

## SSCA Commodores' Bulletin, January 2010

When I retired from my Annapolis ENT practice in 2001, my plan was to combine our circumnavigation with medical volunteerism in the third world countries that we visit along the way. But as I've discovered, it isn't very effective to just dinghy ashore and visit the local clinic. This can work sometimes, but it's much more effective to prearrange visits. In addition to establishing contacts individually, there are a host of nonprofit organizations volunteer opportunities worldwide, to be found by researching the Internet. This is mainly how I came to volunteer in Jamaica, St. Lucia, Mexico and Ecuador over the past decade.

Our cruising mode has changed over the years, especially since our grandchildren were born. We now leave the boat during cyclone season to do some land travel and to return to the States for a few months each year. This schedule lets me fit in a month-long volunteer stint at a medical clinic in Ecuador once or twice each year. I am now on my seventh such visit, and it's rewarding to be welcomed by some of the same staff and see some of the same patients and their families in follow-up.

Our time in the States allows me to seek donations of medical supplies needed at the clinic, and to seek other volunteers, such as anesthesiologists and OR nurses to assist me, and for ENT residents to train with me.

The Guadalupe Mission Clinic serves the rural population in the southeastern province of Zamora-Chinchipe, near the border of Peru. Getting there involves an hour-long flight from Quito to Loja, followed by a four-hour bus ride through the Andes Mountains to the Amazonian highland village of Guadalupe. The clinic is a modern building complex funded by the Roman Catholic Church in Austria and the United States. Padre Jorge Nigsch, the parish priest in charge, is from Austria, and the volunteer doctors, nurses and dentists come mostly from Germany and the United States. There's no need to be Catholic to participate.

The clinic is fairly new and unusually well equipped for such a remote location. It has an established dental service, a lab and a regular stream of German dentists and lab techs. An air-conditioned operating room has an anesthesia machine and modern equipment, including microscopes. The pharmacy is stocked with donated and bought drugs, but volunteers usually bring donated supplies for their own specific needs. I've been bringing my own surgical tools and supplies with me each time. There have been visits by dentists, internists, ophthalmologists, general surgeons, gynecologists and other specialists, some of whom return every year.

The word spreads fast when visiting specialists are scheduled, and many patients come the night before, camping out and sleeping on the front steps of the clinic in order to be first in line the next morning. As the reputation of the clinic has grown since its opening in 2001, some patients come from distant parts of Ecuador, seeking second opinions and surgery. The mostly indigent patients are seen on a first-come, first-serve basis and pay \$1 per consultation. I see the full range of ear, nose and throat cases, and over the years I've treated approximately 2,500 patients and performed over 500 surgical procedures. My Spanish is rudimentary so a bilingual nurse translates for me as needed. Occasionally I perform cosmetic nasal surgery for higher fees to help fund our other operations. I'm still working to establish regular donations of hearing aids and to train a staff person to fit them.

The volunteer medical staff quarters were built recently and are very nice, even to first world standards, with unique electrically-heated showerheads, computer with satellite Internet access and a DVD movie collection. Room and board is gratis, but volunteers organize their own transportation.

Weekends are free for exploration, sightseeing or just relaxing. There's a communal kitchen for cooking and camaraderie (nuns provide meals during the week). One of my specialties is German sourdough bread, most appreciated by Padre Georg Nigsch! The covered veranda overlooks the tropical rainforest mountains and the river. Popular excursions are visiting a commercial frog farm, hiking in the cloud forest of the nearby National Park (with exotic birds, orchids and waterfalls galore), and trips to indigenous Saraguru and Shuar Indian villages—once known for their shrunken heads! I've been able to witness the elaborate festivities of Easter Week in April, All Souls Day in November, and the Festival of the Madonna of Guadalupe in December.

One of the benefits of third world volunteerism is the lack of red tape, with no paperwork or hassles with insurance companies. I can just focus on patient care and surgery, while enjoying the satisfaction of seeing lives improved and being appreciated for my efforts—while meeting interesting people and experiencing different cultures. Similar to the need for self-reliance when cruising in remote areas on a sailboat, I relish the challenge of creative problem-solving, such as improvising medical instruments or making a homemade prosthesis for the middle ear when they're not available.

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