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HOSPITAL OF HOPE

By Alan Shaw

IMAGINE you're a successful surgeon with a comfortable life.

You're about to become professor of surgery at a prestigious university in one of the world's great cities, and the future's looking bright.

So obviously, you uproot your young family to set up a missionary hospital for the descendants of the ancient Incas in a remote part of the Peruvian Andes, 9,000 feet above sea level.

Well, if you're Dr Klaus-Dieter John you do!

"I remember reading a series of books as a teenager written by Paul Wright, an Australian doctor who went to Africa," says Klaus, a baker's son from Wiesbaden, in Germany.

"They were adventure stories and I thought: 'Wow, what a life, I want to do exactly the same thing.'

"Then I met my high-school sweetheart Martina 37 years ago, and we had the same vision — she wrote in her diary when she was 13: 'I want to spend my life in a Third World country.'

"Tina's a paediatrician, I'm a surgeon and in 1991, before we had children, we went backpacking to South America.

"We went to Machu Picchu, the lost city of the Incas, and came across their descendants the Quechuas, 10 million of whom live in adobe houses, many with no electricity or running water.

"They have no access to modern health care so we thought: 'Why not come back and build a modern hospital just as nice as in Europe for these people?'

"I had a comfortable life and my future mapped out," admits Klaus.

"I was with the University Hospital of Berlin, and I was supposed to become a professor.

"So when our friends heard we were going to South America, they tried to talk us out of it, saying: 'Are you nuts? Are you crazy?'

Top surgeon uprooted family to create mission to help descendants of the ancient Incas in remotest Peru



■ Dr Klaus John and his wife, Tina, moved themselves and their



You're wasting your energy, you could have a big career here."

"We founded a Christian charity and found a little place in Curahuasi in the south of Peru, 13 miles from Machu Picchu.

"We purchased a plot of land for £25,000 from the Catholic church, just off the famous Pan-American Highway that passes, linking the main cities of Lima and Cusco.

"We moved to Peru in September, 2003, when Natalie was nine, Dominik was seven and Florian was three.

"We were living in an adobe house among 30,000 Quechua people.

"It was the rainy season and the roof leaked, we had to sleep on mattresses on the floor.

"That was my family's life for three months. One time, we all had to take antibiotics because we had infected insect bites."

The John family might have got a foothold in Peru, but there was one not inconsiderable problem — to both build and run the hospital would require large and continuing donations.

"We had 35 doctors just as crazy as we were, ready to move there with their families to live in adobe houses and work for many years without a salary," says Klaus.

"But the trouble was it would cost \$10 million to

build and equip the hospital and we had no money at all, just a conviction that with trust in God, all things are possible.

"It was the height of the financial crisis and people thought we were crazy trying to raise this money.

"But I've given 2,000 presentations in 19 countries around the world, driving 200,000 miles in Europe alone.

"I'm away for six months every year travelling — finding volunteers, talking to companies and to the Press — since 2004, I haven't seen my wife for a total of six years if you add it all up.

"Also, in the early days, Tina wrote over a thousand handwritten letters, typical German workaholics!

"But I do my presentation, I pack up my laptop and I leave, I never beg. I hate that.

"Some grandmothers donate five euros, some companies donate things like bathroom fittings or lab equipment."

But some stories of donations explain why the hospital's called Diospi Suyana — "we trust in God".

"One Christmas on my way home to celebrate with my family, the customs confiscated my overhead projector," Klaus says.

"I'd asked a big South American telecommunications company if they could donate a satellite dish and they'd just told me they couldn't help us.

"In Lima, I went to buy a new projector, and I hooked up my laptop to check it would work.

"Suddenly, a man asked me if it was true we'd been turned down by this firm.

"He just so happened to be the president of their competitor, asked me to give my presentation — and we had a \$300,000 satellite dish.

"How do you explain meeting him in a shop in a city of eight million people?"

"And dentistry's a big problem," explains Klaus.

"It's expensive, so I went to New York to see Henry Schein, the biggest dental supplier in the world.

"Stanley Bergman, their president, is Jewish. I'm Christian.

"He's Jewish, I'm German — how many of his relatives died in concentration camps?"

"He gave us \$200,000 of materials."

No wonder, then, the medical centre known as "the hospital built on faith", "the miracle in the mountains" and "hospital of hope".

"It's a story of medicine, money and miracles," nods Klaus.

"We also built an outdoor theatre, and also a school with 54 long-term missionaries.

"It's a little bit of heaven on Earth and it has become a symbol for many."



■ President Humala meets Dr John.

President gave seal of approval

FOUR years ago, the Diospi Suyana Hospital faced an uncertain future, writes Alan Shaw.

Ollanta Humala was elected President of Peru and even though he's of Quechuan descent, his political background gave Dr Klaus John cause for concern.

"He's a left-wing politician, his brother's in prison for staging a military coup and his father founded the Peruvian communist party — he's quite a guy!" says Klaus.

"I thought he might shut us down, because so many missionary hospitals have been shut down by similar governments in Africa, so I thought it would be good to present our vision to him, to let him know we were helping the poor.

"But it was impossible, not even a government minister we knew could get us in to see him.

"Then he did a PR campaign, visiting each district in the country, and when he came to ours he used our helipad!

"There he was, walking out, and I just said: 'Mr President, could I show you the hospital?'

"He said he was running late, but he'd do it on his return that evening.

"He was even later then and actually had to run through the hospital, but he asked what I wanted, and I said: 'A meeting with you and your wife in the palace.'

"Six days later, I did my presentation for him and he was deeply moved.

"Ever since, he's been a close friend of our work." ■ If you would like to learn more, visit www.diospi-suyana.com

NEWS IN BRIEF

Complaints over 'poisonous' air

MORE than a dozen flight crew are taking action against UK airlines, claiming they've been poisoned by cabin air.

It comes after a union set up a helpline last month for staff worried about contaminated cabins.

They say 17 former and current cabin crew members have begun civil cases, adding: "It is clear the industry needs to do more to monitor the quality of cabin air."



Picture: iStock

Robin flies high as UK's top bird

THE US has the bald eagle, France has the cockerel and now Britain's national bird could be the robin.

The UK's biggest nature poll saw more than 200,000 people choose the Christmas card favourite, with 34% of the votes compared to the barn owl which received 12% and the blackbird 11%.

The other birds in the top 10 in order were the wren, red kite, kingfisher, mute swan, blue tit, hen harrier and our favourite, the puffin.

FIFA film flops in wake of scandal

A FILM about the history of scandal-hit football governing body FIFA has been given the red card by cinema audiences and critics alike.

United Passions is thought to have cost £20 million to make, much of it provided by the troubled body itself.

But the film, starring Sam Neill, Gerard Depardieu and Tim Roth as ex-FIFA President Sepp Blatter took just £394 in US cinemas on its opening weekend.

Ben Nevis is just 'too high' for us!

A COUPLE from Northampton lodged a bizarre complaint about Ben Nevis on TripAdvisor, warning other holidaymakers that the mountain was "very steep and too high".

Not only that, but the less-than-intrepid pair were outraged that there were no toilets and there was a distinct lack of bar at the summit!

Local Kintail Mountain Rescue Team said: "You have to laugh."