

CAGS /CNIS Gulu report

By Ghee Hwang FRCSC

As was my experience during my visit last year, the Lacor hospital has been most gracious in their hospitality. I was met at Entebbe airport by the driver from Lacor and taken to the Lacor guesthouse in Kampala to rest up. They then drove me up to Lacor/Gulu the next day with some other passengers.

For new visitors you must remember to have US\$50 cash payable at the immigration counter at the airport for the visa into Uganda. Usually we (surgeons/medics) would bring lots of equipment as part of our luggage but that's not a problem. We just haul it all onto a trolley available at the luggage carousel and push it by the green "nothing to declare" passage and your driver will take over from there-on.

It's best to change your money in Kampala as the rates are better. Your driver will know where to take you. Usually it's best to bring \$100 US bills as the exchange rate is lower for smaller denominations, or sometimes they won't accept anything smaller than \$100 bills. You probably need about \$300 to \$400 for a six-week period unless you are big on shopping. This would cover most incidentals including beer and pop. You might want to pick up some comfort food at the supermarket in Kampala prior to departure from Kampala.

The trip from Kampala to Lacor/Gulu used to be a grueling 360 km of pot-holed road and would take upwards of six hours. It used to



take a toll on your back, not to mention the bumps on your head. Thanks goodness due to a loan from the world bank Uganda has gone on a road improvement program and now there is an almost completed highway from Kampala to Gulu and the trip now takes a pleasant 4 to 4.5 hours.

As a CAGS visitor you will be put up in the St. Mary's hospital guesthouse. This is a clean and comfortable building with single and double rooms, each is complete with your own shower and toilet and bed with mosquito nets. Since we are in Malaria country, it's highly recommended that you sleep under the nets. You have three meals a day provided and meat once a day. It's not exactly haute cuisine but it's adequate. You do get laundry service. As a CAGS visitor, the St Mary's hospital looks after your board and lodgings. If you come with a companion they may have to pay about US\$20 per day for the same privileges.

Gulu is the biggest the biggest town in Northern Uganda. Gulu has a population of 115,000 and Gulu district of 340,000. Gulu Government hospital has 250 beds and is supposed to be the regional referral hospital. However, St. Mary's hospital in Lacor in reality is **the main referral hospital**. St. Mary's Hospital Lacor is a private non-profit Catholic-based hospital with 476 beds. It is situated 6 km from Gulu along the highway to Sudan. The hospital on average has 600 in-patients and sees about 500 out-patients per day. It serves the poorest segment of the population with average income of <\$0.50 per day, way below subsistence level. In fact more than 2/3 of the population cannot meet their basic needs. There are numerous NGOs, including the World Food Program, which does help, but one does wonder if all the food goes where it is supposed to go. It is in this environment that a CAGS visitor is working. The hospital has what I call an elastic bed census. They do not turn anybody away so some are



on the floor and in the corridors. Having been here before I find it easier to fit in. There is no orientation so you are on your own to find out what you want to do.

Here are some useful hints: you probably will be asked to give some lectures to the medical students in either 5th year or 3rd year. It would help if you ask for the topics ahead of time so at least you can be prepared.

The contact person is either Mr. Tom Okello or Mr. Martin Okwang. They are both the only general surgeons they have here. They need about six months lead time to process your credentials, as you will be registered as a medical practitioner with the Ugandan Medical Council. The usual activities are helping do the list in the OR with the Interns or Medical Officers (sort of junior Residents).

This kind of surgery is truly general and you do what you are comfortable with. It ranges from the routine hernias and thyroidectomies, to prostatectomies, amputations, skin grafting, and the not so occasional open head injuries. Sepsis is a huge problem and gas gangrene, pyomyositis, psoas abscesses, necrotising fasciitis and a variety of odds and sorts of abscesses. Tetanus continues to be a problem and just last week there were four patients with tetanus in the ICU.

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Do not pre-judge and you might have to relax your standards a little, as I think they may be lagging behind that of Canada quite a bit. The OR organization may drive you nuts, but this is Africa so go with the flow. I do.

ESS Gulu

While I was in Lacor, it coincided with the teaching of essential surgical skills (ESS). Nearly all the credit must go to Dr. Ron Lett. Ron is president of the CNIS (Canadian Network for International Surgery). He has been tirelessly working at introducing this course mostly for the African Nations. I believe it is being taught in eight different countries including Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia, to name just a few of them.

It teaches numerous emergency skills and is primarily aimed at medical students, but does include other health workers. Skills taught include intubation, cricthyroidotomy, c-section, venous cut-down, laparotomy, bowel anastomosis, reducing fractures, and amputations, to name some of the skills.

It is a one-week course taught by certified instructors, which include

the local faculty. Should any CAGS member be interested please contact Ron Lett or office@cnis.ca. The feedback from the students has been extremely positive. The ESS has been funded by CIDA. Ron is in the process of writing a proposal for funding for the next five years. Let's hope it continues.

Murchison Park

It's not all work and no play. Murchison park is only a 2-hour drive from Lacor. It is a national reserve right alongside the Nile river. There is a lot of game like antelopes, giraffes, and elephants. If you are lucky you might see lions. A Nile cruise is highly recommended. You will see the large Nile crocodiles, hippos, elephants, weaverbirds, and all kinds of migratory birds. Set aside \$150-\$200 US for the trip depending on your accommodation. You can also do it all in one day if you start early enough. There are usually other guests at the guesthouse in Lacor from which you can gather a group to go with.

I mustn't fail to mention that speaking Italian is a real asset.

Lacor and Gulu University has a co-Chancellor from the University of Naples. So Naples sends a lot of lecturers over to teach and of course they all speak Italian. Throughout the year there will be various Italian teams that come. A pediatric surgery team comes over to perform like pull-through for Hirschsprung's, surgery for ambiguous genitalia etc. There are plastic teams and urology teams from Bolzano, Italy.

The latest exciting development is that they now have a pathologist on-site. The outfit that runs it is the equivalent of Pathologist Without Frontiers based out of Italy. Of course we have our CAGS surgeons representing Canada.

So those of you with a thirst for adventure should sign up to go to Gulu. Dr. Brian Ostrow is the one running the CAGS-GULU show. You can contact him at brian@bookshelf.ca. As traveling there already takes up the better part of a week, to be really worth while one should consider a minimum of six weeks. I assure you that it will be a memorable experience and you will probably learn more than you teach.

For more details contact Dr. Ostrow or myself at tghwang@shaw.ca, I would be delighted to fill you in on the details.



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Notice of Annual Meeting of Members

(For CAGS Members only)

Pursuant to Articles XII of the CAGS Bylaws, notice is hereby given that the Annual Meeting of Members of CAGS will be held in Victoria, British Columbia on Saturday, September 12th, 2009 from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. in the Lecture Theatre on

Level I of the Victoria Convention Centre. Please try to attend this important meeting – your presence is valued and appreciated.

The Agenda and other materials will be available at the meeting.