Rwanda with JeffHEALTH
Summer, 2010 - Christine Chen

Location/Organization of Trip

JeffHEALTH is a student-run organization whose efforts focus on Helping East Africa Link to Health (work is currently exclusive to Rwanda), which is supervised by Dr. Plumb from Community and Family medicine. I learned about JeffHEALTH through one of the IMS presentations, and knowing that I wanted to do work in Africa, I began attending meetings and getting involved in the fundraising and planning process soon after in late fall of 2009.

I chose to work with JeffHEALTH because it is both an active campus organization that maintains ongoing relationships with its villages in Rwanda even after they have left for the summer. For a little background information, Rwanda is still in a state of progressive recovery from the genocide of 1994, when tensions peaked between two of the ethnic groups in Rwanda. Today, the government strives to have all people live side-by-side in peace. As part of this effort, Rwandans are barred from identifying themselves as a member of either ethnic group. As part of the recovery process, many foreign organizations have made many great contributions to Rwandan communities, including JeffHEALTH through the “Rwanda Healing Project.”

JeffHEALTH works in two different villages in Rwanda. One is Rugero, a survivor’s village near Gisenyi, and the other is Akarambi, a rural village about half an hour north of Kigali. The organization of the trip was loosely based on the experiences and advice of those who had gone before us, which allowed us to function as an autonomous team with translators and the RVCP (Rwanda Village Concept Project), a student group from the National University of Rwanda. All of the JeffHEALTH team members who went (8 in all) each headed a separate project that we wanted to implement in one village or the other, including HIV/AIDS training, Family Planning Education, Income-Generating Projects, Survey Project, Malnutrition Project, and the Water Project.

My water project was a continuation of Philip Chan’s project last year, but I took it a step further this year by adding the biosand water filtration project as part of the initiative. I found an organization called Thirst Relief International and got in touch with them about constructing filters, costs, and general logistics as to how we were going to implement them in Akarambi. After meeting with the filter experts, I made lesson plans to teach about clean water/hygiene and set up an orientation meeting with the people who were to receive the filters to explain to them how they work and how they are to be used. Unfortunately, there were a lot of setbacks (T.I.A. – “This is Africa”), and I was ultimately only able to give an orientation meeting and actually build the filters. There wasn’t enough time to do lessons on the benefits of clean water, nor was I able to follow-up on the filters after we completed them because of my time constraints. However, the team that came after me was able to do a little bit of the follow-up, which definitely made me feel better about the situation.
Medical System/Clincs/Rural Experiences

The medical system in Rwanda is efficiently designed to reach all the villages throughout the country. Each village has a couple of designated Community Health Workers who report to their local Health Clinics on a monthly basis to receive training and layman-type education on various topics. From what I understood, there are Health Clinics within each “cell,” who then report to the Hospital level, located within each “subsector.”

Although we did not spend very much time in the clinical setting, we did pay visits to the local clinics in Rubavo and the Gatwa cell to ask questions and learn about the resources available to the people in the villages. The clinics seemed to be equipped to handle birthings, minor injuries, typical infectious diseases, and the dispensing of medications for common ailments afflicting the population such as HIV and malaria. Although we were not able to pay a similar visit to any hospitals, we were able to arrange for a shadowing opportunity with a resident who let us observe a Cesearean-section at the Kibagabaga Hospital in Kigali.

As with all other things in Rwanda, I feel like their medical system is making progressive strides in the right direction. Although their resources are limited (there is only one dialysis machine and only three MRI machines in the country), nearly everyone is insured (with premiums at $2/person annually), which means that people can get healthcare without feeling the financial limitations that we feel here in the States.

Rural areas in Rwanda are comparable to those in many other developing countries. We stayed at a Catholic Parish Guesthouse in Rutongo where there was electricity (but no running water), but the situation is very different for most rural Rwandans. I actually spent most of my time in Akarambi, the more rural village. Photographs can tell you much more, but a few things I noticed was that most houses do not have electricity or running water. They are pretty spacious and well-constructed, but generally made of sticks and mud. Bathing is not a high priority nor is keeping children clean, probably because water is such a precious resource and toilet paper is considered a luxury item. Most small children are running about and seem to wear the same clothing day in and out, and many of which are dirty and have holes. One thing that I found a little strange and striking was that although they don’t really have much money, many have cell phones, and have to pay shopkeepers to allow them to be charged. Another thing noticed was how women in the village are very modest about keeping their legs covered, but breasts are very nonchalantly exposed, especially for breastfeeding women.
Living Arrangements

The bulk of the trip was spent staying in hostels and Catholic guesthouses. I would say that the constant traveling back and forth was the down-side of my trip, especially for me in particular because I never stayed in one location for more than 3 days at a time (this was due to the nature of my project, location, and cost-saving measures). I was constantly packing and re-packing, although it was different for the other girls because their projects did not require quite as much movement.

In Kigali, we tried to stay at the same Catholic guesthouse the whole time, but because it’s such a great deal, it’s hard to get a room there unless you request a room ahead of time. There’s also another guesthouse right next to it that’s a bit dingier that we stayed out on those remaining days. What was nice about this place was that it was very affordable and included both electricity and hot showers (if someone else hadn’t already used all the hot water). Mosquito nets were present, but are quite dirty and so full of holes that it felt a little bit like they’re only there for show or nostalgia. Nonetheless, we still used them just in case. It was a relief to find that the mosquitos were much less prevalent than expected.

For Rugerero, we stayed in Gisenyi at a hostel with only cold, but reliably running water. We all tried to sleep in one big room on the first night, but that turned out disastrously when none of us could get a good night’s sleep. We later squeezed the five us into two rooms the next day, and things worked out fine. All of us were responsible for doing our own laundry, so we’d go up to the roof where they had running water and basins to wash them in and later hang them up to dry.

Lastly, the area around Akarambi is such an underdeveloped area that we stayed in a nearby parish guesthouse (45 minute walk away) where students from the previous year had also stayed. In this instance, there was no running water at all and very spotty electricity. However, the nice people who ran the guesthouse would bring us jerry cans of water for us to bathe and wash ourselves each day. We didn’t have toilets either, so we had to go use the outhouses whenever nature called. Aside from those aspects, the rooms were spacious enough for 2, and the parish provided us with meals twice a day (we decided to forego lunch because Akarambi is a time-consuming 45 minute walk away).

General Tips (Money-saving tips listed underneath the budget section)

It is so different over there that it’s really hard to express all that I learned and want to convey in one report. The best thing to keep in mind though, is to understand: “T.I.A.,” which, again, stands for “This is Africa.” You have to realize early on that things will reliably not go according to plan, and that you have to be very adaptable to the different things that will inevitably come up and throw a wrench into your well-thought plans. In fact, “Africa time” is based on the general notion that these incidents will always occur, transportation is rarely on time, and that things are generally unpredictable. The Rwandans are very understanding of this (and very nice people, in general), and they almost always expect each other to be late, because things do inevitably “come up.”
Please also be aware that being from the States (and probably more fair skinned), you will be ogled at and constantly called out as being a “muzungu,” which means light-skinned and therefore treated very differently accordingly. Being Asian myself, there were also constant calls of “China!” or “Japan” wherever I went as well. There is very little sense of personal space, so it would not be surprising at all for one of the kids (or adults) to reach out and touch your arm, perhaps to see if your skin felt the same as theirs. Moreover, if you have any sort of claustrophobia, make sure to take this into consideration before going on the trip. We will all be staying in close quarters with each other all the time, even moreso when we take rides on local matatus, where they regularly need 19 passengers (in a minivan) before they are willing to start driving to the appointed destination. That’s 4 people across each row (babies and small children do not count) and 3 up front. The highest number of passengers I’ve counted on a single matatu was 26.

You must also realize that they really do not speak or understand very much English, although the younger children are starting to learn some in school now at an earlier age. However, the phrases they know (and will try on you) do not extend very far from, “Hello how are you?” and “Give me money (or another _____ item).” These are statements that will make you smile, feel exasperated, and give you hearatache.

In terms of physical items, it would have been useful to have a small netbook in the group so we could’ve kept better track of budgeting, documents, and etc. We didn’t bring one this year, and I did feel like a lot of the downtime we had went to waste running to internet cafes and the time we spent there trying to figure and write things out. Also, for any documents you may want several copies of, make sure to print out an original while in the States and then making copies after you get into Rwanda. Making copies doesn’t cost quite nearly as much as printing many copies would.

Another invaluable item to me was my headlight. Yes, they do admittedly look a little bit ridiculous, but they free up your hands and are incredibly useful, especially when the electricity shuts off, which happens more frequently than you’d like. Bring a book or two. There is plenty of downtime, and you’re likely to get a lot of reading done. It’s even better when others also bring a book, and you can all trade amongst yourselves.

In regards to clothing, as a woman, do NOT bring short shorts, it is considered far more scandalous that showing a breast. Moreover, make sure to bring shower slippers, and beware that your feet/legs will constantly be covered in dirt. Bring a washcloth/loofah so you can bathe in Akarambi, and be able to wash your feet off at the end of each day before going to bed. Lastly, being a woman and traveling alone was definitely nerve-wracking at times, so for safety’s sake, especially if you are traveling alone, always have someone waiting at the other end for you.
Expenses/Money-Saving Tips: This will look a little more complex than your typical expenses section because of the unorthodox manner in which I went about my travels.

**Pre-departure Costs - $281**
- Travel vaccinations - $281
  - This portion will vary depending on what kind of insurance you have, vaccinations you’ve already received, and will need.

**Transportation - $1187 total**
- Air - $900 (significantly less than the rest of the team for 2 reasons):
  - 1) I used frequent flyer miles (Star Alliance)
    - Bought my own ticket from Newark, NJ to London
    - ~$200 to use my miles from London to East Africa
    - I’d wanted to book a flight through to Kigali, Rwanda as a single plane ticket, but because I was booking so late (in May), transatlantic flights were no longer available, and I had to book that portion on my own.
  - 2) I traveled in an unorthodox manner in order to use the miles
    - Open-Jaw flight: I flew back to London from a different airport (Entebbe, Uganda) from the one I’d arrived at (Nairobi, Kenya). All the time in-between was ground transport.
- Ground Transport – $162
  - US – $52 – Getting to Newark Airport by SEPTA and NJ Transit
  - East Africa – $60 – Buses from Nairobi, Kenya to Uganda (I met up with the Uganda team over there), and then to Kigali. There was also the unexpected costs of getting to and returning from the airport after arriving in each city.
  - In Rwanda – ~$50 – A lot of these costs were absorbed by JeffHEALTH, but we paid for our own Ground Transport when we were doing non-JeffHEALTH related activities.
- Visas - $125
  - Rwanda does NOT require US citizens to pay a visa fee.
  - However, my unorthodox itinerary (beginning in Kenya), required that I pay for visas in order to pass through Kenya ($25 single-entry) and Uganda ($100; $50 each time and I had to pass through twice).

**Room/Board - $400**
- Room – $200
  - Our fundraising for JeffHEALTH covered a significant portion of the Housing costs in Rwanda. However, I was still hed responsible on weekends and during my time before arriving in Rwanda (2 weeks).
- Board - $200
  - Rough guesstimate for the 5 weeks I was in Africa. Averages about $6/day for 2 major meals each day (granola bars).
  - Note: at “buffet style” eateries, they will charge you for each piece of meat selected. Vegetables and starches can be piled on at no extra cost.
Equipment and Misc. - $150

- There were all sorts of little things that I bought in preparation for the trip, like a money pouch, and perishable likes Granola Bars, tampons, some OTC meds, etc.

Extras - $900

- We did a safari, a volcano hike, visited some museums, bought some souvenirs, and paid for internet usage. I also did some extra traveling on my own in Kenya/Uganda/UK (Ireland and England), which also added to the extra costs (UK was about $350 or so on my trip “extras” expenses category).

Money Saving Tips

- Money Matters
  - Apply for the Foerderer Grant!
  - Get an ATM card that can be used at any ATM without incurring extra charges (the ATM may charge you fees, but Charles Schwab refunds it back)
    - I use Charles Schwab’s banking services, but I believe other banks have it too.
    - This is less useful in Rwanda, but helpful if you are anywhere else, like Kenya or Uganda.
  - Bring untorn/clean $100 bills dated after 2003 (and keep them safe!)
    - Rwanda has yet to set up ATMs that are compatible with the international standards. Because of this, all money has to be exchanged at Forex Bureaus or Money Exchange places.
  - Keep good tabs of your money and keep the bulk of it separate from the “general use” money.
    - I had my small moneys pouch taken when I wasn’t paying attention, so be aware that money can be taken pretty easily (stay in groups!). Thankfully I only lost about $30 or so in RWFr.
    - Do not keep a large sum of money laying out anywhere!
  - Always haggle, especially in souvenir shops. Talk to the shopkeepers and they will frequently give you a better price.

- Everything else:
  - iPod touch: Discreet, portable internet access anywhere you can find free wifi. The newer models (with a mic) allow you to make skype calls!
  - Book “stopovers” or “open jaw” flights if you want a little extra traveling
  - Frequent flyer mileage: if you don’t have it already, get on it!
  - Backpacking backpack or duffle: Suitcases are only b nightmare to get across the uneven roads. If it’s big enough, local transport taxis could charge you an extra “passenger” to have it sit next to you on the ride.
  - Granola bars: saves time, convenience, and money
  - Plastic bags are technically “banned” in Rwanda, so use with discretion
  - Buy bigger and share things with other people in either smaller travel-size bottles (between two people is good, three is pushing it because you won’t necessarily be around each other much) Especially sunblock and insect repellant.
Pictures: *worth a thousand words*

Shadowing Physicians in Kigali

Biosand Filtration project in Akarambi
• Akagera National Park for the Safari
  o Highly recommended, unless you are planning to travel elsewhere in East Africa, in which case you should probably do it in Tanzania or Kenya instead.
  o It was a great bonding experience for all of us

• National Parc des Volcans for our Bisoke Hike (same park as the Gorillas)
  o The price of seeing Gorillas was a bit more expensive than we were willing to pay, so we did a hike up to crater lake instead!
  o It was a difficult hike, but very rewarding.

• National University of Rwanda in Butare and visiting the fellow RVCP students
  o Taking part in the Liberation Day festivities (also on July 4th)