

TRAVEL

Voluntourism trips for do-gooders

There comes a point – generally when you're on your third margarita, sunburned over 60 percent of your body and the kids are screaming in the infinity pool – when you start wonder if there is more to the whole vacation concept than lying on a beach getting toasted.



— The Earthwatch Institute lets volunteers join with scientists on an exciting, diverse range of projects taking place all over the world. Sue-jenkin

June 20, 2007, 9:52 AM EDT / Source: Forbes Traveler.com

By Aaron Dalton

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A way of showing thanks for your own good fortunes, perhaps. You want a chance to contribute more to a local economy than buying overpriced trinkets that neither you nor your friends back home really need.

If these perfectly reasonable thoughts cross your mind from time to time, you're not alone. In fact, you've jumped on something of a bandwagon. The caravan of do-gooders heading hither and yon on altruistic volunteer tourism (a.k.a. "voluntourism") programs has reached proportions that, if not biblical, are certainly large enough for the tourism industry to take notice.

(TIA) highlighted this growing trend as far back as 2005, when it spotlighted an annual National Public Lands Day event that saw nearly 100,000 volunteers head to our National Parks to build bridges and trails, plant trees, remove invasive plants and generally behave in a manner that would have made Teddy Roosevelt proud.

The latest data available indicates that the volunteer tourism trend is only getting stronger. The percentage of travelers planning to volunteer during vacations in 2007 nearly doubled from the previous year, jumping from 6 percent to 11 in the latest poll by travel Web site Travelocity. Travelocity is not only chronicling this trend – it's also encouraging it with "Change Ambassador" grants that it awards to customers and employees who lack the means to book a voluntourism trip on their own.

But there's no need to wait around for someone else's largesse. You can become a voluntourist anytime by picking one of the myriad opportunities at your fingertips. Whether you prefer an island vacation in the Caribbean or a shooting trip in rural Alabama, the luxury of a room at the Fairmont Winnipeg or the simple comforts of a Cambodian guesthouse, there are comfortable volunteer options galore.

In Aruba, for example, you can join hundreds of other scuba divers, snorkelers and beach combing volunteers for the 14th Annual from July 7-8, 2007. If a hunting vacation is more your speed, you can donate the venison from your prize buck to feed families that otherwise would struggle to put food on their table.

www.aruba.com

The cushy Fairmont hotel in Winnipeg has partnered with to develop a package for travelers who want to help build a home during the day, and come home to a cushy bed at night. On the other end of the price scale and halfway around the world, the in Cambodia provides opportunities for visitors to volunteer in an orphanage, or help schoolchildren learn English and computer skills.

Most voluntourism programs are noble and altruistic, but as with any travel trend, plenty of opportunists have jumped on this bandwagon. That's why it's vital for any would-be voluntourist to check out the credentials of the organization in question, and ask questions to gauge the depth of its commitment to its chosen cause.

"Make sure you do your homework about your voluntourism operator," says Daniela Papi, who founded a well-respected voluntourism organization called (Protect Earth, Protect Yourself) that organizes bike trips through Cambodia (and Nepal starting this November) to raise funds for a variety of education, environment and health organizations. "Ask for a list of past participants and their contacts. Any reputable operator should be able to provide such a list. If it is not apparent in the itinerary, ask about the details of your volunteer experience."

Bestfriends.org

If you don't relish doing investigative work on your voluntourism operator, you can always turn to a trusted travel industry leader to help arrange your trip. relies on volunteers to help supplement scientific environmental research and conservation projects around the world. The upscale escorted tour company even offers a trip through Wyoming that includes the opportunity to spend a half-day volunteering at Yellowstone National Park.

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Papi notes that the best programs won't just charge tourists for a chance to visit a village and hand out school supplies. Top voluntourism operators have deep commitments and partnerships with the communities they serve. They have long-term goals and conduct follow-up assessments to gauge the success of their projects.

Nor should you have to pay a premium for the privilege of helping others. Voluntourism isn't free – someone does have to pick up the costs of meals, housing and other expenses. But in many cases, reputable organizations will do all they can to mitigate your financial costs. In Louisiana, for example, it can be possible for voluntourists helping with to find basic accommodations for as little as \$5 per night.

Of course, the real considerations in voluntourism trips are usually measured not in financial terms but in human benefits. The good karma you're accumulating by selflessly devoting your precious vacation time to help others is its own reward. Even better, a recent Corporation for National and Community Service report shows that volunteering is actually good for your health. "The Health Benefits of Volunteering" found that volunteers have greater longevity than Scrooges, higher functional ability, lower rates of depression and less incidence of heart disease.

So throw out those anti-depressants with scary side effects. Take a volunteer vacation instead. It's good for you and depending on the trip you choose, it's also good for other people and the planet.
