



Goodwill or Good Vacation?

► The pros and cons of paying to volunteer on your holiday.

By Maureen Littlejohn, Freelance Writer, Communications Consultant

WHEN PEOPLE swap vacation stories around the water cooler these days, they are increasingly more likely to be inspiring tales about helping an international community rather than fuzzy recollections of margarita-soaked beach getaways. Cultural immersion, coupled with doing good, has become a hot trend in tourism, and the Internet is swamped with “voluntourism” trips that range from joining a Habitat for Humanity team to build homes in Haiti, to taking a Ritz-Carlton Give Back Getaway where guests join staff in half-day projects such as saving the sea turtles in Sanya, China.

A Condé Nast Traveler survey from 2008 noted that of 1,600 people polled, 20 percent had taken at least one volunteer vacation, and 62 percent said they would like to take one. There are countless tour operators, hotels and nonprofit organizations offering trips to fill this demand, but just how effective are they? Can meaningful, sustainable change happen in two weeks? The jury is out on this question. Some people say a little effort can go a long way to help a community out of poverty. Others say voluntourists get far more out of the experi-

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ence than the people they are trying to help. Some critics charge there is more harm than good being done.

VolunTourism.org, a website that grew from a brainstorming session held at the 2004 Educational Travel Community conference in Washington, D.C., is dedicated to the subject. The site describes voluntourism as a combination of travel and service, “awakening of thoughts, feelings, emotions, via a labor of gratitude that is offered as a part of your overall itinerary.” Offering tips for people on both sides of the

equation—travelers as well as tour operators, hotels and host communities—the site notes there are more than 10,000 voluntourism options available around the world.

Luc Lapoint, VolunTourism.org’s head of strategic development, is working globally to promote voluntourism’s benefits and effect policy change. “My job is to get communities to understand the value of short-term volunteering,” he says. Lapoint, whose background includes stints as a consumer protection lobbyist, notes his work covers the spectrum of volunteer organizations and hotels, from Peace Corps to Cross Cultural Solutions to Sandals resorts. The main problems he sees currently are the number of groups getting into the field and a lack of standards. “Many host countries are trying to discourage volunteer tourists. Tanzania’s volunteer visa is \$550 for three months while a regular tourist visa is \$100 for 90 days.”

Globe Aware, a 12-year-old American nonprofit voluntourism organization, has a mandate to promote cultural awareness and promote sustainability. “Since 9/11 and the economic turndown, people are starting to want vacations where they can give back,” explains Aubrey Roberts, the company’s director of social media and outreach. Globe Aware operates 17 programs in 15 countries and sends approximately 1,000 people a year to an assortment of projects, from building schools in Ghana, to assembling wheelchairs in Cambodia, to building an eco-ranch for tourists in Costa Rica. The trips are around \$1,200 for one week and include food and home-stay lodging. Flights are not included. “Volunteers do six hours of work a day. People really like our concept. Repeat business is between 40 and 50 percent,” notes Roberts. Globe Aware partners with local NGOs and communities,

relying on their input before projects are undertaken. "We don't require expertise from the volunteers, since we mostly are just looking for able-bodied workers, but if someone has certain skills we try to use them. Our coordinators oversee the projects and make sure they move forward as each new volunteer team arrives," explains Roberts.

Voluntourism experiences can vary dramatically. When Emma Pettey, a 25-year-old occupational therapist from Calgary, Alberta, was on summer break during her university studies in 2007, she wanted to take a month off and travel to another country before hitting the books again. She wasn't looking for the traditional college student backpacking adventure. "I wanted to give back to society and do something that wouldn't cost too much money," she recalls. Pettey found uVolunteer online, an organization that offered an opportunity to teach English in Costa Rica. "I hoped to use what I had learned in school and teach children with disabilities," explains Pettey. The company representative told her there were not many children with disabilities in the region,

but she could teach kindergarten students as well as adult women. Pettey signed up and paid her \$1,000 fee that included accommodation and food for four weeks. Flights and insurance were her responsibility. Did she get what she hoped for? "I taught two classes a day. In the kindergarten class, the regular teacher's English was well above what I was teaching, so I was not doing anything she could not. The adult class was more satisfying since the ladies could tell me what they wanted to learn. They worked in the hospitality industry, so I taught them phrases that would help with housekeeping, such as 'Do you want your room cleaned?'"

Pettey came away with a different impression of volunteering than she had expected. "I realized this was a business. The volunteers paid to go, but there wasn't that much to do and they kept increasing in numbers. I enjoyed my spare time at the beach, but it was frustrating because that wasn't really what I had come to do. It worked out well for the people who just came to surf and drink." Although she was unsure about making much of an impact with her English classes, Pettey concedes that her

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hosts appreciated her food and board money. "I was in a family home-stay that had separate apartments for the volunteers. There were 10 of us and they cooked us amazing meals."

When tourists pay for food and accommodation as well as the chance to volunteer the local economy can benefit in a number of ways. "My sister paid \$5,000 to track elephants

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in Africa. But her money largely went to the tourism component of the trip, helping to pay for guides, cooks, hotel staff, not to the actual tracking which probably was a small percentage of the fee," says Lapoint.

Last year, Caedmon Ricker-Wilson packed his bags and headed to Moshi, Tanzania, to volunteer with a small NGO called Pamoja Tunaweza that ran a women's shelter and medical clinic. Ricker-Wilson, 27, needed to complete an internship for a college course in international development, and a friend suggested he apply to the NGO, cofounded by Canadian physician Karen Yeates. Working as a project manager, Ricker-Wilson found the experience extremely rewarding. "I had a chance to do raw programming, get experience and integrate into a new culture." He noted that since he was willing to pay, the organization was very easy to work for. The cost for his six-month experience, including flights, visa, rent, food and small amenities was \$9,000. Ricker-Wilson, who had previously volunteered with Save the Children doing fundraising and awareness-building activities, was able to help the NGO with marketing and income generating projects as well as writing assessment reports on medical visits to local villages. The organization's typical volunteers were a rotation of around 30 doctors and medical staff who looked after up to 200 patients a day. Their two-week experience cost \$5,000, with any leftover money after expenses going to help the clinic.

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Ricker-Wilson has mixed feelings on the impact he made as a voluntourist. "The skilled health care workers were very valuable. Occasionally my role was to give people directions at the clinic in broken Swahili—that should have been done by a Tanzanian. People without medical skills were not really needed," he says.

Some critics believe short-term volunteering by westerners can be damaging, not helpful. "With every school that is built by well-meaning western volunteers in impoverished villages in Africa, there is one less opportunity to provide employment and skills training to young people living in those communities, who are also desperately seeking such experiences," says Samantha Nutt, physician and founder of the NGO War Child, in her book *Damned Nations: Greed, Guns, Armies and Aid*.

Judith Brodie, director of Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) UK stated in a *Guardian* article a few years ago, "While there are many good gap year providers, we are increasingly concerned about the number of badly planned and supported schemes that are spurious—ultimately benefiting no one apart from the travel companies that organize them."


Lapoint agrees. "It is hard for the consumer to choose. We are in the process of developing standard guidelines for voluntourism. We'd like the communities themselves to give a seal of approval to a project for volunteers to see." Using tools such as geomapping, Lapoint is working with a Washington-based consortium called the Building Bridges Coalition to show how strategic short-term volunteer projects helmed by small organizations can fill holes left by larger NGOs. Members include high-profile, international, volunteer-sending organizations such as the National Peace Corps Association, corporations such as IBM and educational institutes such as the Washington University Center for Social Development. Focusing on assets, needs and capacity building, the group is currently working with communities in Bolivia and Guatemala to map data and determine where short-term projects such as digging a well or setting up a clinic are needed and where there are overlaps with other NGOs. "Sometimes communities don't even know where to start and they need capacity building. You can't just throw money at them. We are also looking at impact and long-term tracking for these projects to see if and when they might be ready for a longer commitment," says Lapoint.

Development is a long and careful process, but Lapoint believes there is a place for short-term volunteers. "For people with limited time to spare, this is a good way to take a baby step. It builds a cultural bridge between two worlds and can plant ideas of sharing and even returning," he says. Lapoint points to personnel input that he says helps communities. "Usually a project is overseen by coordinators and work continues over many months or years. For instance, medical clinics have a constant flow of health care professionals coming in to take care of patients. That work is carried on by the next volunteer physician."

There are many organizations that send people with particular expertise on missions for six months to two years. Generally these organizations receive government funding and work as partners with smaller local NGOs on the ground. Rather than pay to participate, volunteers are supported financially by the organization. One example is Crossroads International, a 50-year-old Canadian nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing women's rights and eradicating poverty in Africa and

South America. “We focus on capacity building in our partnerships with local organizations. We do not send volunteers over to fill gaps,” notes Nika Munro, a program officer for volunteering. The type of expertise required includes professions such as accounting, fundraising and IT (information technology) management. Volunteers go through an extensive application and screening process before they are selected. Although they are expected to fundraise up to \$2,000 to support Crossroads overseas program, volunteers are provided with return air tickets and a modest living allowance for the duration of their placement. “The projects we do are a slow build. You don’t just show up and make change. One person’s achievements build off another, who builds off another,” explains Munro, adding, “sometimes that is a challenge because volunteers don’t see immediate results. Their greatest appreciation comes from working side by side with the partners.”

Peace Corps has also been sending volunteers overseas for half a century. Currently there are more than 9,000 volunteers serving 75 countries. The majority of Peace Corps volunteers are in their 20s and single. Placements are usually for 24 months with an additional three months of cultural and language training. Volunteers assist in an area of need identified by the host country. Like Crossroads, Peace Corps provides transportation and a living allowance. Most placements require a bachelor’s degree, but work experience and hobbies are also considered. Work areas include education, environment, agriculture, health and HIV/AIDS, youth and community development, business and information and communication technology. Although the activities of volunteers benefit communities, Peace Corps’ mission is also to promote a better understanding between the people being served and Americans.

Voluntourism is about more than accomplishing quick fixes. It provides participants with an up-close cultural experience that can be life-changing. A short stay will not solve problems that are deeply ingrained in a community. When volunteers have unrealistic expectations and haven’t done their homework on an organization, tour company or destination, the experience can be less than satisfying. On the other hand, it seems impactful work can be done even though it might not be immediately apparent. The jury may still be out on whether voluntourism is a good thing or not, but the demand for these types of vacations make it clear it is a trend that will be with us for a long time to come. 

Short-Term Volunteers

► Funding short-term volunteers may seem like a waste of money, but perhaps there is more return on investment than meets the eye.

By John Cape, Program Officer, American Jewish World Service

“... Every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere [...] Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world—cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the realities of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go—so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.”

—Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

IT IS INCREASINGLY common for young people—high school students to recent college graduates—to volunteer internationally for short periods of time (several days to several months). Nonetheless, the participants in these programs are generally inexperienced and lack technical skill. While they arrive with a desire to “make a difference,” their understanding of how to do so is uninformed and frequently misguided. What is the value of short-term volunteers in international development? What can unskilled people contribute? And do the benefits of their service outweigh the costs?

Short-term international volunteer programs are expensive, and it is reasonable to argue that they represent a misappropriation of funds. Add the price of a plane ticket, vaccinations, a new sleeping bag and a pair of gloves, and throw in some overhead expenses—the total cost of volunteering abroad for as little as one week is likely to exceed the yearly average pay of a laborer in the Global South. Can a volunteer who wants to make a difference honestly believe that this is money well spent?



Who would claim that the value of one week of their unskilled labor exceeds the value of the yearly output of a skilled local laborer? How could a responsible international development organization facilitate these programs while recognizing the limited relative impact they have compared to investing the same amount of money directly in the community?

In 2011, the United Nations Volunteers program released the *State of the World's Volunteerism Report*, focusing attention on the undervalued social contributions of volunteerism: “...volunteerism goes far beyond merely completing a given task. It creates and sustains bonds of trust, societal cohesion, and