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The Virtuous Vacation? --- More Travelers Sweat, Teach As Volunteers on Time Off; The Burden of Do-Gooders

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Abstract:

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If the labor of the volunteers is the sole objective of the exchange, "then I concur with what he says," says Bud Philbrook, president of Global Volunteers says. "The cost of having the volunteers might outweigh the benefits." But, he adds, his organization never insists on continuing a program if the local project doesn't welcome the help.

Louis Reilly, 71, a former attorney for the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco, has been on 14 volunteer vacations since he retired in 1992, also for "selfish motives." These sorts of trips are "entirely different than `if this is Tuesday, it must be Belgium'," he says. "I am no longer enamored of canned tourism." Mr. Reilly has lectured Polish students about the U.S. Constitution, taught English in a Russian nursing home and renovated a home for the mentally ill on the Navajo Nation in Arizona. "I feel we do leave behind something very positive. There are people in other countries who have an image of America that isn't totally flattering."

Full Text:

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DONNA BEHRLE lives to travel, and last year she decided to step well off the beaten path.

So she paid \$400 to Global Volunteers, a nonprofit organization in St. Paul, Minn., to spend a week with five others do-gooders helping migrant farm workers build low-income housing in San Juan, Texas. As part of her working vacation, she spent hours scraping caulk from floors and tacking tar paper on the exterior of a house with a staple gun. "I wanted to do a getaway where it was low budget but was in the spiritual realm of helping others," says the 42-year-old massage therapist from Melrose, Mass.

Think of it as feel-good vacationing. This hybrid form of tourism mixed with public service is gaining momentum as Baby Boomers hit an age where they have the time, resources and desire to give something back to society. The trips are aimed at travelers "who want to come back with something deeper than a tan," says Kevin Long, marketing director of Global Citizens Network, another nonprofit in St. Paul that specializes in this type of travel.

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Sharon M. Draper, a 50-year-old educator and author from Cincinnati, volunteered as a teacher in Ho, Ghana, for three weeks in February. Some of the schools, she says, "were just hovels, tin walls, dirt floors . . ." The program "paved the way to help us get involved in the lives of the people there," she says.

No special skills or language proficiency are required for most trips. The cost of the program is often designated as a "contribution," which, along with airfare, can be tax-deductible for U.S. residents. By plunging into grassroots projects, volunteers gain instant access to the local culture in a way that traditional tourists can only dream of. "You can't just go to Kenya and meet the Masai tribe," Mr. Long says. But by working in a Kenyan village, building a clinic or digging wells, the trip becomes "a gateway to this amazing cultural exchange."

The exchange is sometimes one-sided. David Arizmendi, executive director of Proyecto Azteca, the Texas low-income housing program, says the volunteers often are a burden. "If you get somebody who's never gotten their hands dirty, in order for them to be any value to us, we have to stop and teach them," he says. "Sometimes when you add it all up, it's a negative. We've thought of telling them to go away."

What's more, volunteers at Proyecto Azteca stay free of charge in the homes of the local families, even though they pay the host organization hundreds of dollars in fees. "Given our level of poverty, they should pay our families," says Mr. Arizmendi, who says he justifies continuing the program only because "it gets our story out."

If the labor of the volunteers is the sole objective of the exchange, "then I concur with what he says," says Bud Philbrook, president of Global Volunteers. "The cost of having the volunteers might outweigh the benefits." But, he adds, his organization never insists on continuing a program if the local project doesn't welcome the help.

An Wei, president of the Sino-American Society in Xian, China, is realistic about the volunteers' multiple agendas. They come to his city to teach conversational English because "they want to understand China," he says. "They want to stay a little longer. They don't want to participate in a tour." The three-week volunteer vacations "are much less expensive than a tour," Mr. An points out.

Showing up briefly to baby-sit in a daycare center or swing a hammer might not make a dent in places where there is a world of need, concedes Mr. Philbrook of Global Volunteers. But, he adds, "if you're part of a team of eight or 10 or 20 people, and you're part of an organization that returns time and again to the same location, you're a vital link in a long chain of volunteers," he says.

Most volunteers come away moved by their experiences, but also certain they got the better end of the deal. "The actual work is inconsequential," says Jeff Carne, 27, a restaurant manager in St. Petersburg, Fla., who has taken three volunteer vacations since 1996. "The real value of the experience is the people-side of it. . . . It's the one-on-one with people. It's absolutely, positively a selfish thing."

Ian White, director of the Glenree Centre for Reconciliation, a nongovernmental organization near Dublin, Ireland, devoted to bridging the divide between Catholics and Protestants, says one "could be quite cynical about the volunteering schemes. But without volunteers, we couldn't operate at all."

The 60 or so who visit Glenree every year "are very willing to engage in menial and manual work," he says. They cut grass, paint window sills and clean carpets at the rambling 200-year-old former British Army barracks that houses the center. "They don't always have the skills, but they have the willingness," he says.

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Reaching Out

Some of the nonprofits that steer tourists to good works:

-- Amizade

www.amizade.org

Helps out in Brazil, Bolivia, Australia, the Navajo Nation and Montana. Coming soon: programs in Nepal, Thailand and West Virginia.

-- Cross-Cultural Solutions

www.crossculturalsolutions.org

Sends volunteers for two or three weeks or longer to programs in Ghana, India, Peru, Russia and China.

-- Global Citizens Network

www.globalcitizens.org

Places volunteers in programs on Indian reservations, in Guatemala, Kenya and Nepal.

-- Global Volunteers

www.globalvolunteers.org

Sends volunteers to programs in 70 communities in eight states and 17 foreign countries.

Credit: Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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