gold-painted, sitting statue of what must depict a cross between a large breasted half-naked woman and a Buddha. We are lucky that the water fountain that seems to be incorporated in the statue is not working, or we’d be witnessing a much worse scenario (who knows where the water would jet from!). The lobby of the hotel is dark, but there is a very large LCD TV and a few couches that indicate its function as an entertainment area as well. It is decorated with more stupendously grotesque carved statues of what should depict local people collecting parlmnuts or something, but they give the place a “witchcrafty” feel. We get the keys to our rooms, and then struggle to open the doors as the corridor is too dark. We are explained that the electricity is switched on from 1900 to 0700 hrs, which means that in a quarter of an hour we’ll have light, TV, hot water and all other luxuries normally associated with a hotel. Gavin and I decide to kill that time by having a beer at the pool. The pool is actually three pools, two of which seem in working order. The large one does have a cloudy look to it, and the small kid pool also does not look too fresh. The third pool is a deep hole, empty, next to yet another grotesque contraption that is supposed to look like a rocky waterfall and that jets water all over the place. Despite the lack of electricity, we do get a cold beer, and sit sipping on the side closest to the bar. On the other side of the pool a group of 20 or so white guys are also drinking and talking. Judging from the fleet of white large 4WD vehicles with UN plates outside, I think it is safe to guess these are UN guys on the last day of their meeting or workshop. Once the power gets on, we both get to our rooms, have a shower and a much deserved sleep in our air-conditioned room.



Ugly statue at Wusum Hotel The grotesque fountain-statue at the gate of Wusum Hotel

Friday 13th

Today we decided to go for our first independent foot traverse. We both get a helper with a small rucksack and set off to the northern part of the tenement. When we get to our planned pickup point, we point that out to Maurice, and then direct him to where we are to start our traverse. We get dropped some 10 km away from the pick up point and Maurice drives back to that point to wait for us. Because of the success of engaging the locals in our search for outcrop, I ask in every village for people to show us around to see rocks. This often leads to long walks to see a crummy little pebble, but more often leads to some good outcrops. The field assistant also seems to enjoy it better with some locals, as his English is rather limited. We see large green snakes on two occasions during the day, and the reaction from the locals tells me they are probably trouble. I also come across a villager processing palm oil, by boiling down a yellow "soup" of the palm nuts. I also come across some empty pits which, I am told, also play a role in the process. I make good progress and get back to the car around 1500 hrs, where I wait for another hour or so until Gavin turns up. He looks positively tired and tells me he's suffering from the heat. I think we all are! We get back to camp by five, just in time for dinner and a few beers. This time we get a lift from Jason and his driver, but he plugs the I-pod ear phones in his ears closing off any chance of a conversation. We are both quite tired from our first walk anyway, and when we get to the hotel we skip the beers and go straight to our rooms. I do enter my data points into an excel sheet and pass that over to Gavin before turning in.



Green snakes seen during the first foot traverse



Manufacture of palm nut oil



The final product



Gavin, tired after his first walk

Saturday 14th

A newer Landcruiser vehicle has arrived today, and we get that assigned to us from now on, together with Maurice to drive it. Not that we need it this time, as we plan a set of traverses just north of Lunsar. My field assistant now is another guy who speaks no English at all, apart from the word “rock” that is. He also is a loud-mouthed fellow, shouting out his sentences rather than speaking normally. It makes everything seem a bit funny, and I immediately like the guy. I spend the day explaining what I want by sign language, while he keeps shouting back to me in his language, but we somehow get to understand each other. He soon understands that he has to ask villagers to bring us to rocks every chance we get, and it all goes well. He also is very proud of the big hammer I put in his hands, and violently whacks any rock I point to. His worries about getting his feet wet, especially as he is wearing new combat boots from the company, soon disappear as he sees me sloshing through the vile water with my boots. Soon enough he is sloshing even more violently than me. This time we get to the car to find Gavin already waiting. The driver has also taken the initiative to bring along a cool box, and we get treated with chilled water and fruit juice: bliss! Back at the office there is time to get the data in the GIS and look at our work so far. Jason is happy with the progress. We get a lift with him to the hotel, but this time we end up talking some of the way. Jason invites us for a few

beers at the pool, an offer we gladly accept. The few beers do turn out to be four each, and I'm a bit drunk when I get to bed. This turns out to be a good thing as this is Saturday night, and as is often the case in African hotels, there's a loud disco with some local band playing. The band turned out to be awful, which does not stop them to push decibels until about two in the morning, when the party moved to the pool side. The most annoying thing, however, was the "Master of Ceremony" that kept yakking away everytime he got hold of a microphone, which unfortunately was all too often. I did manage to sleep a little through the night-long barrage of noise, but was still in pretty poor shape in the morning.

Sunday 15th and Monday 16th

Feeling pretty poorly, I did not look forward to doing another traverse. Nevertheless, after a very light breakfast, we set off for some foot traversing up north. About an hour into the traverse I started to feel better and enjoy the walk. The weather was also a bit better, with some cloud cover sheltering us from the direct sunlight. I was amazed, yet again, at the inventiveness of the village kids in their play. Two kids ran in front of me for at least 2 kilometers, holding a stick horizontally in front of them and pretending to be motorbikes. I came across several family groups extracting palm oil in their traditional fashion and managed to piece together steps in the method. The bundles of nuts are taken from the palm trees, and boiled in a three legged pot for a couple of hours. The resulting "stew" is poured into a rectangular hole dug in the ground, and lined with stones and tree branches and clay to make it "watertight". The process is repeated until they have enough to fill the pit, and then, as the stuff has cooled, kids are summoned to stamp on the nuts, turning the mix into a yellow soup. This is then scooped into the same three-legged pot and boiled off, until the oil starts floating to the surface. This is scooped off, filtered, and ready for use.

The next day, Monday, we finished up the northern part of the map. I did a car traverse along three villages, stopping at each one to ask the locals to guide me to outcrop. Maurice, was very keen to join me on these foot traverses, despite the fact he was sweating enormously during the effort. "I want to drain this body" he explained, "I want to be more fit". He's very nice company too, as his English is quite good. In every village he also took it upon himself to explain what we were doing, and why it was good for the village. "If we are successful, the entire village will benefit" he said, and as a result, the village was really helpful to show me their rocks. Some of the outcrops would have been absolutely impossible to find by myself. They were often hacking away at dense bush to uncover a moss-covered rock that would otherwise have remained unnoticed. Their enthusiasm did mean that they showed me rock outcrops very far away from the village too, and even though we were doing a car-traverse, we did a fair bit of walking as a result. By 1600 hrs I raised Gavin on the walkie talkie, and then went to pick him up in a village further north. He, too, had done a longer than planned traverse, apparently getting carried away with the geology in his region. We were both tired, but on the way back to Makeni in the car later that evening, I asked Mohammed, our first driver, if he'd like to go for a drink in Makeni. He said "I would very much like that, sir". So, after a short shower, we met him in the car park and drove into town. It was already dark, as even in Makeni there is no electricity everywhere. We entered a darker area as Mohammed was enquiring along the road on where we could find cool drinks. We finally made it to a "bar" that was running a small generator and had "cool" drinks. The generator was also fuelling a loud music system, forcing us to sit outside to allow any discussion. Having settled down, Mohammed then told us a few stories about the civil war. He had a car at the time and was running a business as a "mule" to carry

diamonds from SE Sierra Leone to Conakry in Guinea. He was captured and held by rebels and said that the rebels killed a man in front of him using machete. He was then released after they took the car, his 20 carats of diamonds and some 1500 US dollars he had on him. When Gavin asked whether he had been scared, he said “in my mind I was already dead; yes I was very scared”. This all happened some 10 years ago, and Sierra Leone is a nice and quiet place now. One would not suspect that this country had such a bloody past.



Abutu (white man) walking through attracts attention Especially if we also take notes and look at rocks

Tuesday 17th

Today we had a day in the office to clean up our data and attempt to draw some lines on the map. Gavin had quite a lot of work to do on his database, so in the morning I took a car and did a reconnaissance trip down to the river to see if I could arrange some boats to map along it. After talking to the villagers in two places, I had set us up for two simultaneous river traverses, converging onto one pick up point, the village of Katik. I was planning to do the upstream traverse, while Gavin would do the down stream one. The road down to Katik passes through the old mining complex of Marampa. Some of the old buildings are still lived in, but most are derelict. Nevertheless, Lunsar must have been quite some place when mining was going on. There are rusty fire hydrant points dotted around the place, the houses look pretty fancy (even though they are derelict), and there are also some semi-recognisable structures of what could have been a theatre, a church, several mosques and a very large hospital. In Katik there are also ruins of what used to be a pumping station to get water from the Rokel River to Lunsar.

Back in the office, Gavin had meanwhile finished his databases. He was excited about the prospect of doing a boat traverse tomorrow. I had lunch, and we then sat together to try and draft the first lines of the map. In doing that we could get an idea of some infill traverses we could plan to improve the map, time allowing. By the end of the day we had quite a reasonable map for the northern part, although there was still room for improvement, especially if we could analyse some air photographs.

Wednesday 18th

Gavin and I were dropped off at different point, each of us using a separate car. The idea was to find the guys with the boat, discuss the price, and then map along the river. Gavin was to go down stream, for a distance of about 6 kilometers, and I was to go upstream over 5 kilometers or so. We did find out from the skippers that the river was quite shallow, and that passing with a boat would possibly be somewhat problematic, but I had my hopes that they would be able to get the boats through the difficult parts. When I arrived, the guy I spoke to was there. He came up to the car, beaming, probably expecting a handsome income for the taxi ride. I had Mohammed explain that we were not interested in getting to Katik, the pick up point, in a hurry, and that I wanted to see as many rocks as possible. The field assistant, allocated to me from the large pool of security officers that Marampa Iron Ore inherited from African Minerals Ltd, told me there are no rocks. We were standing next to the river, which at that location splits, leaving a rocky island in the middle, a large outcrop of rock. I pointed again and said : "I want to go and see those rocks, and then we'll go up stream and see some more". He adamantly told me, looking at the rocky island, "there are no rocks". A bit more explaining was clearly in order, and Mohammed set about telling the guy what I was after. He finally understood (I hope), and we had by that time come to an agreement with the boat guy to get his services for the day at 20,000 Leones. I got into the boat, a solid hollowed out hunk of tropical wood, and found it immediately lacking of balance. We pushed off anyhow, which is when I also noticed a sizeable hole in the bow of the boat. Water steadily accumulated on the bottom, but we could somehow get across to the island, where I set about looking at the rocks that supposedly were not there. Meanwhile the boat was readied for the second leg, which involved a lot of bailing, so that when I had done my work we could board again for the next hazardous leg. The guys soon got the drift of what I was doing, so that after about 30 minutes they automatically zig zagged along the river to give me access to all the rocks. We saw monkeys on the banks, which the field assistant promptly wanted to kill and eat, and the skipper got into fishing while I was hammering rocks, steadily accruing a load of small, presumably edible, fish. As forewarned, the river had quite a few shallow bits that required us to get out and map on the shore, while the guy walked the boat across the rapids to the other side. Nevertheless, we made good progress, until we got to a stage where we were only using the boat for 5% of the time. I decided to leave the boat behind and walk along the river for a further hour or so, after which we radioed in and got to walking back to the car. From the static-infused communication with Gavin I gathered that he, like me, had abandoned the boat, and was making his way back to the car away from the river. By the time I was at the car, he was still two kilometres out. I paid my skipper and gave him an extra 5,000 for a great effort, and Gavin called in he was at the road and wanted to be picked up. We found him, as advertised, on the road a kilometre away, wet, tired and pissed off. They had apparently capsized the boat sometime in the afternoon, losing the Trimble mapping device in the process, and getting everything else wet enough to preclude any further mapping. The field assistant Gavin was assigned could not swim, and must have thought he'd die when the boat capsized. Because of all this, Gavin was in a piss poor mood, although he kept a brave face, and we got back to camp, ate dinner and almost immediately went back to the hotel. I still had a few beers in the bar with Jason, but Gavin, I assume, went straight to bed.



The river traverse (Rokel River), on foot in shallow bits, with the dug out canoe following for the deeper bits

Thursday 19th

Today, I filled in the gap left by Gavin along the river, where some interesting structure was to be anticipated, while Gavin mapped along the track and streams just south of Lunsar, going down to Katik. I had yet another field assistant (I think we are really getting through field assistants quicker than should reasonably be expected), and went through the same procedure of getting them to understand that I wanted to look at rocks. He was quite quick on the uptake, but did not feel too inclined to take the lead into the bush or water. I walked in front all day, and after we met a large black snake that fell off a tree, he stayed well behind. He did carry the machete, so when we tried to cut through thick bush towards the river, he was forced to take the front and brave the beasties. The machete was completely useless, so in the end, as my patience ran out, I simply thrashed through the bush getting cuts all over my arms. When going through thick jungle, it crossed my mind that the hat, much like the thing Indiana Jones always wears, is more of a hindrance than a benefit in thick jungle. The river sections were fun to map, although we were often forced to go into water up to the waist. When we got back to the car, Gavin was already waiting, and we handed out our sweets to the throng of kids that had materialised. Back in the office we plotted up our data and had a nice meal. As we drove back to Makeni, some rain started drizzling down, but by the time we reached the place the rain had stopped. Suddenly, as we were negotiating the narrow dirt streets near the hotel, a screaming police car appeared as if out of nothing behind us with lights ablaze, honking like there was no tomorrow. We were “ordered” off the road, so the driver frantically swerved left and into an even narrower track, which turned out to be a dead end. The police car screamed ahead to disappear in a gateway of a large house further up the road. Not soon after, more speeding and blaring cars appeared, with in one of the large gaps between them, a white 4WD car with the P1 numberplate, the President, closely followed by a green Landrover with something lethal-looking of monstrous calibre mounted and manned on its back. More cars followed after that shocking force of gun power, until finally the gates were closed, leaving a set of armed military blokes guarding the entrance like it was Fort Knox. We got the sign we could move again, so the driver reversed into the road to make the final 100 meters to our hotel. The display of raw power in the brutal motorcade and weaponry left us all a bit speechless. It’s the kind of thing that makes one hope never ever to meet the President again.



Getting through thick bush
using the machete

A snap of Gavin and me in the village of Katik

Friday 20th to Wednesday 25th

Friday, we woke up to the sound of rain. The rain did not relent during the drive to Lunsar, and it was still gushing down when we arrived at the office. We decided to work on our databases and samples, rather than get soaked in the rain, and did a small trip down to the river later in the afternoon to decide on whether we would do another dug out canoe trip on the Rokel River to complete the section. The rain had raised the water somewhat, and the western sections did seem deeper, and thus more inviting to us, and we decided to organise some canoes for the morning after to do these sections by boat. At the river we found some women washing palm nuts in preparation of cooking them to extract the oil. Two 210 litre drums were sitting ready to receive the nuts, but judging from the heap of washed nuts available, it looked like they were only going to be ready to start cooking the nuts later in the week. As we were waiting more unwashed nuts arrived to be cleaned in the river.



Washing palm nuts in Rokol River, in preparation of the extraction process

Saturday 21st

In the morning we did not find the women busy washing palm nuts, but the drums were still there, now half full with nuts. The arrangement to get the boats also seemed to have been misunderstood, as we failed to find the canoes ready for us. I decided to walk upstream and map like that, while Gavin made his way to the village on the other side, using the single canoe left at the crossing to see if he could arrange another canoe for him to map the downstream and deeper section. I was only 200 meters in the traverse when I came across a dug out filled with planks to be delivered at the village. We discussed with the skipper and they agreed to help us after off loading their timber. I waited for half an hour in the river and we were visited by some young girls who had noticed us from the banks. They were secondary school students who would be in Lunsar over the next weekend to compete in the sports event organised between schools in the region. When the boat arrived we set off to map the river, which we did without capsizing or other mishaps. As we approached the exit point in the late afternoon, Maurice, the driver, was shouting from a distance that the second car we had expected to pick up Gavin had broken down, and that we had to go and pick him with the one car. I completed the last set of outcrops in a hurry and we got on the way to get Gavin. Gavin also had had a great traverse, and we should have all data needed to draft up a nice type section for the region, along Rokol River.



Mapping with a dug out canoe along the Rokel River

Sunday 22nd

I managed to convince Seth, a Ghanaian geologist working with Marampa, to join me and show me some pits that they had been digging across a gravity anomaly just northeast of the old mines. We set off, and he showed me the succession of pits, 100 meters apart, exposing some of the bedrock in the area. None of the pits were mineralised, until we got to the last one, where at least a hint of specularite haematite could be seen. After that, I set off along a planned traverse, and almost immediately we hit some promising rocks with abundant specularite haematite. As I worked my way across the magnetic anomalies I had identified as potentially interesting, we discovered more and more of those rocks, and by the end of the day we had a good idea of quite an extensive area of mineralisation to be investigated further. As soon as Jason was briefed on the occurrence back in the office, Seth got immediate instructions to plan a few pits in the area to confirm the potential, prior to getting in drilling teams. All by all a successful day, I would say.

Monday 23rd

I went across the river to map out what we expected to be a mafic-ultramafic succession. Apart from one outcrop at the very start (serpentinite), I found nothing but extensive laterite cover throughout the area. I had yet another field assistant, who when we saw our first snake wanted to turn back. We also saw a large monitor lizard, and then another snake to freak the poor guy out for life. He did hang on and made it to the exit point, where I took a swim in the Rokel River. He waited for a little while to see if there were no crocodiles, and then joined me too. As we were driving back to camp he was already asking whether he could come again another day, as he had enjoyed himself. In the evening I noticed that my phone was no longer in my laptop bag. Hopefully it was simply left in the office!



A large monitor lizard along the path, one of the things that scared my assistant for life

My assistant, making his way across a dodgy bridge

Tuesday 24th

In the morning I checked for my phone in the office, but failed to find it. I talked to Jason, and told him it could be stolen, so he promptly organised a meeting and gave the staff two days to get me my phone back. If it would not be back by Thursday, he'd have to get in the police.

Today's walk started off from near the old mine dumps, south towards the main road to Makeni. The plan was to map out a series of geomagnetic anomalies, and then, time permitting, map along the road. We soon found a villager that knew the location of old peg sites of the Sierra Leone Diamond Company (SLDC). He, amazingly, located pegs in the middle of the thicket, and in the process showed me quite a few small outcrops that otherwise would have been impossible to locate. Overall, however, a lack of outcrop and fairly decent paths meant that I got to the road early in the afternoon, permitting a lot of time to map the road cuts. Mapping along the road does have its drawbacks. White fellows do get a lot of hooting to deal with, and there always is the hazard of stepping on shit. Road sides are treated as public toilets to some extent, and it is something to ever keep in mind when stepping up to the road cuts. Passing through the roadside villages, I was always accosted by a chorus of "Abutu", "Abutu" (white man, white man) and insistent requests for sweets, or the more bold ones, for money. Before I knew I arrived in Lunsar, where I quickly located a roadside bar and consumed a few coldies to close off the day.

Wednesday 25th

Today we spend a day in the office, cleaning up databases and drafting some line work on the maps. We had also been asked to write up an interim report for the client, which we did. Our work so far has identified two important target areas, and as a result exploration activities were being shifted to one of these target areas. Seth, the Ghanaian geologist had been working on some pitting just southwest of the identified target, and found nothing so far. This evening, however, he came back with the news that his first pit on the new target gave good results. He will plan a more extensive pitting and trenching programme across the anomaly, so that perhaps before we leave we get a better idea of where the good stuff is. Gavin has been contacting some lab in China to carry out thin

section work, and we spent part of the afternoon looking at our sample collection to select a set for further analysis.

Thursday 26th

Today, the police officer and crime investigation officer came to the office to record my statement for the lost phone. I sat in the office, almost dictating the CIO the statement, which basically took all morning. Jason too made his statement, and then the guy left to the police station where he would summon a few “suspects” for further investigation. I told him all I wanted was a police report for the insurance, but he was adamant he’d investigate the matter fully. I left the office by 11:00 with only little time remaining for a real traverse, so I selected a near mine target for confirmation. We walked from the office, crossing parts of Lunsar under a chorus of “Abutu”’s from kids all over. Then we reached the mine dumps and set out across the bush to look for positive indicators of mineralisation. We soon found them, and came to a village, where the headman told me there were a lot of old pits and trenches in the area, from “mining” back in the 50s. I saw a few of those, and recorded their location, as well as the name of the village headman. The area looked as promising as the other target where Seth was working now. When I got back to the office, I made another short report to the client so they could also start concentrating on this new area.



Making clever use of old inner tubes

The mobile bar in Lunsar

Friday 27th

Gavin and I had decided to start tackling the southern parts of the tenement. This part poses a few logistical problems of access, as we had to cross the Rokel River either on a pontoon some 20 kilometers to the east, or over a bridge 40 kilometers to the west. We decided to try accessing the area via the bridge, and set off with a Landcruiser. The ride out through Rogbere and then on the road to Bo, took us quite some time, and we also stopped at the bridge, where rocks of the Kasila Group were supposed to occur. This route must attract some tourists, as we found a young lad trying to sell us a “diamond”, which obviously was a cleverly shaped piece of quartz. As we got closer and closer to the tenement from the south, it did become clear that access from the south would not be simple. The maps we have are hopelessly outdated, and the tracks are all appalling. We finally reached a place called Toma in the tenement, which Maurice recognised. He said we’d be able to drive through and reach the pontoon to get back a lot more easily. With that news, we solicited some help from the villagers to investigate the rocks around Toma, and found that there is a unit of

specularite haematite schist, as indicated, although wrongly placed, on the geological map. We tried to penetrate some densely overgrown part of the hill to see how far the mineralisation would occur, but found the machetes were no match for the tough bush, which often towered to twice our height. We came out covered in plant sap, seeds, grass and other vegetable matter, and sweating like pigs. So, after losing most of the day on roads seeing nothing, we at least managed to confirm some mineralisation in the end. What made the day even better was that upon getting back to the car, some villagers were waiting for us with two small antelopes they wanted to sell us. They had caught them in the morning, and after a round of brisk negotiations we got them and tied them to the roof rack. We returned over the pontoon and came back to the office just before dark. The kitchen staff welcomed the surprise bush meat and Giorgiana, the cook, promised to cook it the “African way”, tomorrow.



Hacking through the bush



Game meat for sale



Fresh meat for the kitchen

Saturday 28th

The plan today involved, for me at least, as little car as possible. I wanted to be dropped at the Rokel River, and would walk south to Toma, to map along a nice little river. We got a small dug out across, and made good progress throughout the morning, arriving at Toma before lunch. I decided to walk on to the west, and see what more could be mapped, and arrived at a village at the western boundary of the tenement, without seeing a single outcrop. The area is composed of an ultramafic volcanic package that rises as an elevated plateau above the surrounding terrain. Just as I was planning to head back to Toma, a walk of four kilometers, a Landcruiser turned up, with Gavin in it. They were as surprised as we were, but it was a welcome sight! We got in and did a bit more mapping together before heading back.

Sunday 1st March

Today, I got the car, while Gavin was sent out for a foot traverse ending in Toma. After dropping off Gavin, Maurice and I went on a round trip to several villages, asking the villagers to show us outcrops. As is always the case, we often walked a lot for a pretty dismal little outcrop of quartzite or other boring lithology, but did come across a few good outcrops as well. On one little such traverse I actually managed to map out the contact between the basement lithologies and the Marampa

Group, which was quite a nice surprise. We arrived in Toma sometime around 14:30, with ample time to spare for Gavin to turn up. An elder villager told us that there were pits in the region south of Toma, and that an old mining company had actively explored the area a long time ago. I asked him to show us the pits, and so we went on another guided tour of the region. The man did manage to show us two pits, but we failed to find more than that. The bush is quite thick south of Toma, and finding the old pits, some often half collapsed, will prove to be difficult. Surface indications, however, were abundant enough to suggest a quite sizeable area of mineralisation. I marked it all on a map, and as we were trying to trace the extent of the specularite-speckled soils, Gavin turned up on the road. We called it a day and got back to the car for the drive back to base, but told the village elder he'd be expecting a follow up visit to work a bit more on these pits, and that we'd need to recruit a few suitable workers to help us map out the mineralisation.



Gavin sets of on his traverse



The people of Toma village

Monday 2nd March

Having finished the traverses needed to draft the map, we settled in for another day in the office to clean up our databases, deal with the samples, and further draft the map. I used the core-cutting machine to cut slabs off the rocks for thin section work, and selected a series of samples for mineral separation. The lot will be sent to China for processing, in the hope that the thin section data will be available for inclusion in the report. We spent the day discussing geology and gradually improving our map, a draft of which we showed to Jason, the Exploration Manager, so that he could decide on new tenement boundaries, as Marampa Iron Ore will be required to shed off 50% of their tenement in April. The work highlighted one small gap in the northern part of the tenement, which we planned to fill in tomorrow with two more foot traverses.



Me at my desk in Lunsar



Gavin demonstrates the geological model

Tuesday 3rd March

We got ready for the final foot traverse of this project. My aim was to fill out a small gap in the area just north of Lunsar, where some high magnetic signatures were present, and Gavin was to check out another set of magnetic anomalies further north. I was dropped off just south of quite a large swampy area, so spent the first couple of hours sloshing through thick mud and swampy ground. The anomalies turned out to be mainly lateritic hills, with limited clues as to what occurred below surface. I then got a few young blokes from a village to show me around to see more rocks, and was treated with some more outcrops, and a lot of walking about. When I finally got back to the pick-up point, Gavin was not yet there, and I sat down in the village square under the watchful eye of the villagers and rabid attention of the numerous kids. As time passed, I was treated with a few wrestling matches between some of the kids (West Africa style), and the retaliatory whipping of one of the fathers who felt it was undignified for kids to wrestle a bit, but dignified to whip the living daylight out of the offenders. I was offered a nice handmade reclining chair, and some villagers tried to strike a conversation in a combination of Pidgin English and local languages, as well as sign language and enactments. It was all entertaining stuff! Gavin finally arrived an hour later, and we set off for the camp immediately to plot up our data. With this last field day done, we should be in a good position to finalise the maps, databases and interim report.

Wednesday 4th and Thursday 5th March

The last two days in Lunsar were spent putting together the maps, discussing possible geological models, drawing diagrams, organising and interpreting data and writing an interim report with accompanying diagram showing the work done, and observation points in the field. I also spent some time to cut slabs of rock off the samples to send them off for thin sectioning in China. Gavin and I spent a few hours looking at the core, trying to see the structural features on core, and discussing those structures with Seth, The Ghanaean Geologist. I think Gavin and I have come up with a plausible geological-tectonic scenario, which should be testable in the coming months, as pitting, trenching and maybe drilling will be conducted on the targets. We gave the kitchen staff and cleaners (doing the washing for us) some “bonus” which made them very happy. Everyone seems to be a bit sad that we will be leaving, and they all ask whether and when we will come back.

On Wednesday afternoon, some villagers reported at the gate, claiming to have located the missing Trimble handheld digital mapping device which Gavin had lost in the Rokel River. Gavin went out immediately and was given back the Trimble, with an explanation that fishermen had found it in the stream. The most likely thing is that the guys from the boat actually went back to look for it, and then having found it at the bottom of the river in the rapids, passed it on to the English speaking villager to bring back. Jason was pleasantly surprised and paid out a cash sum to the guy, hoping that this would possibly entice the guy, whoever that would be, that took my phone to return that. Gavin tested the device in the evening and surprise surprise, the Trimble actually worked. The screen is a bit wonky, but the data was still there! Talk about ruggedised equipment!

Friday 6th March, Freetown and Lungi

The trip to Freetown was uneventful, and Ali, the driver, drove a bit around on a tourist-type of sight-seeing tour. He showed us the famous “Cotton Tree”, where according to history the first “free slaves” were dropped off to start a new and free life in Africa. The cotton tree now is an amazingly big specimen, surrounded by publicity panels and being smothered by the thick combustion engine fuels that constitute the breathable atmosphere in busy Freetown. Not far from the tree, the oldest church of Freetown stands, built in 1808, presumably by the very same free slaves.



The “Cotton Tree” in Freetown



The oldest church of Freetown (1808)

We also stopped by the offices of African Minerals, and then by the bank, where Akuna, the Marampa Project accountant cashed in two cheques to come back with a shockingly large backpack of Leones (local currency). We all looked on in awe as he was dividing the “loot” into two packs, one for immediate shopping needs, and one for safekeeping to bring back to Lunsar.

We were then dropped at the Lighthouse Hotel in Aberdeen, Freetown, which is located on the quay overlooking the Freetown terminal for the hovercraft on which we had arrived four weeks earlier. As we were sitting on the balcony, the hovercraft did arrive, creeping majestically onto the ramp. Gavin and I then walked to a restaurant along the beach side, accompanied by a bunch of nice kids that showed us the “shortcut”, below the other hotels, and through the local fish market. The fish on that market were phenomenal beasts. There were big red snappers, barracuda’s, a large shark that had just been gutted and whose intestines were floating in the surf, and various sorts of lobsters and crabs.

After lunch at “the Family Restaurant”, we walked a bit along the beach, where we were immediately accosted by a bloke who wanted to get a job, sell diamonds and just wanted to be our friend, all at the same time. We soon headed back to the hotel, now forced to take the long route as the shortcut was flooded due to the incoming tide. We were dropped at the helipad for transfer to Lungi well in advance and had to kill quite some time, looking at the two young dogs that were fighting over a goats’ leg, and gaping at the dodgy-looking Russian helicopters we were soon to use for the transfer.

Needless to say that the helicopter ride was noisy, windy, smelly and gloriously adventurous and interesting. We were basically strapped into the bare fuselage and unceremoniously dropped off at Lungi airport twenty minutes later. Baggage boys swarmed all over the show, trying to pick up business, and after having dealt with those efficiently, we resigned to a long wait, and three full baggage checks where they were looking for diamonds or what not. With customs and immigration behind us Gavin and I sat down for a last meal in the cafeteria. We were both glad to have finished the work, and looking forward to home.



An example of an “AIDS” signpost



The Russian helicopter Freetown to Lungi