

Before joining the real world...

Catherine Henstridge MRCVS recounts her experiences of an island clinic off the south-east coast of Thailand

There are various options open to a vet student once they have finally graduated. The most obvious, and the most parent-pleasing, is to find a job, and this is indeed what most new grads will be aiming at. The second is to do nothing, after all having been a student for 5 years it is a hard habit to break. With long summer months of freedom ahead of them, it is an attractive option, especially after the hard grind of the final year. The third is to 'go away', to fill a backpack with enough stuff to last a couple of months and board a cheap flight for somewhere hot and exotic, marginally better than doing nothing, but far more expensive. As a student there is precious little chance to get away in the long uni holidays due to the huge amount of EMS and the time after graduating is the perfect opportunity.



Catherine Henstridge (left) and Por, the nurse who works at the Thai clinic, doing a bitch spay

This is the option I went for, deciding however, to mix it with a little bit of option 1. I decided that whilst I was away I would like to hone my spanking new veterinary skills on the unsuspecting animal population of some far flung nation. It also gave a bit of justification for my decision to not 'get-a-job' just yet, although that was a phrase I was to hear loud and clear as soon as my plane touched down after 3 months away!

To this end I started the obligatory internet search to try and find charity clinics abroad who would be willing to take me on, and train me up. However, random searching on the net didn't get me very far and so I sent an email to Helena Cotton at the BVA's foreign wing to see if she could help. She came up trumps in less than 24 hours with a list of about 20 places they had had contact with and I subsequently contacted about 5 that seemed to be suitable. Of those that replied Pang Ngan Animal Care, based on Ko Pang Ngan, an island off the south-east coast of Thailand, was the most keen and just a few months later, with my graduation hangover only just clearing, I was on a plane bound for Thailand.

Ko Pang Ngan is a perfect tropical island paradise; palm trees lean at impossible angles over beaches of pure white sand and their leaves dip into the crystal clear waters of the ocean. The locals are friendly and the food is out of this world. My accommodation was a simple bungalow on the beach, literally 5 strides away from the sea. It is also the island made famous by the Full Moon Parties, monthly beach parties held at the islands main town and attended by upwards of 5,000 people. So, Ko Pang Ngan holds attractions for all people.

The clinic was set up and is run by Dr Shevaun Gallway, an Irish vet who is now based in Hong Kong. She works at the clinic 1 month in every 3 and she and I worked together for the first 4 weeks of my stay. The clinic has a permanent nursing staff of 3, one of whom is a Thai and invaluable for translating, although, this being a popular tourist island, the level of English is very good. There is

not always a vet at the clinic, and it is only when one is there they are able to carry out surgeries, so a lot can be crammed into a short space of time! I stayed at the clinic for 2 months, and was the only vet there for the second month. Quite a challenge for a new grad to be in charge of their own island, but a fantastic confidence giver when I came out at the other end with no disasters!



The clinic deals with any case that comes through its doors; the nurses are able to treat most medical cases and any minor surgeries. A large proportion of the work is wound management; in the hot and humid climate it only takes a few days for a neglected wound to become maggot infested, not something we see often in rainy old Blighty! If a vet is present there are usually 2 days of elective surgeries per week, (leaving plenty of time to enjoy the island!) although there can be more if the vet is happy to do them. The animals are mainly strays, but as the clinic's message of animal population control spreads, more and more owned animals are presented for surgery. The clinic is run entirely on charitable donations and owners are charged only the cost price of the medicines used.

The facilities of the clinic are basic but more than adequate. There is a well-stocked pharmacy, although its range can only be described as eclectic. It contains mainly donated medicines and these come from all over the world, so a knowledge of several foreign languages could be a bonus in this job! However, given that drugs tend to have the same generic name regardless of their place of manufacture, all that is required is an intelligent approach to prescribing, there is no Synulox in this clinic! All the operations are carried out under injectable anaesthesia, not something that most vets are used to dealing with but the nurses there are more than competent, and it is only your job to remain calm and hang on to the relevant bits while the nurse deals with the patient who has decided to get up and walk off the table! There is also a high degree of Erlicia infection in the population, making the surgeries more bloody than usual, but these challenges represent little risk to the patient and we lost no animals during my time there.

I was not paid for my work at the clinic and lived at my own expense. However, Thailand is cheap for westerners and I felt the experience I gained more than worth it. An opportunity to live and work with local people gives an experience that you simply wouldn't get just passing through. During my time on the island I learnt about the Thai way of life and picked up some of the language, both of which were invaluable when I finished at the clinic and spent a further month travelling around the rest of Thailand.

I would recommend this experience to anyone, whether like me you want to get your veterinary skills up and running before you hit the job market back home, or if you fancy a break on an island paradise and want to use your skills to help the local population. The clinic would be pleased to hear from you, as would the many others like it based around the world. I came away from my time on the island with greatly improved veterinary skills, confidence in my own abilities and judgment, and a whole host of new friends and amazing experiences. It was hard at times and stressful but I wouldn't swap it for the world and would repeat the experience in a heartbeat.

Catherine Henstridge BVSc MRCVS
February 2004