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Adventures in Maasailand

For three weeks this July I traveled to East Africa to the country Tanzania for a medical trip. My first stop was the town of Moshi which is located at the foothills of Mt. Kilimanjaro. Upon my arrival I met the 11 other students, three translators and three doctors that I would be working with during my time there. The purpose of our trip was to travel from Moshi to Maasailand and work with and educate the people indigenous to that region. The Maasai people are a group indigenous to both Kenya and Tanzania who maintain the traditional ways of life despite their government's encouragement to modernize their societies. Before reaching Maasailand I consciously tried to push out of my head any expectations that I had because I did not want to taint my experience by creating preconceived notions about both the people and the place. When we got to Maasailand we visited the village of Magadini. Travelling from hut to hut in groups of three we asked the people of the village questions concerning their general hygiene and recent family illnesses. Depending on their responses we would then try to explain via our translator the importance of boiling water, having a toilet with a cover, sleeping under mosquito nets and bathing regularly. Following our conversations we would assess any family members who complained of health problems and send them to one of our clinics which were held at their local church once every three or four days. At the clinics we would try to teach them about antibiotics, vitamins, parasite treatment, and painkillers such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen. Our hopes were to show them that if they came away from traditional medicine and learned a bit about modern medicine they would no longer have to live day to day with parasites, aches and pains, and upper respiratory tract infections. The people that we met in

Maasailand were the most hospitable, and gentle people I have ever encountered. Their homes were nothing more than sticks, mud and thatched roofs, but as soon as we arrived they brought out wooden seats for each of us and patiently waited as we asked them questions concerning their families and lifestyles through our translators. Although I was on a medical trip, I had personal interest in knowing more about their culture and beliefs. I was intrigued by their steadfast hold on traditions, and asked as many as I could about religion, values, and marriage. Throughout the three weeks I discovered that cows, sheep, goats and donkeys were some of the most important things to the Maasai as they represented property, ownership and wealth. Furthermore, the entire community is in charge of raising the children. There is such respect for elders, and even our group was encouraged to call adults “Mama” and “Baba” (mother & father) and people over fifty “Bibi” and “Babu” (grandmother & grandfather) since that is customary for all people in Maasai. I was also able to ask how the people in Maasailand (who were predominantly Christian) felt when missionaries came over to travel through the area. I was told that the peaceful and gracious demeanor of the Maasai invites anyone who travels through the land in the same way they had received our group. They listen respectfully to anyone who comes to speak at their church or in the community and take from the groups what they want while silently dismissing the rest. There is never hostility or animosity. Such is the same for all the people in Tanzania where over 120 different tribes live in complete peace. Throughout everything that I experienced and learned in my three weeks in Tanzania, I most came to enjoy the slow-paced culture and relaxing atmosphere that is perpetuated in all aspects of Tanzanian life. Many Americans could probably learn a lot from the people of Tanzania where there is always time in the day to relax with a cup of tea, help a friend, or talk with visitors.