

TRAVEL EVOLVA AWARD CLARE BENNETT



I was very grateful to receive the Evolva award, which helped me fund my trip to Kenya.

During my medical attachment, I spent time with a private paediatrician in Nairobi. She cared for a culturally diverse population from mainly affluent backgrounds. Her prescribing habits were very different to those I had witnessed in my general practice work experience in the UK. For example, she prescribed antibiotics to a large number of children without proving they had bacterial infections. I feel that as it is private medicine, there is pressure from parents to give a 'solution' to the problem and sending them home empty handed is not expected. I experienced the contrast between consultations here and in the UK. Many questions are immediately asked to rule out diseases native to Kenya. For example, when a young girl arrived with a fever, high heart rate and breathing difficulties, common symptoms of both flu and malaria, the doctor's first question was if they had been visiting Western Kenya (where malaria is more prevalent). Although a life-threatening disease, it is easily treatable, but much less common in areas like Nairobi due to the altitude and climate. During a very interesting discussion with the paediatrician I learnt a lot about common hereditary diseases in Kenya. An example is sickle cell disease. The importance of this disease is that in the heterozygous form it gives the carrier resistance to malaria due to the shape of the red blood cells.

Later during my stay I had the opportunity to visit a very basic Health Centre in a small tribal village in the middle of the Masai Mara. I was really struck by the limited resources and the competency and knowledge of the local doctors and their ability to make the most of their meagre resources. I learnt about the abundance of diseases like Tuberculosis and HIV and the impact of these on the lives of the patients, such as mothers with newborn babies. Although chaotic and disorganised, the doctors kept thorough clinical notes for every patient. Whilst talking to the doctors about transport they told me 'we don't have any means of transport, if someone is critically ill, we either find a motorbike and a willing driver, or they die.' Although not surprising, these words still shocked me. Overall, I was impressed and sad after visiting Emarti Health Centre. Impressed because of the ability of the doctors to provide such a service in conditions like these, but sad because of the lack of support and funding they get. It would be a dream of mine to return one day when I can be of more practical help to these people.

Overall I was shocked by the stark contrast between the private healthcare in the city, and the rural, Masai Mara healthcare. One having clean, smart and bright rooms and the other being run down, messy and underfunded. Yet both were striving to

provide good medical services to the best of their ability to their patients.

I also volunteered at Stepping Stones Kindergarten in Nairobi and although not medical experience, it was still experience caring for people and children. I was not at all surprised by the lack of 'health and safety', with kids running around barefoot and knocking each other off swings! Here I was placed with a very busy teacher in a class of 15 two-year-olds. During my time here I developed friendships with both the children and the teachers. I learnt a lot about resilience and patience, two important skills for both teachers and doctors.

In the Maasai Mara I stayed in Enonkishu Conservancy. This is a locally-led initiative, which employs a number of methods aiming to preserve not only the wildlife in the community, but the heritage and the people. To achieve this it manages to strike a balance between conservation of the ecosystem and appropriate tourist enterprise for the resident Maasai communities. This community showed me the importance of sustainable agricultural policies, which enabled local tribal communities to become self-sufficient.

When I had a few free days I took a train to Mombasa and travelled onwards to Kilifi. After thorough security checks (and accidentally queuing in the male line for 40 minutes!) this 5-hour train journey,

costing not even £8, crossed beautiful landscapes to arrive on the very hot coastal town of Kilifi.

Kilifi is a very special town to me, as it is here I met a now family friend of ours called Lawrence. He comes from a huge tribal family who live in a tiny village on the outskirts. After dedicating his life to funding his children's education, he always dreamt of going to university. For 5 years my family has helped support his daughter through her education, allowing him to get the degree he has always wished for. During my visit this time I felt very lonely, so Lawrence and his family took me under their wing. Despite living in a tiny house with one bed for 4 people, they fed me delicious food and made me very welcome. It is a very important tradition to take care of your guests in Kenya, so no matter how much I asked them not to, they bought me drinks (as they were concerned the tap water would make me ill) and piled my plate high with rice, stew, beans and chapatti. One day we went for a snorkel in the Indian Ocean and the children, although hesitant, ended up in the sea entirely clothed! They didn't know how to swim and so were nervous. After some time and encouragement Lawrence and I helped them to learn. This was an incredible experience for me as they had never been in water they can't stand in. My trip to Kilifi, although not medical experience or volunteering, was definitely one of the most memorable parts of my Kenyan visit.