

Flying doctor packs her bike t

A SINGLE-ENGINE plane and a mini-bicycle don't sound the ideal travelling companions, one being comparatively fast airborne and the other decidedly slow

on the back door for treatment. In any case, the three-day trip has to cover a lot more ground, some of it on remote parts of the mainland which would otherwise take

VIRGINIA WAITE profiles flying GP Dr. Anne Spoerry

foot-driven. But one of Kenya's Flying Doctors has discovered — by unhappy experience — that the combination is exactly what is required.

Dr. Anne Spoerry, working for the non-profit-making African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) flies her Piper Lance over hundreds of square miles during her GP (general practice) rounds, and it was on one of these monthly trips that she first thought of taking her own bicycle as well as her own plane.

The doctor was only a few miles away from Lamu hospital at the time, across the other side of the island, when an emergency call reached her. Instead of catching a boat round, as usual, she thought to take what appeared to be a short cut by land. She arrived exhausted two weary hours later after trudging through soft sand under a noonday sun. Now the bike flies with her.

Lamu, however, is only one island in the archipelago, so some of this medical round is done by boat, which inevitably means wading ashore from time to time. In fact one clinic is at a place so notorious for being left nearly high and dry by the tide that its original name has been informally changed by the locals to *Pandanguo*, roughly translatable as 'pull up your trousers'!

Most of the time it's not only Dr. Spoerry, in her blue baseball cap, who is rolling up her jeans, but the medical officer of health and district nurse who accompany her too, as well as the porter who carries the precious vaccines and drugs packed in cool boxes and often ordered by radio telephone by outlying districts from AMREF's Nairobi headquarters.

For Dr. Anne Spoerry, her own home on Lamu itself is hardly the haven of the tourist brochures, with folk knocking

government health personnel days to reach. Even so, if there has been too much rain the visits have occasionally to be cancelled or abandoned when the team is insuperably bogged down.

Like most of the Flying Doctor services, the main object is preventative medicine, which very often means immunisation; so the doctor's route is to some extent governed by who needs jabs where, a primus stove for sterilisation being an essential part of the medical equipment.

Over the years this region of Kenya has become one of the most successful for AMREF, because it has enabled local health workers to supervise and pay regular visits around their district, communications have been improved with the completion of a new airstrip on Pate Island and there's a flexible helpful approach by the "mariner" islanders who immediately put a sailing dhow or a dug-out canoe at the doctor's disposal if she needs such a vessel.

From the humid coastal area with its palm tress, Indian Ocean beaches and mangrove swamps the next flying round takes Dr. Spoerry for three days to the northern frontier region, largely desert, mostly waterless, with the base at Marsabit.

To have a plane up here is of enormous advantage, for, as well as the team and the drugs, it carries a physiotherapist who works at the hospital while the doctor does her rounds which include flying up to Moyale on the Ethiopian border.

Until last year there had been a drought, so powdered milk was distributed to the under-fives. Now that the desert has blossomed a decided improvement has been noticed in general health. There had been a measles outbreak at Sololo



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Wading ashore at the place called 'Pandanguo' — 'pull up your trousers'. Anne Spoerry at left behind boat.

and luckily its airstrip had been repaired since a freak tropical storm put it out of commission and at the same time blew the roof off the primary school.

Perhaps the most remote place of all is Dukana where Dr. Spoerry's destination is the airstrip itself. She never knows who will turn up for her surgery, which is held next to the plane. It can be a hundred women and children; it can be a group of men suffering from gunshot wounds after *Shifra* raids; or it can be, disconcertingly, no one at all.

It is in the north-east of Kenya that the little-known disease of hydatid is encountered; it has become AMREF's first large-scale research; they are trying to find, among other aspects, an alternative to the surgery that is at present the only treatment for the enormous cysts. Sadly, it's partly because the Turkana people love animals that they suffer from it, fondling their dogs who help to spread it.

The research team are

closely watching whether the heavy rains which have dispersed both people and cattle to areas normally too arid to be inhabited or used for grazing will affect the spread of the disease. Meanwhile, Flying Doctors like Dr. Spoerry continue to diagnose and treat it on their rounds.

She is no sooner back from the desert than it's off again, to the third flying round of the month, west to Lake Victoria and the islands of Rusinga with its mission hospital, and Mfangano, with its health centre, the latter air-strip unfortunately damaged by rain and thus cut off for several months.

Flying time between the two islands is only five minutes, but if often takes twice as long as that to persuade the cattle to move off the airstrips.

Finally, there's Masailand where AMREF first established its services and where there is now a network of airstrips including Narok and Kajiado. It is only a day's trip

from Nairobi but in a way reflects most accurately what the flying doctor programme is all about: to help both patients and local medical staff prevent ill-health.

AMREF's multi-national

staff numbers nearly 100, most of them specialists and not necessarily medical, for the organisation trains its own aircraft maintenance crews, for instance.

Dr. Spoerry does not keep a

record of how many hours month she spends in-surf on her rounds, but her flight log reads 30 hours. Being a keen flyer she does not, of course, regard this as paid the job or as work!