

Six Months in Arusha, Tanzania at Selian Lutheran Hospital

September 2009 – March 2010

Preparations/Packing considerations

If you're thinking about going abroad for a medical school rotation, I would suggest starting a year ahead of time, particularly if you will be decelerating, aka using your "Flex MD" option. It takes that long to get approval from the foreign site, the IMER office and the medical school, and to figure out your finances and arranging your rotation schedule.

If you're considering a rotation at Selian Lutheran Hospital, I would certainly recommend it, but with a few caveats. Tanzania is a beautiful and very friendly country with a lot to explore, and the hospital is a wonderful place to get your hands dirty. That being said, you have to be prepared to really be IN the third world, not just hovering above it. You also have to be okay with some level of Christianity; every morning at Selian begins with chapel, and although you can be of another faith, you might get bored either way of going to church every morning. In a nutshell, consider this site if you want to really "jump in" and make your own adventures in a fascinating, exciting, and very welcoming country. Maybe don't consider this site if you like a lot of structure (you often have to create your own learning opportunities or cultural experiences) and if you don't deal well with third world living (i.e. being dirty and kind of smelly, having unreliable power and hot water, dealing with strange bugs in your house, walking everywhere, etc.).

In the summer before your trip, you might consider taking a few weeks of the Global Health course (offered every summer through the med school). The course has a different module each week so you can take as many weeks as you'd like, and I found it helpful before I left to have covered topics such as "practicing in resource poor areas" or "the differential for fever in the tropics," as well as refreshing my memory about the management of various tropical diseases.

In addition to getting your vaccinations, there are some things you should consider when packing before you leave. Most things are available in Tanzania, but perhaps at a cost. The items I think were valuable to have packed from the US included: all the gloves, hand sanitizer, and alcohol swabs you think you'll need, your stethoscope and medical pocket guides (especially Oxford Tropical Medicine), a headlamp (power goes out a lot), a laptop (there is internet at the student housing), medications including Imodium and Tylenol/ibuprofen, feminine products, and bug spray/sun screen. I suggest bringing clothes and shoes that you can use and then leave behind...they will be very worn out and super dirty, and the local Tanzanians will be happy for the donation! Things you do NOT need to bring because you can find them in Arusha or

won't use them include: shampoo/conditioner and soap (as long as you're not picky about the brands, although there is one very western grocery store where you can find just about anything), N99 masks (TB patients are mixed in with all the rest, so masks do you no good!), mosquito nets (provided at the housing), toilet paper (you can buy it all over town, though don't go ANYWHERE without a stash in your pocket). Some things that we loved having with us: iPod dock with speakers for some music, DVDs or movies on your computer for the long nights, travel towel and alarm clock, swimsuit (there is a pool just near the student housing), light jacket and scarf for night, rain coat for rainy season (Oct-Jan and March-April), Nalgene to keep water with you for your long walks to work. Also flash drives or blank CDs are good to have so you can back your pictures up as you go...then if your laptop gets stolen, you haven't lost all your pictures.

Last thing about packing: don't forget that Dr. Jacobson or some of the other doctors in Arusha will probably want you to bring things over for them...so you have to keep some extra room for last minute things (like for me, 30 picture frames!). Also remember that some airlines will waive the "extra baggage fee" if you have a letter saying the suitcase is full of donated medical supplies. We were able to bring a lot of donated supplies this way, but you never know if that's going to work.

Daily Life in Tanzania

Tanzania is a beautiful country, and the pace of the daily life is a nice, slow alternative to our lives as medical students in the US. We woke up and either walked (six kilometers one-way, about 70 minutes) or took the bus (about 50 minutes door to door) to the hospital. We had chapel followed by morning report, and on certain days this was followed by radiology rounds or CME lectures. After this, we rounded on patients until anywhere from noon to 3pm (depending on the size of the ward and the attending you're working with), had lunch at the hospital canteen, and then did any discharge summaries or procedures (lumbar punctures, ascites taps, etc.) that needed to be done. We either walked home (again, six kilometers) or took the bus home. Sometimes you can catch a ride home with one of the American attending who has a car.

As someone told me before I left, "living takes a long time in Tanzania." When we got home in the afternoons, we had a couple hours of daylight left to do errands, such as buying vegetables at the local stands, or going into town (about a 25 minute walk) to get other groceries. There was usually time for a run (albeit on very rocky and dusty roads) or a swim before dark, and sometimes we would make plans to take a taxi into town for dinner or drinks (you have to take taxis after dark because it's not safe to walk). Luckily, there is a lovely "house girl" who comes three times a week to do laundry and clean the house, which is a blessing. You are in charge of your own cooking, which becomes

quite a chore without instant meals, a microwave, or some of the ingredients you're used to. Staples (for us, not for Tanzanians) included pasta dishes, burgers (frozen beef is available), rice and beans/lentils, and soup. You'll probably lose a few pounds!

The nights are long in Arusha because when you have to pay for a taxi to go anywhere at night, you tend to stay home. We played cards or read by headlamp (when the power went out, which was pretty often) and watched movies on our computers. There are also a lot of other volunteers and ex-pats around so you'll make friends and do dinners and things. If you do venture out, there are pretty amazing restaurants in Arusha, including great Indian, Ethiopian, and even seafood places. There's also a couple of bars/dance clubs that are safe to go to, so you'll have some night life if you're looking for it. (Side note: as a woman, I felt comfortable in all parts of Tanzania, but you have to be dressed modestly to not invite unwanted attention. You should not show any leg above the knee, and exposing shoulders is up to your comfort level. I stuck to T-shirts and capri pants or long skirts.)

Medical Nitty-Gritty

You'll be able to spend time on surgery, OB/GYN, pediatric, and medicine wards while you are at Selian. There is also a hospice team that rounds at the hospital and does home visits if you're interested. You get a lot of exposure to tropical diseases (obviously), primarily TB and HIV. Arusha has a low prevalence of malaria (due to its altitude), but plenty of people get treated for it anyway, a trend that the American doctors try to reverse. No matter which services you rotate through, you have to prepare yourself for some very sad and frustrating experiences at the hospital. Several patients don't get treated because they can't pay, and some die because the hospital doesn't have the proper resources or knowledgeable enough staff. You can help this fact by, first and foremost, learning how the hospital treats typical diseases and runs the wards/clinics during your first week, and then slowly becoming a resource to the Tanzanian providers once you've gained their trust. The most useful thing I had with me was not my stethoscope, but my Oxford Tropical Medicine guide. The Tanzanian doctors have no such handy guide, and we looked things up together at the patient's bedside all the time.

There is at least one clinic day per week on each of the services, and you'll be working with either an ex-pat doctor or a local Tanzanian provider. Of note, almost zero percent of your patients will speak English, so no matter what you'll need a Swahili speaker with you to get anything but the most basic of history. You'll pick up pretty basic Swahili within a week at the hospital, if you put a little effort into it.

Befriend the interns at the hospital, because they are the ones who do admissions, procedures, etc. and will let you help them. Remember to offer to help with the paperwork, not JUST the cool procedures. You'll always want hand sanitizer and a couple of gloves with you, both because they are not available at the hospital and because, even if they are, you don't want to use up their resources.

The new, fancy hospital right in town is called ALMC (Arusha Lutheran Medical Center). You are allowed to spend time there doing the same rotations as at Selian, but your help is much more needed out at Selian. In fact, doctors at Selian told me that even the presence of the foreign doctors was a direly needed boost to their morale (Selian doctors have lost a lot of funding and hadn't been paid in months when I was there!)

Travel within Tanzania/Weekend Trips

Traveling in Tanzania can involve big bucks or hardly any money at all. The three big things that will cost you but are definitely worth it are: Zanzibar (tropical island vacation), climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro (at least \$1000 per person), and safari (anywhere from \$100 day trip (to Tarangire National Park, which is awesome!) to 600-700 for a Serengeti four-day excursion). There are cheaper versions of each of these trips: Tanga/Pangani is a tropical beach area on the mainland, which will save you the flight to Zanzibar because you can bus to Tanga. Mt. Meru, which is in Arusha, is a more technical but cheaper climb than Kilimanjaro, plus the summit is not at such high altitude. It costs \$400-500 to climb. A day trip to Tarangire or Arusha National Park is well worth it if you're strapped for cash or time. You can even squeeze a day-trip out of Ngorogoro Crater, which is breathtaking and absolutely a must if you can swing it. (Note: Lodging and park fees are what will cost you on safaris, which is why day trips are much cheaper but not always feasible for far away parks). I did a day hike on Mt. Kilimanjaro (to the first hut), which cost about \$170 per person and was beautiful and definitely worth it.

Within Arusha you can do cultural tourisms trip to Masai villages, or sign up with the Flying Medical Service (a volunteer pilot/medical group) to do emergency flights (transporting patients) and outreach clinics (an incredible way to get out into the bush and treat very rural areas!)

Reflections

Overall, I am overwhelmingly happy that I decided to take this trip. Now that I have returned to my rotations while my classmates have matched and are graduating, I of

course feel a slight pang of desire to be graduating with them and to be done with medical school. However, I am very grateful for the extra time I have had to contemplate my specialty and consider its utility in a tropical setting, and to be confident in my decision to match in that specialty. I also got to sample what practicing medicine abroad in the future would be like, and how I might integrate trips like this into my career.

For me, the expenses of this extra year are well worth it. The round-trip flight and travel within Tanzania, plus the extra living expenses for my fifth year are all of the extra loans that I needed. The actual cost of living in Tanzania is very cheap (i.e. rent, groceries, etc.) and is quite overshadowed by the memories you will have from this place!

In the end, I have made several lasting friendships with Americans and Tanzanians alike that I met while in Arusha, and this is probably one of the most memorable parts about my experience. The number one thing that I miss about Tanzania is the friendly, adorable children who greet you everywhere you go (see pictures below). If you end up making the journey to Tanzania, I think you will find that the people offer their friendship to you in a way that will leave quite a lasting impression.

Feel free to contact me with any questions!

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Class of 2011

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The medical student house:



Masai patients lined up outside the clinic hut during Flying Medical Service outreach clinics (yes, we held clinic inside that mud hut!):



Morning report at Selian, which takes place in the chapel:



Katie, Maiken, and I with children from Plaster House, a rehab facility for pediatric post-orthopedic surgery patients:



Friendly kids on the walk home from Selian:



Selian Hospital:



Rounds on the pediatric ward:



Lions on safari:



Brandon on a hike in Arusha National Park with girls from an orphanage we worked with (doing public health teaching and mentorship):

