

Emergency Medicine Rotation
Hospital Heroes y Martires de Ometepe
Isla Ometepe, Nicaragua
in cooperation with
Doctors for Global Health
and
Natural Doctors International

Applicants

This is a rotation in a rural emergency department and small hospital in a resource-poor area. It would be appropriate for a second or third year emergency medicine, obstetric-gynecology, or family practice resident. Spanish proficiency would greatly enhance the experience, but Spanish instruction is available by tutor or school.

Background

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere after Haiti, and home to six million people. The Sandanista revolution and Contra war occurred 1979-1987, where a the dictator family Samoza was overthrown. Lasting social effects are pronounced, and as a result of an aggressive literacy campaign, Nicaraguans have one of the highest literacy rates in Latin America. The current government is Sandanista by democratic election, with Daniel Ortega as president, a recent change from twelve years of a Liberal government.

Located in Lake Cocibolca, Ometepe Island is the largest freshwater island in the western hemisphere. 35,000 people live on the island, with the primary industries of fishing, cotton, tobacco, and coffee. The only known freshwater sharks in the world swim in Lake Cocibolca, which has depths to more than one mile. It has a few healthposts, usually with a doctor every fourteen days or so, and two medical centers, one of which provides 24/7 emergency care. Definitive care is usually not available on the island, and people who need intensive care or surgery must cross the lake to the mainland. Hence, early diagnosis is an important goal of the doctors at this hospital.

Setting

Small hospital, covers 35,000 residents of the island for both emergency and primary care.

Healthcare system:

The healthcare system has a public and a private sector, with the majority of patients cared for in the public sector. Until recently, most Nicaraguans did not have primary care available to them, and had to pay on the spot for laboratory testing, surgical supplies, and medicines, although not doctor's fees. Recent changes in the government have made available limited free medications and laboratory testing when ordered by a public health center physician. Staffing and maintaining consistent medical and laboratory supplies are still a major challenge.

Language requirement: Spanish preferred, but there is a spanish school in the same town, Moyogalpa.

Needs: They just acquired a new ultrasound, and any help using it is much appreciated.

They appreciate training in procedures, EKGs, and evidence based medicine.

Supplies needed: Oscopes, ophthalmoscopes, suture kits, BP cuffs, stethoscopes.

Most common illnesses: Parasitic, respiratory, pregnancy and delivery, minor trauma (machete wounds).

Doctors: Generalists (few Nicaraguan doctors specialize, as there are few residency programs available)

EMS: Private ambulance at resort (mostly tourists), public ambulance (1), trucks, horses, oxen, bicycles, motorboats and ferrys to get to mainland (and surgery/OB care).

Contacts:

Hospital director:

Ana Saballos Sandoval, MG

Hospital Heroes y Martires de Ometepe

Del Juzgado Local 50 v al sur

Moyogalpa Ometepe

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Arranging institutional agreements:

Maria De Los Angeles

MINSA (Ministry of Health)

Rm 438 Modulo 1

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Note: Address official correspondance to:

Dr. Roberto Zapata Sobalvarro

Director General Regulacion de la Salud

And cc to Ana Saballos

English speaking contact (works full-time, mixture of allopathic and natural medicine)

Tabitha Parker, ND, MG

Executive Director
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She can put you in touch with the above folks,
help you find a Spanish tutor or enroll in Spanish School,
help you understand the myriad of local medical belief systems.

To do on the island: Spanish school, Horseback riding, swimming, fishing, nice beaches, two volcanoes to climb, dry and wet rainforest.

Travel: Solentiname archipelago, visit colonial Granada, surf at San Juan del Sur
Inexpensive accommodations, from backpacker hostels to resort hotels.

Safety: Ometepe Island has a very low crime rate; violent crime is almost unheard of. However, you can still have things stolen.

To/from airport

Get some Nica money out of the ATM (cordobas, about 20 to the dollar), buy something in the airport so you have change, and then choose your own adventure:

Really adventurous (AKA: cheap): cross the busy street (callatero norte), and get on a red/green/yellow painted bus with a teenage kid leaning out of it hollering “Huembe huembe huembe”-sounds like “wembey”, keep your stuff in front of you at all times and realize that the pickpockets are much smarter than you are, swear an oath to support population control forever more, as you realize that way more than 60 people can actually fit on a bus, get off at the last stop, Mercado Roberto Huembes. Take an express bus if you can find it, figure out that you’ve added 3 hours to your trip and that you’ve been conned by the bus assistant into taking the local anyway (hint: ask the other people in line if the bus is express or local) to San Jorge if available, Rivas if not. Take a taxi to San Jorge if your bus went to Rivas- cheaper to ride with a couple people, like public transportation. Haggle like mad, shouldn’t be more than 20 cordobas, but gas and inflation may have changed this. And if you take the local bus by accident, you probably saved 20 cordobas: not bad for 3 extra hours!

Take any ferry to Ometepe, (unless you see white caps on the lake, in which case it’s a better idea to wait for the big ferry unless you are into swimming in the only freshwater lake to also have sharks), get off on the dock, walk up the hill until the street T’s, turn right, and you are 2-3 blocks from the hospital. Moyogalpa, incidentally, means “place of the flies” in Nahuatl, although the flies are mostly on the other side of the island.

Adventurous, fruggle: Take a taxi (haggle like mad and don’t pay more than \$10 which is 4 times the going fare) to Mercado Huembes, and follow the instructions from there. Walk or take a bicycle taxi to the hospital.

Much safer, easier, and more convenient, big spender: Take a known taxi (ask Tabitha for a recommendation and current contact number) to the dock in San Jorge. It's about a two hour ride, and on the way back to the airport, leave time to stop in at the handicraft market in Masaya (the "new" market is the cheap one).

Really asking for trouble: rent a car. Managua has the scariest driving I've ever experienced in my life. Seriously, Ometepe is an island. You have to schedule to take your car on the ferry sometimes weeks in advance.

I had been down to Nicaragua previously, and had worked as a volunteer for an organization called Doctors for Global Health. I worked in Tipitapa, a city outside Managua that mostly houses gangs and young women who work at the sweatshops in the free trade zone. I did a variety of things, one of which was practicing medicine a tad to soon, but also learned Spanish and met some very interesting and wonderful people. My experience was fantastic, but not a very safe or sane environment.

My good friend Tanya Neubauer, a naturopathic doctor, had started a nonprofit called Natural Doctors International (NDI), and invited us down to Ometepe Island, which is essentially two volcano cones joined by a narrow land bridge. Doctors for Global Health has a community health worker program on the island, and they wanted to start putting together a locally-run monitoring and evaluation program. I volunteered, and spent my time at a conference teaching monitoring and evaluation workshops, and then trying to apply the same principles on Ometepe. I spent time in the local hospital, a small building with some great, dedicated doctors, that is open 24/7 to emergencies on the island. A big problem they have is that women who need c-sections have to go to the mainland, which means a scary ride in a launcha (a cross between a canoe and a motorboat) that can take two or more hours. They have a campaign to identify women with problem pregnancies early, so that they are already on the mainland a couple weeks before their due dates. I had a wonderful talk with Dr. Ana Saballos, who is the hospital's director, and she is very eager to have residents come down, learn about the Nicaraguan medical system and local health problems, and teach a little about ultrasound, evidence based medicine, and procedures.

Before naturopathic medicine sounds like a bad idea, remember that it forms the majority of the medicines used by Nicaraguans. NDI does an excellent job of blending the right amount of natural and local medicine with judiciously used allopathic care. They are popular, and rarely over or underprescribe antibiotics, which cannot be said for the allopathic side. For example, a common treatment from a Nica doctor for vaginitis is a shotgun approach of a steroid, an antifungal, and metronidazole suppositories, which in addition to being somewhat harmful, is also expensive for people who live on less than two dollars a day.

Most of my time was spent conducting interviews of village health workers on the remote side of the island, Cerro Maderas, trying to figure out which parts of our program work well and which parts need improvement. These were carried out often by walking village to village. Most of the problems were related to organizational issues, such as ensuring a

steady supply of medications to each village, need for more direct clinical training, maintaining equipment, and negotiating a careful balance between the two political parties and several religions (mostly christian, but there is at least one hare krishna, I kid you not). A resident with good Spanish fluency could help out with our projects in the field.