

Maiken Overton

Selian Hospital in Arusha, Tanzania

September 2009-April 2010

It seems impossible that a car could traverse the rutted, dirt road that leads to Selian Hospital outside of Arusha, Tanzania. As we pass, children in brightly colored school uniforms wave excitedly and chant “muzungu,” while Masaai boys in red, checkered shukas herd their goats and cattle out of harm’s way. Women, wrapped in kangas and balancing impossibly large bundles of vegetables, green bananas, and fire wood on their heads, step delicately aside. Men in tattered, ill-fitting suits bounce past on rusty bicycles and turn their heads to avoid the thick dust kicked up by our tires. We arrive at the hospital jostled, but in one piece, and make our way to the inevitably crowded inpatient medicine ward. After six months I am no longer shocked by the illnesses we encounter there. Severe malaria, tuberculosis meningitis, PCP pneumonia, complicated AIDS, tropical splenomegaly, month-old hip fractures, and very advanced cancers of the esophagus, pancreas, and cervix. Using our physical exam and limited diagnostic tests we do our best to evaluate and treat each patient. Some days we feel like we are providing quality care and making progress. Some days we are frustrated by the lack of resources and the apathy of the local staff and all we have to offer patients is a caring smile and a hand to hold. Every day in Africa is a crazy, wonderful adventure and it is impossible to leave without being challenged, rewarded, inspired, and changed!

Through the flexible MD program I was able to take a year off between my third and fourth years of medical school. I started this year by participating in the 8 week Global Health course at the U of MN. This course runs every year during July and August and was excellent preparation for working in Africa. I applied to work at Selian Hospital by completing the online application and a resume and emailing them to the program director Dr. Jacobson. He is a very busy man and it took several weeks to hear back, so prepare early and be patient. I was accepted and left for Tanzania in mid-September and stayed until the beginning of April the following year.

My time in Africa was spent primarily volunteering at Selian Hospital. Selian is a government run hospital located about a 1 hour walk or a 30 minute drive from Arusha. I rotated through internal medicine, pediatrics, and OB/GYN and also spent 2 weeks with the hospice team doing outreach day clinics. The schedule is fairly flexible and can be arranged upon arrival. The days start around 8am with chapel, morning report, radiology rounds or CME lecture, and then ward rounds. Ward rounds are led by a Tanzanian intern, 1-2 Tanzanian students, a Tanzanian staff physician, and any visiting foreign physicians. The lengths of days vary according to patient load and clinic, but work is usually done by 2pm. All documentation is written in English, but patient

interviews are done in Swahili or Masai. It is not necessary to know Swahili, but learning a few key words and phrases is very helpful.

There are also many great opportunities for volunteer work outside of Selian. The former director of Selian, Dr. Mark Jacobson, has opened a new hospital in town called Arusha Lutheran Medical Center (ALMC). ALMC is better equipped and funded and caters to a wealthier population. I spent two weeks doing medicine at ALMC and also helped sort medical supplies and set up a procedure room in the soon-to-open ER. Outside of the hospitals, I did public health teaching at an orphanage for adolescent girls called Whisperers of the Jungle and also at a primary school called Gracious School. For Gracious School, we undertook a fundraising project and with the help of family and friends built them a new classroom, playground, and bathroom facility! I also helped with student check-ups at Gracious School and a secondary school outside of Arusha called Peace House. It is also possible to get involved with the Flying Medical Service. Through them you can participate in 3-day outreach clinics to the bush and also accompany patients on emergency medical flights throughout Tanzania.

Tanzania offers wonderful opportunities for travel! While there I went on 3 safaris, climbed Mt. Meru and Mt. Kilimanjaro, visited Moshi, Dar es Salaam, and Zanzibar, and traveled to Cape Town, South Africa and Egypt! Travel in East Africa is very expensive, but well worth it!

Practicalities:

The housing and amenities in Arusha are excellent by African standards! Selian owns 2 fully furnished houses on Ilboru Road that can sleep up to 8 people. Houses are shared by visiting medical students and doctors and have running water, electricity, internet, and 24 hour security guards; however, this is Africa, so expect to have frequent power outages and a few cold showers! Bedding, towels, and kitchen supplies are all provided. All houses have a maid that comes 2-3 times per week and washes laundry. Ilboru is a dirt road that is either incredibly dusty or muddy depending on the season. The short rainy season is November/December and the long rainy season is April through June/July.

Arusha has lots of great restaurants and many small grocery stores with inexpensive food. It is easy to find bread, peanut butter, milk, cereal, pasta, rice, meat, cheese, eggs, fruit, and vegetables. Shoprite is a large Western grocery store that also has shampoo, lotion, deodorant, feminine products, and socks, so don't feel like you have to bring all of those items with you. Taxis around town are cheap and sometimes visiting doctors have cars, but expect to do a lot of walking! There is a small cinema complex outside of town that plays fairly current US movies and Masai Camp is a fun dance club on Saturday nights.

The currency in Tanzania is the shilling. There are many ATMs in town where you can get cash, but they breakdown occasionally, so be flexible. It is good to bring US dollars if you are planning to go on safari or do mountain climbing because the tourist companies will give you a better rate.

There is a great safari lodge on Ilboru Road and you can get a one-month membership to use their pool for about \$20. There are also 2 soccer fields on Ilboru where you can run with less dust and harassment than on the roads.

Expenses:

Vaccinations and medications: \$100-500 depending on insurance

Plane ticket: US to Kilimanjaro (JRO) \$1300-2000 depending on time of year and route,
Arusha to Zanzibar \$250 round-trip

Visa: \$100 for a one-year tourist visa (must leave the country every 3 months), there is talk of starting a volunteer visa for Selian workers that costs \$120

Rent: \$200 per month, but this will likely go up

Internet: \$71 per month divided by the number of people in your house

Maid: \$10 per week divided by the number of people in your house

Food: \$20 or less per week of groceries, meals out average about \$10 per meal with soda/beer

Safari: very dependent on number of people and number of days. 2-day for 4 people \$300 per person, 4-day for 4 people \$580 per person for camping

Mountain trekking: Mt. Meru 3-day trek with 4 people \$400 per person, Mt. Kilimanjaro 6-day trek with 4 people \$1000

Packing

It is acceptable to wear khaki pants, capri pants, or a long skirt and a t-shirt at the hospital.

Comfortable hiking shoes or even tennis shoes are fine at the hospital. In town you can wear sleeveless shirts, but it is more appropriate to keep shoulders and knees covered. Clothes get very dusty and muddy here, so don't bring your favorites! It gets cool at night during the rainy season so a long-sleeved shirt, sweater, and/or jacket are good to have. An umbrella, poncho, or rain jacket is a must during Nov-Dec and April-June. You should bring sunglasses, hat, swimsuit, bug spray, and sunscreen (although you will find some of this leftover at the Selian houses). For the hospital white coat, nametag, hand sanitizer, gloves, and alcohol pads are nice to have, so you don't deplete the hospitals' supply. Bring a headlamp or flashlight, computer and outlet converter, camera and charger.

I would love to share stories and advice with anyone planning to travel to Tanzania, so please don't hesitate to email me at over0184@umn.edu! I highly recommend this experience!!



Pictures L to R and top to bottom: Selian House #2, Ilboru Road, Small girl, Whisperers of the Jungle Orphanage, Selian Hospital, Tarangiri National Park, Mt. Kilimanjaro, Gracious School, Ngorongoro Crater, Outreach Clinic, Road to Selian Hospital

