

TANZANIA 2012

I would like to start by thanking the Trust for supporting my trip to Tanzania. This trip was part of my fourth year of medical school during which time I opted to stay with local families whilst volunteering at the local hospitals.

I have just returned from Tanzania during which time I spent one month with a friend, Natasha, staying with a family in Mwanza and one month on my own staying with a family in Arusha. I kept a detailed blog of my time there which can be accessed here: myelectiveblog.com/chrisp. What follows is a report complete with pictures describing my time in Tanzania.

Mwanza

I spent one month in Tanzania's second largest city, staying with Mumma Laiffee (front right of picture in Figure 1). She's a very interesting person. Tragically her husband, a doctor at the local hospital, passed away around 8 years ago. Their two teenage children were away studying at school in the capital city when I was there so, unfortunately, I did not get to meet them.

Mumma Laiffee trained as a social worker, before going on to set up a charity aiming at preventing the spread of HIV/AIDs. One of the fundamental messages she started to spread was that it was the responsibility of men, not just women, to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDs. This was apparently a controversial idea at the time. Mumma currently earns her income by hosting conferences in the building opposite her house, from which her own charity also operates. She employs a whole host of other workers at the site who provide the catering and hospitality services to the conference workers.

Mumma Laiffee looked after us incredibly well, arranging great meals for us to eat every day. The language barrier was quite significant, but I tried to use as much Swahili as I could, and no matter what language someone speaks, the language of kindness is universal. The way she treated her workers like family and was so welcoming was just incredible. She was a fantastic woman to meet, especially when I had been feeling apprehensive about arriving in Africa. She made me feel so welcome and looked after.

She asked us to do some research for her regarding where would be the best options to send her daughters overseas to study – she is adamant that she will try and scrape together the funds to allow her daughters to have the best opportunities to study to give them the best career chances. As a leaving gift she gave me a typical African shirt made by her local tailor which I have very proudly been wearing ever since I got home!



Figure 1 Natasha and I with Mumma Laiffee and her colleagues

Sekou Toure Hospital

I spent my days in Mwanza working in the paediatric department of the local hospital, shown in Figure 2. This was, at times, extremely challenging. This made the welcoming and friendly environment at home with Mumma Laiffee even more appreciated.

I witnessed many children die when, if they were being treated in England, they would not have done. Malaria was causing so much serious sickness in so many of the children, whilst lack of fundamentally basic medical supplies such as proper oxygen facilities made it, at times, a very harrowing experience. I saw such badly malnourished children, one in particular whose skin was falling off has left a real imprint on my memory. The level of poverty I witnessed was disturbing.



Figure 2 Me outside Sekou Toure Hospital

Arusha

My one month staying with a family in Arusha acted as a real contrast to my time in Mwanza. The family was large – a grandmother (Bibi), grandfather (Baba), four children (the grandmother had another 3 who had already moved out) and one grandchild. The family were pretty impossible to all track down at once but I've included a photo of some of them below. The grandchild Norbeti, a boisterous four year old, was good fun. I went out and bought every Pixar film I could find which we worked through together, whilst my leaving present of a bow and arrow set (tactically given as I left and not before to ensure my own safety...) went down very well.

I felt like this family was struggling a lot more for money, only able to send one child at a time through university. The grandmother was incredibly happy to have me as it meant she would be receiving income to pay for the grandchild's expensive school fees.



Figure 3 Me outside the family home with (from left to right) Norbetti, Bibi, Baba, Nora and Devota



Figure 4 Me being fed cake by the twins on their 21st birthday

St Elizabeth's Hospital

During my time in Arusha I was working at a small Catholic missionary hospital, mostly in internal medicine. Here I predominantly saw cases of Tuberculosis and the diseases that arise in patients with AIDs. Again, some of the experiences here were difficult, seeing the pain and suffering of one AIDs patient in particular, who was suffering from cryptococcal meningitis, is something I will never forget.

One realization that dawned on me during my time here was how desperately this country needs improved contraceptive services. I've written about it more extensively in my blog, and have since donated money to the charity EnGender health, which aims at improving contraceptive services in developing countries : <http://www.engenderhealth.org/our-countries/africa/tanzania.php>



Figure 5 Me with two of the nursing team at St Elizabeth's

Summary

It's difficult to capture the varied experiences and wonderful friendships I made in one truly mind-opening experience. I would like to thank the GIFT trust for giving me some money for my trip, as still being student, money was very tight. I was however able to make a contribution to the second family I stayed with, whilst I also delivered some medical supplies to the hospitals I worked in.

I still can't get over how friendly everyone in Tanzania was. Perhaps it was a more notable contrast coming from London, but I just cannot believe how well looked after I was. I received countless dinner invitations with just about everyone I met and actually felt safer walking around at night than I do in South London!

I would definitely recommend staying with local families during any trip to a foreign country, as I felt it gave me a fantastic insight in to living in Tanzania, from the local foods I ate to the unique customs they follow. Had I just been staying with other students or in a hotel I would have missed out on what life in Africa is truly like.

Thank you again for the sponsorship, I cannot wait to go back!

Chris Pereira