EHF *VET TREK*® MANGAIA 2008

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We are back in Rarotonga now after 4 exciting yet relaxing days in Mangaia, the southernmost island of the Cooks. We were part of a ***Vet Trek*** team that had two main focus points: desexing & a canine census. Max & I were in charge of the census but also acted as vet nurses for the two British veterinarians, Kat & Rachel.

We took a 12-man plane from Raro to Mangaia - a 40 min flight, landing on a dirt runway outside the one-room building that served as Mangaia's airport. We were welcomed by Terry, the mayor, and Te, the head of agriculture, who served as our hosts and guides. They put us up in the women's center and took us to Babe's store, where we stocked up on pasta, potato chips and bread - which would end up being our diet for nearly the entire trip for lack of other options. Talk about a carb overload! The accommodations were comfy despite the mosquitoes & cold showers that we shared with a spider the size of my fist. It was still a quiet refuge from the barking dogs at the clinic!

So Day 1 began with us riding around the bumpy dirt roads of Mangaia in the back of a pickup truck counting any dog we spotted. We went door to door, asking people how many dogs they owned and if any had been spayed or neutered. Responses varied from skepticism and hesitation toward the strange white folks in matching t-shirts to warm welcomes inside for a chat about Mangaia & its dogs. On an island of 550 people, there was certainly much diversity in perceptions of foreigners. Te, our guide and driver, smoothed things over in Maori when necessary.

Days 2 - 3 were spent in surgery, which was set up in the local Market on one day and in a school the next day. These days were long, with Kat & Rachel as young vets working slowly & diligently over splayed open animals, while an audience of local schoolchildren gaped at the blood and mess of organs. Not your ordinary school day, I am sure!

During our spare time, we explored the island a lot and even found time to go snorkeling in a small but colorful lagoon. We saw a lionfish, purple starfish, and sea cucumbers the size of my arm! Then while sitting on the beach afterward, we saw a spray of water fly up just past the edge of the reef. A large whale - probably a humpback - surfaced just for a couple seconds and then was gone. Incredible!
(It's whale season here, so we are hoping to see more of them here in Raro!)

Later on the first evening, Max & I happened upon a volleyball match in the middle of town that seemed to have attracted the entire main village of Tamarua. Shyly, we approached, not wanting to draw too much attention to ourselves or interrupt their game. I was surprised at how good they were, watching them do trick sets and jump serves. (Not just a little pick up game on the beach!)

So it was with nervous hesitation but excitement that I accepted their invitation to join in and play a bit! It wasn't my best game of v-ball....far from it. But it was one of the most memorable.

Mangaia is the 2nd largest island of the Cooks, but has only a fraction of the population of Rarotonga. Its charm comes from the small population and isolated lifestyle, as well as the incredible topography of the island. As the oldest known island in all of the Pacific, its land is a weird mixture of black and gray coral and volcanic rock. The coral & rock mixture is sharp and jagged, softened only by the lush greenery surrounding it. It was hard terrain to navigate but offered much mystique in its uniqueness. With the coral jungle and 'walking' fig trees, it felt like we were already in Middle Earth!

On Sunday, we attended church, which was a beautiful mess of Maori that still managed to awe us despite the language barrier. Missionaries did their job on Mangaia, as the entire island is very religious. The music was just as harmonious as I remembered from my first trip 7 years ago. Sunday afternoon offered perhaps the highlight of our trip, as Te took us spelunking for hours in a cave that is considered sacred by Mangaians. There are several burial sites within the enormous cave, which continues for nearly 12 km. Neither words nor pictures can really do it justice, but I will post many on facebook in attempt to show how incredible it was!

We counted just over 100 dogs on the island, and we desexed over 30. There is much speculation that some on the interior of the island may consider dogs part of the daily diet.

It was a successful Vet Trek and a very memorable experience for us. My sweetest memory has to be visiting with Teina, a woman who hosted my dad, brother and me on Mangaia's first Vet Trek seven years ago. She remembered me and hugged me genuinely. The morning before we left, she gave Max and me both necklaces made from small snails native to Mangaia and the famous rock of Mangaia. She placed a lei of flowers that she had made around my neck. I nearly cried!

It was a wonderful trip and we're now back into the swing of things at the clinic, working on some fundraisers this week.