A life-changing experience

If you like adventure, volunteering with Dental Project Peru gives you the chance to explore the world while using your talents to make a difference. Roisin Tohill explains.

In August 2006, I spent two weeks with Dental Project Peru (DPP) in the Apurimac Mountains. I never predicted what a life-changing experience it would be for me and I can’t wait to go back.

We saw an amazing part of the country that few tourists have ever seen. This small charity is making a huge difference in an area where there is little other dental care. It is truly lifesaving work, and extremely rewarding. Some patients who have endured years of pain will walk for hours or even days to get treatment.

Rampant decay

The Apurimac is one of the poorest areas of Peru. Some villages had no electricity or running water; yet they had Coca Cola! The introduction of a Western diet with no dental education has lead to rampant decay which went largely untreated until DPP started a few years ago.

Much of the treatment was extractions, although we did manage to save quite a few teeth. Each year as the charity returns, the number of extractions decreases and fillings increase—a tribute to the sustainable improvement in dental health and awareness.

The trip was rewarding and fun although not always easy. As long as you are prepared to rough it a bit and you have a sense of humour you will survive. We had only several beds most nights and even found some toilets and cold showers.

Each day started with a fun interactive dental education talk. The children were screened and those requiring treatment were seen straightaway—quite a challenge if a couple of hundred turned up at once! The adults were then treated. Having only limited Spanish, I certainly got to practice my non-verbal communication skills.

Making a difference

Sometimes we had free time to play with the children and get a glimpse into the fascinating way of life. They were a kind and simple people and it was a privilege to know you were making such a difference to their lives.

Peru is a fascinating country and the trips include sightseeing around Cusco and the Sacred Valley of the Incas. The scenery is spectacular and it is a country immersed in culture and history.

Preventative care

The charity is planning to expand in 2009, requiring dentists, nurses, hygienists and therapists. DPP will now provide much more preventive care, including fluoride application, toothpaste provision and dental education. This is an exciting development, but will require even more volunteers than before!

If you or a friend may be interested, please visit www.dental-projectperu.org or email info@dentalprojectperu.org. The trips run between July and October.

About the author

Roisin Tohill qualified in Dentistry from Queen’s University, Belfast in 2003 and I am presently a final year Orthodontic Specialist Registrar in Edinburgh. I was in Peru in August 2006 and I am returning October to December 2009.

Roisin Tohill

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