

## Leicester to Gondar – a ‘gonjo’ (beautiful) experience



### Take a moment and imagine standing in a hospital ward in Ethiopia....

What did you see? Was it a gloomy place, full of sick and hungry people in despair? Our previous ideas of poverty and developing countries had certainly made us feel sceptical about travelling there. However, after spending 4 weeks at the Gondar Hospital in Ethiopia during summer 2009, our encounters there have revealed a face of beauty behind the poverty. Gondar, a historical city situated north of Ethiopia, has one of the leading medical centres in the country. Being the main healthcare provider in the entire North-western Ethiopia, the Gondar university hospital not only functions as a referral hospital, but also a major research and teaching centre. Working in conjunction with the Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET), the medical link between Leicester and Gondar has accomplished many remarkable projects since its establishment in 1996.

The staff made us feel very welcome from day one of our visit. There was a lot of freedom to explore the hospital and observe a variety of procedures suited to our interest. We spent the majority of our time attached to the surgical and paediatric departments. Ward rounds, teaching sessions and patient notes are all conducted in English, making it very easy for us to get involved. Despite the language barrier with patients, they were happy for us to examine them. With exotic diseases and textbook style conditions everywhere, our time on the wards and theatres certainly gave us some invaluable experiences. Assisting in minor surgeries were particularly memorable with major defects (e.g. huge hydrocoeles) operated under local anaesthetic. Circumcisions are a routine procedure there and can be performed by senior medical students on a ‘see one do one’ basis. It was surprising to see the level of responsibility given to junior trainees. Hence, all their doctors are very skilled and knowledgeable. Auditing is relatively new in Gondar Hospital, being introduced in 2005 by the link. We were particularly privileged to conduct Gondar’s first patient satisfaction audit with the help of their audit clerk. Whilst many staffs were still

unaware of auditing, we all felt that our project was useful to promote awareness both in auditing and patient centred care.

Staying in Gondar really gave us a taste of the unique Ethiopian lifestyle and culture. Being 2,300 meters above sea level, below the foothills of Simien Mountains, Gondar’s ancient castles and picturesque sceneries were an eye opener during our weekend travels. The city is buzzing with life from early morning with children playing, to late at night with adults dancing. Ethiopians are the friendliest people we’ve ever met. Whether you are on a minibus or on top of a mountain, someone will try and start a conversation. The owners of a local coffee shop became like family to us, and often invited us to have coffee after a days’ work at the hospital (Ethiopians love their coffee). There we met a variety of people and learnt a lot about their language, culture, religion, education, traditional coffee ceremonies, iskista shoulder dance... (The list goes on). We were lucky enough to meet a radio broadcaster there and were invited to talk about our experiences on their radio show.

During our time there, we were amazed to see children happily playing with just a rock outside their mud homes, patients thanking their doctors without moaning after waiting 6 hours for a 10 minute procedure. The fact that people can be happy in these conditions, play and laugh like normal human beings, made us learn how to appreciate. With the erratic water and electric supply in Gondar, never did we know that showering in collected rain water could in fact, be a luxury.

Learning about developing countries is never the same as a personal experience. We fell in love with Ethiopia and would recommend anyone to go there for an elective, volunteering or even, just a holiday.

*A comment from an Ethiopian journalist: “you have created a link with people with your heart, you make your history from Gondar... and you can make another history in Gondar in your lifetime”*

By  
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