

Volunteer Vacations

Want your down time to benefit the greater good? Here's how you can blend tourism with volunteerism.



**Photos Courtesy of
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(Left) Tree planting with the Conservation Club in Kenya.

(Right) The view from the Swala Camp in Tanzania's Tarangire National Park.

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(Opposite Page)
Peru's Sacred Valley.

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Most vacationers traveling to Sarasota don't dream of leaving a luxurious resort to spend hours on their hands and knees with a scrub brush and a bottle of bleach. But Roe Moldow of Newport, R.I., did just that — and she considers it a highlight of her trip.

Moldow devoted a half-day of her vacation to cleaning a swimming pool for tigers at the Big Cat Habitat, a Florida sanctuary for lions, tigers and bears in need. The activity was part of a Ritz-Carlton Hotels social and environmental responsibility program called Give-Back Getaways that offers guests the chance to mix community service with vacation. The concept is called "voluntourism," and it's gaining popularity. In fact, roughly 38% of tourists planned to include volunteer service in their 2008 travels, according to a survey by Travelocity, up from 15% in a similar survey in 2006.

"Part of the reason people travel is for new experiences, and if you add a service component and engage the local culture more deeply, you make the experience so powerful by giving it meaning," says Scott Laughlin, who has visited India and Africa as a voluntourist and is co-founder of the Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based nonprofit voluntourism organization Heart and Passion.

Volunteer vacations can take on almost any guise, ranging from simple, half-day sightseeing tours of projects vacationers may have helped fund to weeks of hard manual labor. But before you sign up for any volunteer vacation, make sure you consider these factors to ensure your trip will be rewarding, safe and successful.

Choose Your Adventure

Pick someplace that appeals to you as a vacation destination. There are opportunities to serve everywhere, so unless you're traveling



specifically to work with a particular charitable organization, let your instincts be your tour guide.

There are several ways to find a partner organization through which to serve. You can contact an international organization that sponsors volunteer vacations (the list includes Habitat for Humanity and the Sierra Club), or you can search online to find a smaller group in the area you're planning to visit. Laughlin says his best experiences are with small local groups, but if you go that route it's up to you to make sure the organization is legitimate and that your expectations for the trip match what the group can provide.

"It's important that the organization be clear about what the volunteers are going to do. For example, tourists might arrive thinking they'll be helping baby turtles hatch, but instead they might be in an office doing spreadsheets for the turtle-hatching operation," says Kristin Lamoureux, director of the International Institute of Tourism Studies at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Alternatively, you can ask for help from your hotel or travel agent. The Ritz-Carlton's Give Back Getaways program, which launched last year, offers half-day service trips from each of its

worldwide hotels. Luxury travel agent Abercrombie & Kent has similar programs and also helps its custom-tour clients make connections with local service groups.

"We do the due diligence," says Sue Stephenson, a Ritz-Carlton vice president who oversees the Give Back Getaways program. "Our guests want a credible experience, not volunteering-light. We can research these organizations, understand their missions and what the volunteer experience will be."

Start Small

A volunteer vacation can be entirely service-based or include a small service component. If you're new to the voluntourist idea, make sure you emphasize the vacation part: go sightseeing, sample the local cuisine and leave time to relax. Then add service to taste.

"It might be enough to sponsor the digging of a well before you leave, and then travel to see it in completed form," Laughlin says. "That's a lot different than spending three weeks digging the well."

And think about the kind of service you're doing, and how intense it might be, physically and emotionally. Lamoureux

says a classic example is volunteers who sign up for a week of caring for babies at HIV/AIDS orphanages in Africa. “That can be very traumatic and most people can’t handle it in a prolonged way,” she says. “Take some prep time beforehand, and then maybe take breaks from the experience to do other tourist activities such as going out on a safari for a day.”

Volunteer vacations usually carry a price tag that minimally covers your expenses so the organization you’re serving doesn’t have to pay. Sometimes the fee, which can range from \$50 to several thousand, includes a donation to the organization.

Think, too, about your accommodations. If you’d like to serve by day but enjoy five-star restaurants and hotels at night, make sure you’re serving in an area that offers those amenities. Especially with overseas trips, this is an area where a travel company can do the necessary research to minimize any surprises you might encounter.

Measure Your Impact

Stephenson says she strives for authenticity with the Ritz-Carlton’s Give Back Getaways, ensuring that volunteers are making a genuine, needed contribution to the community

they serve. Voluntourism comes under fire when it fails on that count, and local residents sense that travelers are treating their impoverished or storm-ravaged neighborhoods as just another sightseeing stop. Despite tourists’ best intentions, those trips can seem dehumanizing and voyeuristic to locals, who probably don’t share in the tour guide’s fee.

One way to guard against that is to form a lasting relationship with the organization you serve, either through philanthropic contributions, repeat visits or continuing your service when you return home. Laughlin, for instance, visited a school for street children in Mumbai, India, and met with the school’s leaders to determine its needs. He continues to help the school achieve tax-exempt status in the United States so Americans can eventually make tax-free donations.

Moldow enjoyed all aspects of her trip to Sarasota, but the volunteer experience stands out: “How often do you get the chance to stand so close to a lion or a tiger that you can feel its breath?” she asks. By adding a service component to your next vacation, your trip, too, might become more meaningful, memorable and beneficial — for you and for those you visit. ■

YOUR TRIP, YOUR CHOICE

Before you start packing, here are several online resources that can help you make the most of your volunteer vacation. The first group consists of general voluntourism resources and provides a good start for learning more about volunteer vacations as well as connecting with small service organizations. The second includes voluntourism organizations that sponsor trips so you can sample the possibilities. And the third is a group of large, well-known organizations that offer volunteer travel packages.

ONLINE VOLUNTOURISM RESOURCES TO GET YOU STARTED:

The Internet’s foremost volunteer travel site: www.voluntourism.org

Stories from Travelocity’s Travel for Good program: travelforgood.igougo.com

The International Volunteer Programs Association’s online forum: www.volunteerinternational.org

An alternative travel database from goabroad.com: www.volunteerabroad.com

ORGANIZATIONS THAT SPONSOR VOLUNTEER TRAVEL:

Cross-Cultural Solutions: www.crossculturalsolutions.org

Global Aware: www.globalaware.org

Global Volunteers: www.globalvolunteers.org

Heart and Passion: www.heartandpassion.com

I to I: www.i-to-i.com

LINKS TO VOLUNTEER TRAVEL PACKAGE OFFERS:

Ritz-Carlton’s Give Back Getaways program: corporate.ritzcarlton.com/en/About/GiveBackGetaways.htm

Luxury travel company Abercrombie & Kent: www.abercrombiekent.com

Habitat for Humanity’s Global Village volunteer program: www.habitat.org/gv

Sierra Club’s volunteer vacations: www.sierraclub.org/outings/national/service.asp