

The Amazon River, Peru

Having built up our collection of eyeglasses and other supplies, I began looking for the first place to go. An email to the short-term mission leaders from Wedgwood Baptist Church got a response within thirty minutes. While Peru trips usually didn't include medical professionals, they had recently been talking to a dentist about going. Eye care would fit right in with the inclusion of health care. Eventually, the dentist fell through, but eye exams would still be included on the next trip. I believe God used several opportunities to confirm to me that I was in His will, including some described here.

The flight from DFW was late getting into Miami, so we had to run to get our international boarding passes before the ticket counter closed. Two of our seven checked bags, did not make the connection. Our trip



leader Julia's clothes and one bag of eyeglasses were left behind in Miami. Each bag contained 350 eyeglasses with all the prescriptions in each bag, so missing a single bag of the three would not hinder us unless we gave out 350 pairs or so. (You take twice as many as you plan to use to avoid running out of any one prescription.) We flew into Lima and then caught a flight to Iquitos near the head waters of the Amazon River. While in the U.S. the baggage limits are two 50 pound checked bags per person, the limit in Peru is 50 pounds each person no matter the number of bags. They let the four of us check in together, and the combined weight of our luggage was just over 200 pounds so we did not have to pay any overage. If our two bags had come with us from Miami, we would have been almost 100 pounds overweight and would have had to pay a steep fee. We spent a night in Iquitos before heading downriver.

The plan was to travel down the Amazon, stopping at several villages along the way. The three women and I joined Jake, two Peruvian pastors and five others including the boat driver. The ministry was to cook a meal for each village and preach a message to anyone who wanted to listen. Each of the villages had a small church where we would also hold a children's bible activity. Jake explained to me that even though they had not said anything about me, several people in different villages had recently asked if we could send someone with glasses. I took that as another sign that I was in God's will.

The first day we went quite a ways downriver and stopped at two villages. At each, we led the worship service and children's ministry while the meal was being prepared. Two men knelt and prayed to receive Christ at the second. After, the whole town came out to eat, while we set up to do the eye exams. I sat at the table doing the exams, and one of the women from Wedgwood translated. Two others met with people in line and marked a paper giving them a piece of paper with "Near" or "Far" depending on which they had the most trouble with. They could go through the line twice if they had trouble with both, but we didn't carry in bifocals. We even had someone sitting off at a distance for those that said distance was their issue as an easy

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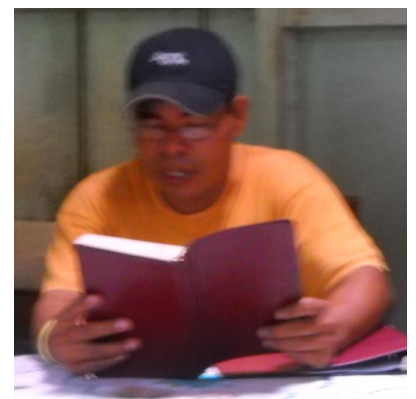
way for them to tell if they could see better or worse between the two options on each paddle. After the exam, I wrote down the results, and then the person proceeded to a table where the glasses were laid out. Two people from our group found the glasses that fit that prescription and helped the person with finding frames that best fit. While Julia (the team lead) and Amy had both been before, Melinda and I were on our first trip to Peru. Melinda also did not speak Spanish and ended up being the photographer documenting the trip.

The line was longer than I expected, and I was slower in the beginning, so we ran longer than planned. It was well past dusk before we headed to the base camp. When planning the trip some people had said wear shorts because it is so hot, while others had said to never wear shorts because of the bugs. I chose shorts, thinking we would be done before dusk when the bugs really come out. After I got home, I counted 147 bites on one leg and 164 on the other, most of them from that first night. One of the young boys slapped my leg while I was testing his friend because of the biting insect that had landed on it. One of the last people in line was an older woman who looked like all the joy had left her life. She was obviously blind in one eye which was the color of milk, and when asked which was her main issue, she said both but chose distance so she could see who was talking to her. I went ahead and did two exams for her. She was one who during the testing I could see the look on her face indicating she could see clearer than she thought possible. I have a picture of her holding a



child and wearing her glasses. She has a huge grin on her face. Even now, fifteen years later, that image brings tears to my eyes that I was blessed to be able to give her that joy. All in all, we saw around fifty people, but it took close to four hours.

By the time we got back to base, I was exhausted. The meals had been for the villagers, and since I was setting up I hadn't eaten at either stop. I don't know if it was hunger or not, but the food I finally ate was delicious, and after that I was more than ready to collapse. However, when the people in the house learned that I was doing eye tests, they asked me to test them. I really wanted to go to bed, but I didn't feel I could say no. I tested the three women who had prepared dinner including Ester our team cook, and then some of the local team members asked me to test their eyes. Pastor Richar got that shocked look on his face, and I knew that he hadn't even known he needed glasses. For the first time ever, he could see clearly. I learned then that when I am doing something in God's will, He tends to bless everyone involved. I bunked with Richar, and the next morning when I woke up he was sitting up in his bed and joyfully showed me the tiny print in his bible he could now see.



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After that first night Pastor Aladino asked me to teach him how to do the exams. I had a spare set of paddles, so we were then able to run two lines of people and things went much quicker. When we got to his home village, I was surprised to see his parents in my line. When I asked them why, they told me their son told them to come to me. He explained to them that he wanted the best for them, and I was the teacher. They would get the best results if I did their testing. I remembered this several years later when John Chase offered to let me work with the belt sander to help make Ben's knife. I was interested but declined, because I wanted Ben to have the best knife. Although I would have enjoyed it, I couldn't do it as well as the teacher.

There are so many more memories from that trip, but in the end everyone agreed that Seeing is Believing was a huge success on its first trip out. And, in the end, the two missing bags arrived just before we were to return. Pastor Aladino had all the glasses that were left plus a complete untouched bag to continue handing out glasses. Overall, we gave out close to 300 pairs of glasses, and I left Aladino with both sets of paddles and over 750 eyeglasses. With all the wonderful pictures Melinda took, we were able to put together some video montages. The three-minute version can be seen on YouTube at the following link:

<https://youtu.be/DtQ1Rsqq5Vg>