

Shooting for sight



CREATIVE VISION: Photographer and graphic designer Michael van Ewijk contributes his creative expertise to the Eyes for Africa cataract clinic initiative.

STORY: HAMISH RICHARDSON

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"It was a very run down hospital, and the infrastructure was very dodgy.

"The operating theatre only had two power points, so we had to use power-boards to run the equipment - and half the sockets on those didn't work.

"If one of them spluttered and fizzed when you plugged something in then you wouldn't use that one. Others would only work if you held the plug at a certain angle."

A seasoned traveller, it was Michael van Ewijk's first trip to Ethiopia.

The professional photographer from Milton was there to document everything as part of the seven-strong Eyes for Africa team that had travelled from Australia for an annual cataract clinic, with its eyes on providing sight-saving surgery to some of the country's poorest.

The second-most populous nation in Africa, with over 85 million people, Ethiopia is only just beginning to recover from 20 years of civil war and drought which began in the 1980s.

The level of poverty, says Michael, can be confronting.

But despite the rudimentary conditions, the team successfully completed 193 cataract operations in nine days.

"It was such a rewarding experience - to go over and help people.

"It is said, altruism makes you happy. It certainly made me happy.

"All these older ladies who couldn't see before because they were blind - when they'd come out and see the Eyes for Africa logo on your T-shirt you'd just get this big bear hug."

Michael joined Eyes for Africa about three years ago after hearing a radio interview with the charity's founder, Julie Tyers.

Visiting Ethiopia on a holiday, she had been shocked by the poor state of eye care particularly in the rural villages.

In response, Julie, an ophthalmic nurse, had begun an initiative to conduct annual cataract clinics for village people who cannot afford cataract surgery.

"I was inspired by her story," explains Michael. "She's a true humanitarian. She is so passionate."

Signing on with the organisation, Michael contributed his professional expertise - which included designing the organisation's logo - and helped with fundraising while he saved for his first trip.

"Everyone involved is a volunteer and has to pay their own way.

"This way all the money that the charity raises goes into the medical supplies and equipment needed for the cataract operations."

Michael is used to putting his money where his mouth is.

"I've always had this idea that we can't just sit on our arses in the West and ignore the bulk of the world's population who need help.

"I don't want to be Father Teresa - but I do believe we've all got the capacity to help in some way."

Arriving in Ethiopia with Julie three weeks ahead of the rest of the team, Michael travelled into the Simien Mountains where the two treated more than 60 villagers for trachoma - an eye infection that, if left untreated, leads to permanent blindness.

"The trek was hard. It was high altitude, we had to carry all the gear up, we were camping the whole time, and it was very cold."

Michael can't wait to go back.

The people and the place, he says, the work and its rewards, all leave their mark.

Despite the violence of its recent civil war, and the continuing human rights issues that dog the political landscape, Michael says he always felt safe.

"Ethiopians are fantastic people. It's one of the most welcoming countries I've ever been to.

"The only arguments we ever had were with taxi drivers - but they're the same everywhere."

Experiencing another culture has the potential to teach you much about yourself, says Michael.

"Until you travel to these places, you can never really appreciate how hard life is there.

"I felt so privileged - most of these people have never been more than 50 kilometres from where they were born."

But different cultures also hold a window to the soul of who we are, says Michael.

"There were road rules of some sort but I was never aware of them."

Goats and sheep share the roads with vehicles and pedestrians even in the cities.

"But I never saw such a thing as road rage. In fact if anything happens, people just laugh."

The city of Harar - where the main cataract project took place - is famous for the way Christians and Muslims have lived in harmony for hundreds of years, explains Michael.

'It's the only place where you'll find a church and a mosque side by side - it's listed by UNESCO for this reason.

"When you see the way other people live, it teaches you that you don't have to live this stressful life that we do."

"The response you get when you're there helping people is completely different to when you travel as a tourist. We were treated like royalty."

In rural Ethiopia, explains Michael, old or young, the entire village plays an active role in the process of food production - from the growing of vegetables and grain to the tending of livestock.

"But if you're blind, you become a burden.

"To restore someone's sight is a really special thing. It's like restoring their humanity."

From the 95-year-old village woman to the seven-year-old girl who will now be able to

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attend school for the first time, Michael says there were many emotional moments.

"We treated a nine-year-old boy with bilateral cataracts. When he was leaving the hospital with his parents, he was asked what he could see. He answered that he could see his mother for the first time."

Inspired by the beauty of the country and its people, as well as acts of courage and stories of hope, Michael will use his images from the trip to create a 2012 calendar and diary to support the on-going work of Eyes for Africa.

As well as training people on the ground there to become cataract surgeons, the longer-term goal is to set up a mobile unit - a four-wheel drive bus from which they can operate.

"Then we can get to the really remote areas.

"We're just a little drop in the ocean, but it's incredible the impact a little organisation like us can have."

The budget for this recent trip was under \$10,000.

"But if you've got people who are dedicated and passionate and willing to work for nothing, the money goes an incredibly long way."

For Michael the expedition, he says, was eye-opening - a life-affirming experience.

"A lot of people go into retirement and put in roses and garden edges - and that's OK.

"But doing something like this... it's like having kids - it gives you meaning, a sense of purpose. You really feel like you're giving something back.

"It was uncomfortable and chaotic and we were all exhausted by the end - but I came back elated."

Eyes For Africa relies solely on donations and the unpaid work of volunteers. If you would like to support the work, visit www.eyesforafrica.org and click on the donations tab. You can ring Michael van Ewijk on 4454 4085 for more information.