

# Indaba

News, views, events and readers' stories – all with Africa at heart



## Matabeleland, Zimbabwe

Thanks to a team of volunteer dentists, thousands of Zimbabweans have plenty to smile about. By **Mark Butcher** of Imvelo Safari Lodges.

'Uncle Juan' works with a deep-rooted extraction at Kanyambizi



It was day five of our 2013 Mobile Dental Safari in Matabeleland as we rolled out of Main Camp, Hwange National Park, at 7.30am. Our little convoy contained three of Imvelo Safari Lodge's Land Cruisers and trailers, and about two tonnes of dental equipment, supplies, generators, compressors and luggage. Along for the ride were twelve Spaniards, three Italians, three Americans and six Zimbos.

We were headed towards Lupote Clinic, about 25km up the Vic Falls road. The day before, the 15 dental surgeons of 'Sonrisas para Zimbabwe' and their support staff from Imvelo had conducted two free dental clinics, one at Ngamo School near our lodge at Bomani and the other in the clinic at Hwange Main Camp for National Parks staff and their families.

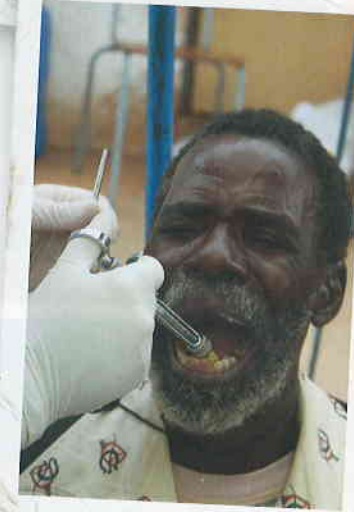
Started in 2012, the programme provides free dental care to patients from over 100 remote villages in Matabeleland North. It forms part of our efforts to link conservation with meaningful community rewards. The dentists are self-funded volunteers who provide their time and expertise, and in exchange we let them stay in our lodges and try to enjoy some safari fun in their time off, gratis.

We arrived at Lupote that morning to find our marquees up and the chairs and trestle tables unloaded – this was thanks to Zondo, a fellow director, and his team. His buses were still on their way in, but we already had over 150 patients in the queue.

**We knew we had pulled off something incredible. I declared it a world record**

Two rooms at the clinic were set up for the dentists, with the cleaning and sterilisation department in one corner, fillings and root canals in another, tools and anaesthetics in the centre and patient chairs around the wall. The waiting room for pre-exams was under one of our marquees, with the other used as our stores room and rest area for the dentists. The compressors, connected to our generator under a tree, were under the window closest to the fillings department. After a quick team photo, we got to work. I recall that Carlos Santana was on the stereo.

A long queue snaked into the pre-exam marquee, where a nurse registered each patient before Sergio and Diego performed the pre-examinations, administered anaesthetics and annotated the recommended procedures. From there the patients were led off one by one



**Clockwise, from bottom left:** Fabio loosens a deep-rooted molar; Fabio succeeds again in removing a rotten molar; Iria, a new Sonrisas team member, fits right in; A man receives an application of anaesthetic at Kanyambizi

by the dentists, to perform their miracles in the cramped confines of an airless asbestos-roofed 'surgery'.

Around the corner were Andy, Annette and Samantha, who were bagging painkillers and antibiotics for the patients after their surgery. They were also making balloon animals. Sam, a Texan who lives in New York, had dreamed them up – they always make scared kids smile.

Inside Arantzazu performed her painstaking root canal procedures, while Isabel, Natalya, Iria and Carla worked on fillings. Around the perimeter of the rooms were Alfonso, Alberto, Cesar, Dino, Fabio, Ezio, big Juan and Paco, who were focusing on the more physical work of extractions. In the corner two 'trainee nurses', cleaned and sterilised bloodied tools, before handing them to the two Zimbabwean nurses who arranged them in order and passed them to the dentists.

Outside, the generators and compressors thump and gurgle, and my safari staff yell on the radios and cell phones, organising village

heads and bus drivers doing collections. Under a big tree ladies of the village committee prepare sadza and beans over open fires in cast iron pots, enough for 400 servings. Surrounding it all are several hundred local villagers of every age and size, queuing.

Around noon the 40 degree Celsius heat led to a cloudburst of biblical proportions. The team never missed a beat, but by 4pm every team member was feeling the strain. We had already attended to 300 patients, but the queue still stretched around the building. However there was not a single word of complaint, just words of encouragement. They dropped a gear, dug deep and kept going.

Two particular highlights spring to mind from that long day. The first was a 22-year-old mother named Sikathele. What caught my eye was her Stormers rugby shirt (I of course am a Sharks man). Her front teeth were black and rotten, and you could guess how a young woman would look at those in a mirror. I saw Arantzazu and Isa exchange meaningful looks and take over.

A solid hour and a half later they had built her two new perfect front teeth. Andy kept Sikathele's six-month-old baby entertained so they could focus on their tasks. After a look in a mirror she couldn't stop smiling.

The other was the last patient of the day, again a young mother named Maina, who needed multiple procedures. It was already dark, and we were all exhausted and wanting to hit the road. But, in a wonderful display of professionalism, the whole team worked or waited patiently in the dark until that young lady was fully cared for – no short cuts, no corners cut.

Thousands of procedures were carried out that day to 407 patients, under very trying conditions. We knew we had pulled off something incredible. I declared it a world record. I don't know (or care) if it actually is – it is our world record. □

