

AMREF Flying Doctors

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The African Medical Research and Education Fund, or AMREF, mainly draws fundraising from Europe and the UK. It's largely unheard of in NZ, despite one of the original founders being Sir Archie McIndoe, surely a candidate for most shamefully under-recognised New Zealander. AMREF itself is a large organisation which concerns itself mainly with training local healthcare workers and addressing public health matters in East Africa. The Flying Doctors are a small component of it and have a rotating cast of volunteer doctors from all over the world.

The Flying Doctors retrieve and transport tourists and locals from Africa to all over the world. With the money made from this (usually insurance payments) they fund surgical teams and charity retrievals. Any profit left over goes to the parent body for their services. The volunteer physician program provides the Flying Doctors with free labour for the retrievals that is then billed out to clients providing a large payment to the organisation.

When I was here for 2 months in 2007 I flew the equivalent of twice around the world in the back of little turboprop and jet aircraft. Apart from going to a large number of countries in Africa I also repatriated people to Italy, Pakistan, Israel, England and the Canary Islands. I picked up people from bush rollovers, a priest who had been shot by the Lords Resistance Army, and a man attacked by a lion and hyenas.

When I returned in February 2015 the workload was less intense. February is always quiet apparently, but still an adventure. I travelled in police motorcades in Mombasa and Nairobi, with the traffic through the middle of Mombasa stopped for us to hurtle through. I spent a weekend in Nigeria, which was much nicer than expected, and I flew into Somalia on several occasions. I saw gunshots, psychosis and some extremely third world medicine. I had VIPs having seizures in our little cramped cabin, and I intubated a young student on the runway of Kilimanjaro International Airport after he was delivered by two doctors with GCS 3 and no airway. In my down time I also managed to do a couple of day trips around Nairobi and spent a day visiting a local hospital's theatre complex to watch some obstetric anaesthesia.

The volunteer program is open to anyone with Anaesthetic and ICU experience, and they will accept applications from anyone in Advanced Training onwards. It certainly is an amazing experience, and provides an easy, short-term way to do some very gentrified aid work. People tend to come for a month at a time and AMREF have a calendar on their website (www.flydoc.org) that lets you see which months are still available, but they tend to fill quickly. It is extremely easy to organise as the Flying Doctors take care of the local registration. The whole process was orders of magnitude easier than trying to get Australian registration, for example.

The work itself isn't hugely different from other retrieval organisations, and is usually at a lower level of intensity. But the environment it is conducted in is unique. Having the organisation based here, and with local pilots and nurses means people have a very good sense of what's safe and what's not. The Volunteer Physician is the only outsider in the organisation, and so for a month you get an amazing view from the Kenyan perspective. Africa is not without its troubles, and it's really interesting to talk to people who have insider knowledge of events.

As with everything in life there are negative aspects, and these are worth considering before volunteering.

Since I was there in 2007 the Flying Doctors had become a company, and there is a definite flavour of profit maximisation coming through. The profits still go to the parent AMREF organisation, but volunteering this time hasn't felt as 'aid workery' as in 2007. This might be an important consideration for you if you do want to feel like you are contributing more directly. Also, they are not like the Red Cross in that they have definitely 'taken sides'. Part of the flying is to pick up Kenyan

soldiers injured in or near Somalia by al-Shabaab, you would need to be comfortable with this lack of impartiality.

As with any retrieval job there is a lot of downtime. This can feel quite restrictive as it's not completely safe to just wander around Nairobi. I would recommend coming later in the year when it's much busier.

Volunteering abroad is never an inexpensive exercise. Flights to Nairobi have to be paid for, though day-to-day living can be done quite cheaply and you are provided bed and breakfast.

Working here is not as safe as working in a theatre in New Zealand, but it wouldn't be an adventure if it were. The day-to-day safety is fine, as the free accommodation is in a good area only a 10 minute walk from the airport. The planes are very good quality and are well maintained. For the aviation buffs these include a fleet of Cessna Caravans, King Airs and Citation Bravo jets. Flying into Somalia has been the only truly scary experience this time, mainly because of the low, fast approach from the sea to make the plane a smaller target to any bored AK-47 toting individual nearby. However, it is at the Volunteer's discretion as to what flights they are prepared to go on. If you don't want to see the lovely beachside real estate of Mogadishu, the Flying Doctors have a pool of locum doctors which they will call on. These locums also allow you to take time out to see some of Kenya. Taking time off is as simple as saying that you are not available for those few days. Volunteer Physicians apparently sometimes bring family along and head away on safari from time to time.

Overall it's an amazing experience, and one I can definitely recommend. If you're happy with the drawbacks of the job then it will provide you with a month unlike any you're likely to find anywhere else.