

DENTAL PROJECT PERU

For dentist Jacqui Nimmo, an action packed trip to Peru sowed the seed for much bigger things to come. From her experiences in the country, she founded the charity Dental Project Peru, as she tells Arveen Bajaj.

For 27-year-old Scottish dentist Jacqui Nimmo, an adventure trip to Peru turned into something much more than she could ever have expected. After studying dentistry at the University of Glasgow Dental School, Jacqui worked for two years in Scotland where she thoroughly enjoyed her work.

Then in May 2001, she went to Peru for the first time in search of travel and adventure and found the country and its people so inspiring that she went back again and again. She spent time travelling throughout South and Central America and spent a month in Guatemala volunteering in a dental clinic. Some time after this, Jacqui took £100 from her bank account and set about buying anaesthetic, needles, painkillers and gloves, borrowed an extraction kit and set off to help people in the poorest, most impoverished part of Peru on her own. Her embarkation on an independent dental relief project was urged on by the need to give something back to a country and to people that had given her so much insight and pleasure.

She travelled to the Apurimac region of the country where the people boast the noble history of being descendants of the Incas. A very rural and remote area with few roads, minimal supplies of electricity and running water and only simple radio communication, in the day the sun was very intense and at night temperatures



Jacqui on the quad bike that acted as an ambulance for the health post of Mara

dropped to below freezing. "Although the elements were extreme, it can be quite beautiful with views of the untouched peaks of the Andes unfolding before you in every direction," Jacqui recalls.

Travelling around the area proved challenging but not impossible. "I got on a bus and travelled out to the most impoverished and rural area of Peru. Once out there, I travelled to numerous rural villages and communities by any means of transport available – including buses, truck, quad bike, horse and foot. I even embarked on a journey with a coffin!"

Jacqui carried an extraction kit with her

and set up surgery in the strangest of places. "One day I found myself pulling teeth in the yard of a mud hut surrounded by chickens, cats, a pig and two guinea pigs. The entire population of the village gathered around me and patiently waited their turn. With every tooth I pulled, I was cheered on by my enthusiastic onlookers. I travelled alone and slept in all kinds of places, including a hospital storeroom and on a birthing table!"

One day I found myself pulling teeth in the yard of a mud hut surrounded by chickens

In a region where a population of 35,000 is served by just two dentists who do not travel, and despite the considerable communication problems, word of her arrival spread quickly. "In one place the doctor took a megaphone and walked around the village, announcing my presence. Word got out into the countryside, and into the hills and after a few days people started arriving."

Jacqui recounts that as she covered more ground, the word started to spread that there was a 'doctorita Gringita' or 'little white doctor girl' in the area and people



Working by torchlight



Jacqui with an 82-year-old patient

started to come to her. She could communicate in Spanish to most patients but sometimes there were people who spoke only the indigenous language, Quechua. With these patients, she communicated through broken Quechua and a translator.

"There was one lady of 82 years of age who had walked five hours over the mountains to get treatment. Her mouth was completely rotted and she had abscesses. She had lived with the pain not for months, but for years. I could see the relief in her face and the gratitude in her eyes and from the way she held my hands," said Jacqui.

Some patients were a bit apprehensive of her at first as most of them had never seen a white person before or had dental treatment and their anxiety was understandable.

At an average elevation of 12,000 feet, Jacqui describes the region she was working in as a cold and barren place but also remembers that the gentle warmth of the people inspired her to put the skills she had learned in Scotland to good use.

"I spent two months in this area and after pulling over 600 teeth I realised I had only scratched the surface," she recalls.

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Dental Project Peru

It was from these humble beginnings that the charity Dental Project Peru emerged. Established by Jacqui in September 2003, the charity hopes to raise money in order to allow her to return to Peru and take teams of volunteer dentists, hygienists and dental nurses from all over the world there



Children proudly hold their new toothbrushes. It is a mission of Dental Project Peru to provide not only dental treatment, but also oral healthcare instruction

for short periods of time. Here they will carry out much needed treatment, from June to November this year. The charity is currently fundraising in order to purchase a portable dental unit which will allow the volunteers to carry out basic restorative dentistry as well as extractions. The target is £10,000 in order for the project to run

tions and restorative work on the local people. "I guarantee they will return home with an experience they will never forget!" Jacqui says.

She adds that she hopes Dental Project Peru will be a long term project with new volunteers coming out to work each year as well as volunteers having repeat visits. "Our vision is to eventually have a sustainable system which will involve not only foreign visitors but local health care professionals," she outlines.

"What I did out there was the most rewarding thing I've ever done in my life. I don't think I've ever got so much from giving so much, it's quite an addictive feeling. There is so much to do and I have really just scratched the surface."

For more information about Dental Project Peru or to make a donation, please see www.dentalprojectperu.org or contact Jacqui Nimmo at jacqui@dentalprojectperu.org or telephone 013397 55501.

until November and the charity has raised £7,000 so far. It also welcomes equipment donations or supplies. The volunteers will visit the rural communities by whatever means of transport is necessary (i.e. truck, donkey, foot, quad bike etc) and sleep in tents provided by Dental Project Peru.

They will be carrying out both extrac-



A young patient proudly displays his recently extracted tooth



Jacqui Nimmo, founder of the charity Dental Project Peru



A female patient at Challhuahuacho who nursed her baby during her five extractions