

Business profile: Winner who talked her way across the river Gambia

By Katherine Griffiths

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Alison Down has won The Daily Telegraph's Summer Business School Competition for her essay on how she negotiated to cross the river Gambia in the middle of the night



As the successful candidate, Alison has won a week-long course at Oxford University's prestigious Saïd Business School. The prize, including attendance on the Oxford Programme on Negotiation, plus accommodation and meals, is worth £6,550.

Alison, who has spent her career in marketing and consultancy, chose to enter an example of a tricky negotiation when she was on holiday in Senegal. Her group had to drive through the night to reach their plane, which was waiting in the Gambia.

"We had not realised we had to cross the Gambia", Alison said. The group of eight tourists was hampered by the fact that it was forbidden to travel at night. As a result, the price offered by a man in a local bar who had a boat was "horrifying", Alison said.

Rather than give up, Alison rounded up 30 local people who also wanted to cross the river to get to the market the next day. They only had to pay half the normal price, while the cost to the group of tourists was also reduced.

"We were thrilled to get across the river in safety, the boat was more stable and we did not have to pay for the boatman's friends to carry us off. Some of our new best friends got us and our suitcases on to their backs to swim to the bank, definitely my best negotiation so far," Alison said.

Alison, 53, now works with seven others at Wisdom8, coaching chief executives and directors on management. She also helps companies in the technology sector form constructive links between offices in different countries, drawing on her previous experience working for Apple Computer and having set up her own brand consultancy in San Francisco.

Alison worked for Apple for nine years in France and the US. Business culture in the US was "very professional and organised". In contrast in France, it could feel like "you were at the end of the canoe".