

A Working Adventure

by S. Forte, MD (Photos: S. Forte)

The author, a volunteer doctor from Switzerland, had intended to spend two months in Honiara working as a registrar in the general surgery department of the National Referral Hospital.

I started my trip on the 21st of March from Zurich and arrived on the 23rd of March in Honiara. I could tell already at the airport that this was going to be an interesting experience. First, the temperature was at least 30°C and the humidity was 90 %, within a couple of minutes I was completely wet. I also learned that in the Solomon Islands everything works slower, it took three hours to go through emigration and customs.



Guadalcanal



Honiara International Airport

People from the hospital picked me up from the airport and drove me to the United Church Resthouse, where I stayed two weeks.

It was quite nice, clean and they even had some warm water to have a shower, however I enjoy a cold shower in the morning, so it did not bother me when there was no warm water. From my place to the hospital was a 15 minutes walk.



United Church Resthouse



Honiara's main street

Unfortunately it was right next to the main street, where the air was quite dirty due to all the traffic. Despite this, it was a nice walk and the people were very friendly always wishing you a good morning. After one week, everybody knew that I was a medical doctor, even though I had never met them before.

I worked in the general surgery department. We started at 7:45 a.m. with the report from the casualty, after this we started our ward round. In the afternoon we had the new admission or referral clinic. Usually at 16:30 p.m. we finished work. The work was everyday a new

experience. The usual problems we were faced with were diabetic foot sepsis, but also many appendectomies and thyroidectomies. Tuesdays and Thursdays were our theatre days. Almost every time I was the first assistant and was able to use my knowledge and improve my techniques. My consultants were always helpful and were there to answer my questions, but with time I was able to do the work by myself, after two weeks I was doing abscess incisions and drainages on my own.



Emergency Entrance NRH



OT NRH



Diabetic foot sepsis

Honiara is not a beautiful city; in fact it is quite dirty, noisy and hot. But as soon as I went out of the main city the beauty of the Solomons appeared. It has nice rain forests, green hills, and an interesting history. Of course, Honiara also has a beach, but I never saw anybody having a swim and I also do not recommend it! About 10km out of the capital is a beautiful beach, where we had a swim, without getting sick afterwards. But you still need to be careful because the corals are quite sharp and can be dangerous.



Beach 10km from the centre of Honiara



WWII airplane wreck

There are also some museums, which are quite interesting, they have a lot of history about World War II, and are worth going to see. You can also do a tour around the battlefield if you are interested, it is a must.

After two weeks I moved to the Kiwi-House. I really had to fight to get there; I asked the administration at least four times. Unfortunately, I have to admit, they are not at all organised. I heard from other students over there that they were charged 60 Solomon Dollars a day to stay there, which is quite expensive. At the United Church Rest house I paid 72 Solomon Dollars a day. From the Kiwi-House to the hospital it was not even a five minutes walk.

The 5th of April was election day in the Solomons, which passed quite peacefully. On the 18th of April the parliament elected the prime minister, who was not the first choice of the people. They accused him to be paid by the Chinese community, it is important to know that Asians run almost all the shops and restaurants in the Solomons. On this Tuesday there was a

demonstration in front of the parliament. As the new Prime Minister appeared the situation went out of control. Stones and bottles were thrown by people and the police responded with tear gas. The people then went to Chinatown and started looting and burning down the Asian stores.

The Kiwi-House was close to the main street, where the mob would walk by. We saw many people carrying stolen goods. We did not sleep much in the night from Tuesday to Wednesday. Two students from the UK called their high commissioner, who gave us the advice to stay in the house.



Chinatown after the riot



View from the Kiwi-House, the police tried to stop the cars



The burned Pacific Casino Hotel

The next day we went to the hospital as usual. Our medical superintendent asked us to keep on working, so we did. There were no bad injuries, just some cuts that needed some stitches. The tension kept going the next night also, and the Pacific Casino Hotel was burned. It was again an uncomfortable night.

At 10 p.m. the British high commissioner called us and told us that he was coming down to get us and he was going to take us with him, we spent that night at his residence. The next morning he told us that there was a plane leaving the Solomon's. He recommended us to take it, because he did not know when there would be another one. He also advised us that all the food stores were looted, and there would eventually be problems to find food to eat. We decided to take the plane to Australia. As a result my volunteer work turned into an adventure, where at the end a military plane flew us to Australia.



Leaving Honiara on a *Hercules*

After this whole experience, I still must admit,

that the Solomons is a very nice country where you can see medical problems which are quite different from what we are used to, e.g. tumours that weigh 5 kg , infected feet with worms inside etc...



5kg tumour

This made me realise how lucky we are to have such a good health system and we should appreciate it much more. I will definitely go back to the Solomons one day and next time I will stay longer, because the knowledge and experience I can bring to their hospitals is needed there.

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