

Family to set sail on mercy mission

A family from Launceston is joining the world's largest non-government hospital ship, as CLAIRE VAN RYN reports.

HOW would you like to spend two years working on a ship not unlike the Spirit of Tasmania with no pay, cramped quarters and more than 450 neighbours in close proximity?

When the Rothwells, of Launceston, discovered less than a month ago that they had been accepted to volunteer on the hospital ship Africa Mercy, they were thrilled.

Jodie and Andrew Rothwell and their 10-year-old daughter Jessica fly to Durban, South Africa, on January 6 to embark on a two-year adventure.

Mr Rothwell, an auto mechanic and auto electrician, will work as the ship's engineering storeman, and Mrs Rothwell hopes to secure a position as a writer on board while Jessica continues her education.

The positions are unpaid — in fact, the Rothwells will be paying \$800 a month to serve on board the vessel.

"We sold our house a few months ago in a bit of a leap of faith . . . and we found out three weeks ago that we were definitely going," Mrs Rothwell said.

"It's pretty amazing — we still can't believe it's real — but we felt God was telling us it was time."

The Africa Mercy is a former rail ferry converted into the world's largest non-government hospital ship. It has six operating theatres, 78 recovery beds and state-of-the-art equipment including a CT scan, X-ray and laboratory services.

As many as 7000 surgical interventions are completed on-board each year, including tu-



Jodie, Andrew and 10-year-old daughter Jessica Rothwell have been selected to work on the hospital ship Africa Mercy.

mour removals, cleft lip and palate reconstruction, cataract removal and lens implants, orthopaedics and fistula repair.

On January 19 the ship will sail from Durban to Sierra Leone where it will spend 10 months in port, administering free medical aid to those who need it. Christmas 2011 will likely be in dry dock on the Spanish island Tenerife, before Africa Mercy launches to the next destination, wherever that might be.

The journey to this point has been a long one for the Rothwells, who first learned of Mercy Ships International at an expo in 2005.

The following year they completed a training course in Texas, ending with a month of

field service in the Dominican Republic.

Mr Rothwell filled an emergency position as ship's mechanic in July and August this year when the ship was berthed in Togo, West Africa, and now they will do it as a family.

The three are looking forward to the friendly culture on-board the ship, and the opportunity to help others.

"It's like a small city — it has a hairdresser, a dentist and the only Starbucks in Africa," Mrs Rothwell laughed.

And when friends have exclaimed at the fact that they are freely giving of their time, resources and skills for no pay, her response is, "You can be rich in other ways."