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By Matthew Davis

Coming from the affluent UK to take part in an expedition in West Africa was a culture shock that brought home the reality of life on less than 10 litres of water a day.

You never appreciate what you have until it's not there any more. Especially when what's not there is a vital ingredient for human life - and for showering.

Sadly, my awakening to the world's water crisis occurred in Accra, Ghana, as the nozzle stopped sprinkling, mid-way through an early morning sluicing.

Like many people, I turn off the tap when I brush my teeth, shower instead of bathing and never hose-pipe my non-existent garden - a series of concessions that make me feel I am 'environmentally aware'.

What I really hadn't bargained for was the header tank running dry. When I turn on the tap I expect results.

But being forced to 'comb out' the soap from my hair on day one of my stay in Africa was just the first of many reminders that water cannot be taken for granted.

Drinking water from a plastic bag is an important skill to master. Bottled water is unaffordable for most, and the main source of "pure" drinking water is the half-litre sachets sold on the streets for about two pence.

No one has honed the skill of putting the packets in a bin, however, with the authorities constantly battling to keep the streets clear of a carpet of plastic litter - not so different from west London then.

They must also fight to keep their hands on the water they do have. It is not unknown for firemen to tap the city's hydrants and sell the water on.

And a surfeit of water is just as bad. Every time it rains dozens of homes are washed away.

Displaced villages

Three hours drive east of Accra - at the head of the Volta Basin - is Ghana's greatest-ever undertaking, the Akosombo Dam. Built in the 1960s the dam has created one of the world's largest artificial lakes, Lake Volta.



Power shower: Waterfalls were the ideal campsite (pic: Raleigh International)

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High up on the hillsides overlooking the dam is a five-star hotel from whose balcony you can sip a chilled mineral water that costs more than most Ghanaians earn in a day - and take in the amazing view.



In the villages and settlements around the lake it is a different story, however.

The dam project displaced 80,000 people, and caused social and environmental problems that still persist today.

The tops of trees break through the surface of Lake Volta (pic: Raleigh)

Diseases like sleeping sickness and malaria have increased in the areas near the lake. And there is real poverty in the plains which the flooding of the basin has isolated.

Ghana depends on the dam for almost all its energy, so low water levels affect the entire country, as in 1998 when there was a major energy crisis.

African institution

Part of my trip was spent trekking in the country around the lake, where we relied on filtering water by hand from rivers and streams - or using water pumps in Ghanaian villages.

Filtering water with a hand pump takes so long, you wonder whether it might have been better to save the sweat and go without. To make it safe to drink you can add a chlorine tablet, but it tastes foul.



Meanwhile, the village water pump is an African institution, a meeting point and a hotbed of gossip.

But all the water you can use for the day is what you can actually carry away with you. The average African woman walks six miles to collect water and walks back with the containers on her head.

The Akosombo Dam has isolated communities in remote areas

That sort of effort is getting into hand pump territory.

Camping really focused my mind on how much water I was, or rather wasn't, using. Cooking, washing and drinking probably used about 10 litres a day, compared with 10 times that back in London.

Even after two weeks out in the bush, I returned to Accra in a dishevelled state, in need of refreshment and a good wash.

Entering the bathroom I said a small prayer of thanks to the Ghanaian Water Company Ltd, that for once the shower was working.