

Ethiopia! There is no place like it on earth!

TWECS (Third World Eye Care Society) decided to have a project in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. All I knew about Ethiopia was that it was in Africa, had a famine, and Italians ruled it for 5 years until they were booted out in 1941.

That was good enough for me.

Well I was in for a rude awakening.

Ethiopia is the most unique place in the world:

- First it is the oldest independent country in Africa, except for 5 years of Italian rule it has never been conquered or colonized.
- Lucy, our oldest human ancestor was found in Ethiopia
- It has its' own alphabet made up of about 100 letters.
- Its' own language called Amahraic.
- They have their own calendar. It has 13 months. 12 months of 30 days and one 5 day month.
- Their New Year is at the end of September. End of rainy season.
- They celebrated their millennium 2 years ago. It is now 2002.
- Ethiopians keep time differently than everyone else. They start counting the hours at 6 am (sunrise in the tropics) so if you go to work from 8 to 5 then you would say you are working from 2 to 11. (Yes, I was confused also)
- Coffee originated in Ethiopia and there is even a province called Kafa where it originated.
- Average income is \$3/day. Yes \$3/day!

A few words about the mission:

Our accommodations were excellent. Large clean rooms with private toilets, TV and even free Internet. The food was interesting and exotic with the Ethiopian staple being injera. It is a very large pancake resembling a large ploie, common in Madawaska.

It is used to hold a series of different stews made with vegetables or meat or eggs.

All eaten with the fingers from a communal plate. It is proper to use only the right hand.

Our accommodations were a 15 minute walk to the clinic

- We set up a clinic in an abandoned building located in a large hospital compound.
- No water and no toilets but we had electricity.
- We were 11 ODs and 11 other volunteers. Some of the ODs brought their daughters as volunteers and they had a once in a lifetime experience.
- During the 2 weeks a good number of us got sick to some extent but that usually lasted 1 day.
- I succumbed to exhaustion on second last day just because I was stubborn and would not drink enough water. (Remember the lack of toilets!).

People typically lined up with most sleeping on the ground overnight so as to keep their place in line Suffice to say that we examined 500 people a day and dispensed about 450. The majority were readers but there were an unbelievable number of extreme high myopia.

I personally refracted 11 patients in one afternoon with over $-10.00D$. One scoped at -28.00 .

It was fruitless since we only had a few high minus glasses and they were gone by the first week.

So the most we had were $-8.00D$ for the second week.

The glasses we had were never exactly right. Some of us very quickly overcame the frustration and set up a new standard which stated that "it may not be exact but if it makes a significant improvement in VA then use it." The patient will not get any better offer any time soon.

At first glance, this may seem less than professional when viewed from our standard of care here in Canada but I believe it met the circumstances as they presented themselves at the time.

Pathology was indescribable. Suffice to say that we saw more severe path in 2 weeks than most ODs see in their whole career.

The ongoing frustration was that we could do nothing to cure the path but were only able to alleviate the optical consequences.

A total of 4,500 patients were seen and about 3,000 glasses dispensed.
We left about 2,000 glasses and meds donated by pharmaceuticals.

Finally, the piece de resistance in Ethiopia is the coffee.
Not only do they have the very best coffee but they also have an elaborate ceremony for its preparation and enjoyment. I fell in love with the coffee. It was like desert in a cup.
The patients were marvelous, patient and grateful.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Pasqualino Marcantonio