“For me, it was an incredible, unforgettable experience that changed my outlook on health care provision”

Louise Collingwood, UK
Our trip to Andavadoaka with Blue Ventures was one of the most eye-opening and memorable experiences in my life. Whilst I had travelled to developing countries in the past, I had always remained in cities or large towns; this was my first experience travelling somewhere so remote and isolated. Having never had an experience quite like this, and it being unlikely that I will again for quite some time, I tried to be involved in as many opportunities and activities as I could while there.

As there was no expedition medic on-site this expedition, in order to complete a medical project we decided to talk to the community health co-ordinator to get involved in Safidy, the women and children’s health initiative in the area. One of the projects we did with Safidy was observing their talks at local schools, where they would teach children who were about to reach the age of puberty the different changes that they would experience over the next few years, and different ways of dealing with them. At the end of the sessions, we were invited to answer any questions that the children had, and to give them our own advice. It was an interesting experience having to think about what I would have liked to have known going through puberty, and giving that advice to the children. Ultimately, the main advice we always gave was “if you are ever unsure about something, or have any questions, don’t be afraid or embarrassed to ask one of the people who work at Safidy.” I feel that this was fair advice to give to the children.

Along with the teaching sessions at the schools, we also got involved in the health governance meetings that were held in the Velondriake centre. At these meetings, we got talking to many of the staff members who work with Safidy through the entire Velondriake area, and were given an idea of how important the health initiatives set by Safidy were to the overall goal of Blue Ventures as a conservation group. One of the things that drew me to Blue Ventures over other organisations was the holistic approach it takes to conservation, involving both the science of the marine biological preservation, as well as the health and

Guidelines to the treatment of various paediatric presentations. The circles indicate how much of each tablet should be given, making the guideline incredibly easy to understand and accessible.
Syed Sabahuddin Ahmad

wellbeing of the community that surrounds the coral reef. This was summarised quite well by one of the members of the organisation who said (paraphrased) “The people of Andavadoaka aren’t just connected to the ocean ecosystem; they are PART of the ecosystem. If our job is to conserve and maintain the health and wellbeing of the ecosystem, that includes all parts of the ecosystem, including the humans.”

One of the aspects of the health governance meetings that interested me was the similarity that they had to the guidelines that we use in the NHS; how they discussed sets of pathways that should be followed upon the presentation of an ill patient. Whilst the guidelines in Velondriake factored in the limited medical resources of the area, they still followed a straightforward step-by-step process that was easy to understand by the staff in the area. Paediatrics is what I am most interested in specialising in in the long run, so it was also interesting to see the paediatric conditions that were most prevalent in this region, and how they were not in fact so different to those in England, with the biggest worries being fever, meningitis and diarrhoea. The difference however, was in the treatments available for them.

Finally, whilst it is unrelated to medicine, the many other activities that we became involved in during our stay were unforgettable and incredibly rewarding too, including but certainly not limited to, learning to dive and making actual contributions (no matter how small) to the world of marine biological research, teaching English, improving my own French (which had been suffering since moving from Belgium to the UK for university), and, particularly difficult and challenging for me, learning to swim properly.

Before this trip, I had always been an incredibly poor swimmer, and had a phobia of the open ocean. A large part of this trip was facing this fear, throwing myself in the (literal) deep end and forcing myself to learn to swim properly. I am proud to say that by the end of the trip, I did learn, and in fact I did something that I knew I wanted to be able to do as soon as I arrived on coco beach; on my second last day on-site, I swam out to Andava Rock. Standing on that rock five weeks after hardly being able to complete a 400 metre freestyle swim, I felt like I had, at the risk of sounding incredibly over-dramatic, conquered the entire ocean. Then I swam back.

The Mozambique Channel from coco beach, with Andava Rock in the distance. This image admittedly makes the distance to the rock seem further than it actually is, which is exactly why this is the picture that I will show people when I tell them about my glorious feat.