

Sierra Leone Adventure

Update 12

To cut a long story short we are back in Sierra Leone, albeit for a shorter period this time. Although we hadn't planned to be back quite so soon it is great to meet up with the ex pats and locals out here again.

At the clinic many things are the same as when we left a few months ago, but some have changed. Most of the new systems we implemented are still in place, some have been improved upon by L. whilst she was out here. We have spent the first few weeks catching up on the changes and also bringing the accounts up to date as there was a few weeks without a dedicated finance officer.

Our journey out here tested our resolve. Although we weren't too badly affected with the weather for our journey to Heathrow our flight was delayed by about 4 hours due to a technical issue with the plane. As an aside, whilst we of course wanted to get on our way as soon as possible we also wanted to be confident the problem with the plane had been reliably fixed and that it wasn't going to give up on us at 35,000 feet!. BMI are now using a different plane, with seat-back videos and games (just like Virgin Atlantic). The previous plane had done the journey to Freetown 4 times a week for at least the last 4 years, and the runway at Freetown is not the smoothest, so perhaps it is just as well they have a newer plane. We were also very lucky to be assigned seats with extended legroom (without even having to ask). The new plane needs to re-fuel on the journey, so we touched down at Malaga. Eventually we landed at Freetown about 5 hours late, and then the water taxi from the airport seemed to take forever. We finally go to our room at the clinic at 03:30 – 22 hours after leaving home.

This time we are living in the [Team House](#) which the clinic rents from a local landlord. This is a 3 story building located just behind the clinic. There are 4 bedrooms on each of the upper floors, together with a shared kitchen and lounge. The ground floor has a dining room and the kitchen used by our cook for our weekday evening meals. We are still close to the Maternity ward so we occasionally here the local ladies giving birth. For the last couple of weeks we have had the middle floor to ourselves, as the other expats have been away on leave. From next week we should be back to full occupancy.

Our daily routine is much as it was when we were out here before. The alarm goes off at 07:00 on weekdays, and we have devotions at 08:00 before starting work. We stop for about half an hour for lunch about 12:30 and finish for the day around 17:00, assuming S. has managed to balance the accounts for the day! Evenings and weekends were are left to our own devices, socialising with the other expats, reading, watching DVDs etc. We have been into Freetown a couple of times on the podda-podda's (local minibuses), and also been out to the beach for a day.

Of course a key difference from our usual home routine is that we were here for Christmas. We decorated our room and the finance office with decorations we had brought out with us, including a small Christmas tree complete with

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baubles and lights. We also found a larger tree which we put up in the dining room. It seemed really strange when the build-up to Christmas was HOT. We watched with interest the reaction to the cold weather and snow in the UK. We showed some of the locals pictures from internet and web-cams. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. Christmas morning we had a short service with the patients at the clinic, and then went for a walk to the local beach armed with sweets to give to the local children. As you might imagine we were very popular. Every child said thank-you without being prompted, which was very nice to see.

We couldn't miss out on a Christmas lunch, and all the expats and some expat guests contributed to feast, which included turkey and most of the trimmings. A welcome omission from our point of view was that sprouts are impossible to source. We don't like them so didn't miss them at all. With about 10 people trying to cook their parts of the meal it was eventually all ready about 15:30 – only an hour and a half later than planned! We made a Christmas cake as our contribution, which went down really well with everyone. We were able to cook this the week before which meant we weren't part of the cooking frenzy on the day – smart move! True to tradition there was about twice as much food as we could possibly eat, although we had a good try. After the meal we went back down to the beach, which was absolutely packed, Again we will add some pictures shortly.

A surprise to us, was that the landlord of the team house decided that the outside of the building needed sprucing up (the lease is shortly up for renewal). This meant the outside needed painting, metalwork needed attention – rusty portions cut away and new bits welded on. The work started on Christmas Eve and continued every day over the Christmas period and is still going on (every day). Hopefully it should be finished shortly.

As medical supplies are difficult to source here, the clinic receives containers from either UK, Netherlands or US about three or four times a year. The latest one arrived from the Netherlands and was delivered about 9.15pm. As this was a forty foot container it could not be brought into the compound (the road outside is too narrow for the lorry to turn) and so the road was closed and we helped unload about a thousand boxes of medical and other essential supplies into our dining room. This took about two hours with the additional labour we employed. The dining room has now been cleared ready for our next community dinner next week.

New Year seemed strange as well. There were some fireworks let off at around midnight but they are mainly low ones and do not explode in the sky like those back home. We decided not to visit the beach on New Years day as a local told us it would be packed and unpleasant, so we delayed our next trip until a later weekend.

.... to be continued

Update 11

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This will probably be the last update, as we are now in our last week before coming home.

We have been busy for the last couple of weeks with the handover to our replacement. That is virtually completed now, so I think we can leave with a clear conscience. No doubt L. will change the system again after we have gone, but at least she understands why we did what we did!

There is quite a turn-over of ex-pats at the moment with new midwives arriving, a change to the Out Patient Clinic doctor, and cover for our surgeon who is on holiday. At the moment the number of people from the southern hemisphere is considerably greater than those of us from north of the equator. What joins us all together though is being here because we want to be, and wanting to make a difference. In the greater scheme of things we are only scratching the surface of the needs of the country. It does make a big difference though to those whose lives we have been able to change. A scary statistic which I don't think we have mentioned before, is that nationally on average 1 mother in 7 dies during childbirth.

We are frequently asked, especially by the locals, when we are coming back to Sierra Leone. The best answer we can give at the moment is that we haven't ruled it out. The finance officer role is hopefully filled by L. for some considerable time, so that option is not available to us. Being totally non-medical (S. also has a major problem with the sight of blood) we would not be of much use on the medical side. However we don't know what opportunities may turn up in the future, either here in Sierra Leone or possibly in other areas of Africa.

P. has learnt a great deal about IT, and hopefully has shared some of this with other ex-pats and some of the locals. With a very slow and somewhat unreliable internet connection tasks which would be fairly trivial at home become quite major. Almost everything we download from the internet (drivers, program updates etc) is saved on our server, so we only have to go through the pain of the slow download once – which can be a couple of hours or more for a 5 – 10 megabyte file.

It would be great to be able to say all the vehicles and generators are working, but..... one of the generators is back in pieces with a suspected oil pump issue, and the engine of one of the cars is being stripped down as it is making some very strange (and expensive sounding) noises. Our team of mechanics have a seemingly never-ending job trying to keep everything running, but like almost everyone else out here they remain remarkably cheerful.

After the reverse culture shock of coming home we hope to dine out a few times on our experiences, and we have a whole heap of photographs to ~~share~~ share with you.

We hope this blog has given you at least a flavour of our adventure.

Update 10

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Yet again it has been a while since our last update.

Most of the issues mentioned in the last update have been resolved. National Power finally got around to repairing the supply line from the sub-station, so we have power from them again. This has allowed us to 'rest' our [generators](#), and give them some care and attention. We have asked National Power to install a dedicated supply line for the clinic, which will hopefully give us a more reliable service and a more stable voltage. The nominal voltage is 220, but when on National Power it frequently drops to 190, or even less. Most of our electrical equipment runs on regulators to try and protect it from the fluctuations.

Our time out here is coming to an end – just a handful of weeks to go now before we leave. We have been planning the handover to our replacement. She will be joining us mid month. She is an ex-pat married to a Sierra Leonean and hopefully will be able to work at the centre long-term.

Trips to the beach are getting a little harder to plan, with the [rainy season](#). This is quite difficult to show on pictures, but hopefully the link gives an impression. It will rain continually for a day or more, and then brighten up for a few hours. One impact of this is that the roofs, which are made of corrugated iron ("zencs" as they are called locally) leak. Replacing them seems to ignore most H&S guidelines! The temperature is cooler now (upper 70's), and many of the locals have taken to wearing coats as they are cold! We are in danger of losing all our lovely tan before we return.

A couple of weeks ago the ship [Logos Hope](#) visited Freetown and we went to visit. It is a converted 12,000 ton ex car-ferry run by the Christian NGO [Operation Mobilisation](#). The on-board book-shop is particularly impressive. We also had the opportunity to see Freetown waterfront from a different angle, as well as operations to load and unload containers at the port.

After visiting the ship we finally stumbled across the [National Railway Museum](#). York it isn't, but is interesting nevertheless, partly because a lot of the exhibits were originally manufactured in the UK. Up until the mid 1970's Sierra Leone has an extensive system of narrow gauge railways criss-crossing the country. Sadly most of the engines and rolling stock were looted and destroyed during the civil war, but a few examples were saved and are on display. The exhibits are housed in a large, dry shed so should not deteriorate any further, but any restoration will be a very long process due to lack of funds. No admission charge is made for the museum – most locals have no spare disposable income – but donations are gratefully received. According to the visitors book we were the only visitors that week.

The Birthing Centre is now fully operational, and becoming very busy as news of its existence spreads. There are queues outside the gates on Wednesdays and Fridays for the ante-natal clinic. Our apartment is just above the delivery room, so we sometimes hear the ladies in labour. Generally however the ladies seem to manage the pain without crying out. Most days there are

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several births, and it is only occasionally that we hear the cry. More expat midwives are due to join us soon, which means they will be able to share out covering the centre amongst more people and cut down on the extra long shifts they have had to work.

The second of our 4 annual [container deliveries](#) came last week. This included medical supplies for the centre, spare parts for the vehicles, and a lot of donated items. Unpacking it was quite a large task, and some of the boxes have still not found a home. The third container is due to arrive in the autumn.

Update 9

The container finally arrived after sitting in the docks for three weeks. Once it had been unpacked and items had found a new home, the birthing centre opened.

We had two pregnant members of staff who wished to have their babies here. The first one (a boy) arrived before we were open, but was an easy birth. The second one (another boy) arrived the day we officially opened. Since then we have had quite a few babies born (girls as well as boys!). We have had our first set of twins and also our first emergency caesarean section.

Now on Fridays we have planned caesareans. We also have an anti-natal clinic on Wednesdays and Fridays. This is well attended by the local pregnant women.

The Mercy Ship, Africa Mercy is due in Sierra Leone next February and we have had the advance team staying with us in the compound to do some of the planning. They have now all departed. Also the expat staff is continually changing with new faces around the dinner table and missing faces.

The rainy season has begun. We have had several long heavy showers, normally during the night. These are normally accompanied by thunder and lightening. The leaky roof panels have been replaced.

Another problem we have at the moment is the lack of National Electricity. A vehicle went into the overhead power line that supplies the clinic breaking it. National Power has no interest in repairing it unless they receive backhanders. This means we are running on the generators which are very tired and keep losing pressure, which means they have to be turned off and have oil changes. Also we are using a lot of diesel to fuel them. A tanker full only lasts just over a week! An engineer is coming this week from Britain with some spare parts which are required to repair one of the generators that has been poorly since before we arrived. This should help the situation.

Update 8

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It has been quite a while since our last update. This is not because there has been anything to report – much the opposite in fact, and we have been trying to find the time to do the update!

Easter was a big event here. On Easter Monday the local beach was a solid mass of people, with barely space to stand let alone sit down. We walked through the crowd and both remarked on how calm and happy people seemed to be. I don't think we would have been as happy to walk through a similar crowd on say Brighton beach on a bank holiday. There were quite a lot of people out with home-made kites, some were very imaginative.

Last weekend Sydneylyn, the seamstress at the clinic, got married and she invited all the staff to go along. A tradition in Sierra Leone is that the bride and groom choose a material and then guests are expected to obtain some of that material and have an outfit made. We made quite an impression as dressed in our green fish outfits. [The marriage service](#), in English, was pretty much word-for-word what it would have been in the UK. However after the couple were pronounced man and wife there were some interesting additions and diversions. One of the priests did a 20 minute (or possibly more) slot which was essentially a pep-talk to the newly married couple on the vows they had just made. The couple also receive cash gifts from the congregation. The bride and groom stand at the front of the church each holding a large tray. All the congregation files past and puts a note or two on one of the trays. Signing the register is also a very public affair, with representatives from the congregation being called forward to add their signatures. All-in-all a fascinating experience, even if it did last nearly 3 hours.

We also had a big day at clinic with the [official opening of the maternity unit](#). Sierra Leonean people love a celebration, and we don't think they were disappointed. The courtyard was dressed with marquees and chairs. Guests included the First and Second lady (the wives of the President and Vice President), Ann Gloag (whose charitable trust is funding the clinic) and representatives from High Commission offices. It also gave us another chance to wear the green fish outfits. Africell, one of the mobile phone companies, sponsored the PA system, although their method of plugging it into the power was maybe not the safest!. A local music and dance troupe provided some very energetic entertainment. We made the number one slot on the TV news that evening and headlines in the local papers. Our container is reputedly at the docks, but has not yet been released by customs. There is some vital equipment in it that we need before the maternity unit can start delivering babies. Once it is up and running we expect to have up to 100 births per month

The rainy season is almost upon us. Over the next 4 of 5 months we can expect about 4 metres of rain. At the moment the 'showers' are lasting about an hour and are mostly during the night. By August it will be pretty much non-stop rain. Being caught in the rain for even just a few seconds leaves you looking and feeling like a drowned rat.

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We have been running our new, simpler accounting system for about a month, and so far all seems to be working well. P is working his way through the budget headings, so we can present a reasonably accurate forecast of the running costs back to the Gloag Foundation. Before we leave we will document it all for L. who will be replacing S. as the finance officer.

Our very talented surgeon continues to work hard repairing fistulas, and most Fridays we have a [Glady Glady ceremony](#) – an extended version of morning devotions - where the ladies celebrate their new start in life.

Update 7

We have now been here just over 50 days, and it is feeling very much like home. It is great to not be bombarded with news about bad weather, budgets and elections!

We have been burning the evening oil (not quite the midnight oil) recently as the new financial year starts. The previous accounts were very complicated so we have tried to make them a lot simpler from April onwards. Over the next few days we will know whether our new system works.

A couple of days ago we had a trip to see [two schools](#). One has been funded by a charity set up by a UK Rotarian and his family. We helped paint an extension which has just been built. The second is a school that we helped to fund when we were out here 4 years ago. It was great to see that the school is finished and in use.

Easter will most likely see us on Lumley beach, where we are told there will be a great deal of kite flying going on.

The clinic is really buzzing with patients at the moment. All the wards are full and our surgeon is working hard repairing fistulas. The container with the remaining equipment for the maternity ward has left the UK, and should be with us in 2 – 3 weeks time. Once the maternity unit is open it will make childbirth a much safer process. Local midwives have been recruited and are being trained by ex pat midwives from UK, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa

Update 6

Our apologies to those of you that do not have PowerPoint, the links to pictures should now work with your browser. If you are having problems please email us.

We have also realised that we have not said much about what the clinic actually does, so here goes....

The clinic was opened in 2005. At the moment it has two functions. The first is to repair fistulas (tears in the walls of the uterus and bladder) caused by

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lack of anti-natal care during pregnancy and also some are caused because the pregnancy occurred in very young women. The fistula results in the woman leaking urine. This is often a very simple operation which transforms community and family. After the operation she is given health advice, a ticket for a caesarean section and also a new outfit to start her new life. There is a ceremony at the clinic just before the women go home, celebrating their new life and thanking God.

The second function is a day clinic for children up to the age of 12. They can receive vaccinations and health checks. No operations for children are available but children can be referred to another hospital if necessary.

At the moment there are changes and it is hoped that from the end of next month, the clinic will be able to offer anti-natal care and will have a maternity ward (caesarean sections will be available if required).

Update 5

Life out here is a mixture of successes and frustrations. Amongst the successes are the lovely people and the wonderful scenery. The frustrations include most things not quite working as you would like them to, especially the internet connection and electricity supply.

Last week we had a visit by a senior rep from one of the major funders of the clinic. This helped us a lot with understanding the budget and what needs to be reported. Soon we should be able to provide the departmental managers at the clinic with input and expenditure information. The handover period with the previous finance officer ends this week, when he goes back to the USA after over 3 years out here. After then it is down to us!

Mostly we have mains electricity from the National Power Authority, and when that is not available we have a generator. However our generator seems to be suffering with the heat – we are in the hottest month – and cuts out several times a day. The internet connection is also quite variable – first thing in the morning and usually during the weekend we get around 30 kbps. During the working day this can reduce to just 1 or 2 kbps. To put that in context it is between around 100 and 1000 times slower that you are probably getting at home. Internet browsing can be extremely slow, and emails can take a long time to send and receive, especially if they have large files attached.

Another challenge at the moment is that the battery on our laptop has given up the ghost. This means that when we switch from national power to generator, or vice versa, our laptop loses power and crashes. We are getting into the habit of saving things very frequently! We are hoping to get a new battery sent out to us shortly.

P. has done quite a bit more driving, including going into the centre of Freetown, and also at night. There are virtually no street lights so you are relying on seeing lights on other vehicles – which would be ok except you need to decide whether a single light coming towards you is a motorbike, or a

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car with just one working headlight – not to mention the few cars that drive with no lights at all! Your own lights are also essential to see potholes and speed bumps in the road, and also the amazing number of pedestrians wandering about. It's actually scarier to be driven than it is to drive. At least with the controls you feel more in charge of your destiny.

Just outside the clinic compound there are several bread-sellers. Locally baked loaves are very cheap at 500 Leone each (less than 10 pence). All the vendors are desperate to sell their wares, so we try to rotate which stall we buy from. By contrast food in the supermarkets – especially imported food – is very expensive. Cheese and meat are particularly expensive, and well outside the range of majority of locals. The supermarkets tend to cater mainly for the ex pats working with charities and NGOs and for the few locals that can afford to use them.

We try and get out at least once each weekend. We can use the clinic vehicles by paying a per kilometre charge, which is divided by how many people are in the vehicle. This encourages efficient use of the available vehicles. Recently we have visited a chimp sanctuary and another beach. Pictures will be loaded up soon (hopefully).

The [chimp sanctuary at Tacugama](#) is located off the mountain road. The mountain road is used only by 4 x 4's wishing to cross from one side of Freetown to the other, avoiding the clogged up roads. The condition of the road is such that only 4 x 4's can use it. The road to the sanctuary is so steep that even our 4 x 4 could not climb it and we had to walk the last few hundred yards.

The sanctuary was set up by a couple who started rescuing chimps from the markets where they were being sold as bush meat. It is illegal to keep a chimp as a pet in Sierra Leone and this couple also took in chimps that had grown too big for their owners to manage. The sanctuary is in the mountains, after an initial 3 months in quarantine the chimps are gradually introduced to others of around the same age. The chimps are then integrated into larger groups in one of four compounds. The younger chimps are fed four times a day, reducing to twice a day for the older chimps in the biggest compound of about four acres. The female chimps are all on implant contraceptives to prevent the group growing too big. At the moment there are a hundred chimps in the sanctuary. It is hoped that one day the older ones could be set free to live in the mountain forests, but due to poachers who kill for bush meat, none have been set free yet. It was great to see the chimps in their natural surroundings.

Saturday we went to another beach further along the peninsular. We were going to meet up with some others who had slept overnight on the beach. We came off the road down to the beach they were supposed to be camping at, but they were not there. We eventually managed to call them. They were at a beach a little further along. They told us to go back to the main road, go past Bureh and at a blue sign turn off the main road, a person will be waving to you. It is not far they said. We did this and shortly after turning onto the

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main road we saw a blue sign and a person waving. We turned off. It was a dead end and there was no way to the beach. Back to the main road. About a mile further on we saw another blue sign with another person waving at us. Someone in our vehicle recognized this boy. We turned off again and this time found the campers. The beach was down a steep path with a few steps in it. It was a beautiful beach. The beach sloped quite steeply down to the sea, so when the waves came in they were quite big, sometimes about three feet high. This meant that one minute you could be knee high in the sea and the next up to you of shoulders. The force of the retreating waves was also quite strong and sometimes it was quite difficult to stay standing. We all enjoyed the beach and S and P are still quite red and sore from the sun.

By the way, we hope you are finding the blog interesting. If you are, or even if you are not, please feel free to send us an email. We do want to keep up with news and activities.

Update 4

In addition to this update we have started adding links to slide shows of various aspects of our trip. If you look through the updates you will see the links as underlined text. Just click (or control click) on the links to see the slide show. If this doesn't work for you send us an email describing the problem. You may get some warning messages, just keep clicking. You do trust us don't you?? Keep checking back and we'll add more slide shows when we can.

Last Friday was a public holiday and as the clinic has no patients at the moment, (the chief surgeon is away), we were all given a long weekend off. Some of the expats decided to go on a long trip south to an island nature reserve. We decided that 8 hours cooped up in the back of a Landcruiser over dirt track roads wasn't for us, so we stayed at home and had a lazy weekend with walks on the beach, and a trip to a local pub on Sunday night. Today it was back to work. S has started on the month end procedures and P has been working on IT projects. After having to cook for ourselves over the weekend, it was great to be back in the team house for dinner tonight. The cook Fatu did not let us down and had produced a lovely chicken and vegetable pie.

We have now been able to watch a local television station. It is quite different from British television, last night at around 9pm after the news, there were birthday greetings followed by obituaries. Tonight we put the television on around 8.15pm to hear someone from the Health ministry talking about national immunisation days for Polio!

Update 3

Into our second week, and it is beginning to make a bit more sense.

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Last weekend we bumped down a dirt road for almost an hour and ended up at [Beach 2](#), so-called because it is at the end of River 2, so-called because apparently it looks like a figure 2 from the air. Palm trees, white sand, and warm sea to swim in – it doesn't get much better than that! Maybe we will do a picture show to accompany this blog so you can see for yourself.

P. has now got a local driving licence. Paid somewhat over the odds for it, but it did reduce the waiting time from about a day to around an hour. Interestingly the licence covers cars and motor bikes, even though he has never ridden a motor bike. Also took his driving test in a Landcruiser today, and is now able to drive the clinic's vehicles, which means we can get out a bit on our own if we wish.

S. went out to lunch to meet another NGO (Non Governmental Officer) from another charity. She has signed the bank authority and soon will become a signature on the accounts. The accounts are becoming clearer and she now knows the value of each bundle of notes from the bank. Things should become even clearer after the end of month accounting procedures.

We are still enjoying good evening meals prepared by the team house cook, tonight was shepherd's pie with green beans and salad. For desert there is always fresh fruit salad. We have also joined members of the team house and watched some videos from the collection there.

Update 2

We're getting the hang of things a bit more now and into a routine. Work starts at 08:00, after *Devotions* – a short session of giving thanks and prayers, and we work until around 12:15 which is *Chop time*. Work continues until around 17:00 and then we have an hour or so before dinner at 18:30. Daylight is from about 07:30 until 19:30, but the temperature stays pretty constant.

P. has applied for his local driving licence and then has to demonstrate he can handle the Landcruisers. Driving seems to be a perpetual game of chicken, and the most important control to master is the horn. In theory people drive on the right, in practice they drive to avoid the potholes, pedestrians, animals, and other traffic – but not necessarily in the order – and to get ahead of the vehicle in front.

S. is establishing herself in the finance office. She has now taken control of the vault key. The largest note is the 10 000 leone (worth less than £2) so a trip to the bank for petty cash involves coming back with a bag full of notes which are quite bulky and can not be stored in a usual cash tin so they are stored in the safe (vault). Also stored there are other peoples valuables (passports etc) and also some US dollars and some English pounds. She also now has the key to the Finance Office.

Today was a public holiday (only announced two days ago) in memory of the dead soldiers from the civil war but we went to work. Some of the staff had

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today off but the rest are taking tomorrow off. There is another public holiday next Friday.

Update 1

Got off to a flying start by having to push the car off the drive in the snow. Spent the night with friends in London and then caught the flight from Heathrow to Lungi. When we arrived it was dark (most flights are timed to arrive during the evening) and we chose the new water taxi to cross from Lungi to Aberdeen (the suburb of Freetown we are staying in).

After a not-too-good night's sleep, due to the heat, we spent first couple of days acclimatising, meeting the rest of the team, and renewing acquaintance with people we had met before on earlier trips.

Our accommodation is in the new block that we helped to build when we were last out here. We have a lounge area, a bedroom, a bathroom and AIR CONDITIONING!!!! [Pictures of our accommodation](#)

We started work on Monday after devotions (Christian prayers). It felt strange after being off on holiday. We are now getting to grips with the accounting procedures and managing to mend broken computers. Today after work we went for a swim in the Atlantic off [Lumley beach](#).

We have to prepare our own breakfast, but during the week we can eat the same as the patients for lunch (rice + a different sauce each day) or we can prepare our own lunch. Dinner Monday-Friday is prepared for us and is eaten with the team in the team house. Our cook is very good and we have enjoyed our meals so far. At the weekends we are on our own for preparing food. Shove Tuesday saw one of the team make pancakes for us all after dinner and we made it a social occasion.