
Upgrade travel smarter



THE NEW GOODWILL TOUR

More and more travelers are spending their money—and limited vacation days—on trips that help make the world a better place. Here's how you can join them.

BY STACY PERMAN

➔ Once a popular way for college students to spend a gap year, volunteer travel—voluntourism, as it's now called—has become one of the most booming segments of the travel industry, largely because of the changing tastes of both millennials and retirees. A *Tourism and Hospitality Research* study from 2014 estimated that more than 1.6 million tourists spend around \$2 billion annually on volunteer vacations. The explosion of programs means that there's one for any budget and level of involvement, as well as for any length of commitment, either as a full trip or as an add-on. Here are five important things to consider before booking your next volunteer trip.

1 Decide What Type of Experience You Want

A new crop of travel start-ups caters to a number of price points, skill sets, personal interests, and age groups. Trips range from restoring coral reefs and protecting endangered animals to teaching coding. Luxury operators like London-based Hands Up Holidays now pair volunteering opportunities with upscale accommodations. And last spring, Carnival Corporation launched a series of social-impact land excursions on ships that call in to the Dominican Republic.

2 Do Your Research to Find the Right Program

Social media has played a significant role in enabling participants to research thousands of options and share their experiences—both good and bad. Most reputable organizations have websites that provide detailed information about their partners and financials. U.K.-based Global Vision International, for example, gives a breakdown of how its earnings get funneled back into its programs. Veena Rangaswami, who has been organizing independent volunteer trips since 2005, says doing your research is crucial for a successful experience. “Social media helps you to see how good these different organizations are,” she says.

3 Be Prepared for a Background Check

Many organizations now place more emphasis on vetting volunteers than they have in the past. Some groups, like Build Abroad, require background checks, while others send out detailed questionnaires so they can match abilities with needed skills.

**In 2015
the word
voluntourism
earned an
entry in
the Oxford
English
Dictionary.**

4 Find a Program That Trains Its Volunteers

The earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal have shown how good intentions can go wrong if volunteers are ill-equipped and unprepared. Many volunteers came to help but didn't bring their own bedding, supplies, or food. “I think that human nature and the American psyche lead a lot of people to want to give back,” says Thomas Kirsch, director of the National Center for Disaster Medicine & Public Health. But, he cautions, “in my experience, untrained and inexperienced volunteers not familiar with disaster environments almost always cause more harm than good.” In response to the failure of rebuilding efforts in Haiti, the World Health Organization created the Emergency Medical Team to train and certify organizations capable of providing care in such environments. The U.S.-based Medical Reserve Corps pretrains health-care volunteers to be deployed in the event of a disaster.

5 Ask Enough Questions

If you plan to vacation for a cause, find out what will be expected of you, as well as the current political climate at your destination. “Think hard about what sort of work you want to do and the end goal,” Rangaswami suggests. “Be clear about your expectations so when you're on the ground there aren't too many surprises.” Also ask what your daily out-of-pocket expenses will be and whether ATMs are readily available. Even in today's connected world, there are still many undeveloped areas without Wi-Fi.

GET CONNECTED

These 19 companies will help you plan a great volunteer vacation, whether you want to save the planet or teach a kid to read.



WILDLIFE & ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Adriatic Dolphin Project

The Blue World Institute of Marine Research & Conservation runs field stations in Croatia where volunteers can help scientists collect data about the bottlenose dolphin population of the Adriatic Sea. Volunteers must be at least 18 years old and be able to swim and speak English. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Twelve-day projects are offered from May to September; from \$936 to \$1,000. blue-world.org.

Blue Ventures

Founded more than a decade ago, this organization specializes in marine wildlife conservation and helping coastal communities find alternatives to fishing. Volunteers can help rebuild fisheries or monitor coral reefs in Madagascar, Belize, and East Timor. While all programs include dive training, the company offers dive certification in Madagascar and Belize. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Programs average six weeks (but shorter stays can be arranged); prices start at \$1,630 and include science and scuba training and certifications. blueventures.org.

Earthwatch Institute

The granddaddy of voluntourism, Earthwatch has paired

volunteers with scientists in more than 40 countries. They have studied the feeding habits of killer whales in Iceland, investigated archaeological ruins in Mongolia, and monitored the impact of climate change on bees and butterflies in the Indian Himalayas. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One week to 15 days; from \$1,475 to \$3,975, including related research costs. earthwatch.org.

FARMING & AGRICULTURE

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms

This global online network connects →

organic farmers in 120 countries with volunteers, known as "Wwoofers," willing to help with chores such as planting, harvesting, digging trenches, and cleaning pens in exchange for accommodation and food. Some examples: volunteers can try beekeeping in Brazil, plant mango seedlings in Belize, or harvest berries in Belgium. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Varies with each farm; \$40 membership fee. wwoof.net.

HOME BUILDING

Build Abroad

Founded in 2010 by two architecture students, this organization partners with local groups in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nepal, Peru, and Thailand to rebuild community infrastructure, construct new homes, and repair schools, churches, and orphanages. Volunteers live with host families and are required to submit to background checks. Staff members are on hand to provide building assistance and on-the-ground support. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One week to six months; from \$510 to \$6,490. buildabroad.org.

Fuller Center for Housing's Global Builders

When Millard and Linda Fuller launched this outfit in 2005, their mission was to bring volunteers to Armenia and Nicaragua to build safe and affordable housing. Since then they've expanded to 11 countries, including Haiti and Peru. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One to two weeks; from \$840 to \$1,800. fullercenter.org.

HUMANITARIAN AID

Carnival Corporation

Cruise-goers on AIDA, Carnival, Holland America, and Princess Cruises can choose social-impact land excursions on ships that sail to the Dominican Republic's Amber Cove. Travelers take part in volunteer activities such as reforestation projects, tutoring children and teaching English, or building water filters. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One day; from \$80. carnivalcorp.com.

Cross-Cultural Solutions

Since 1994, this company has helped some 35,000 volunteers complete projects in nine countries. CCS organizes programs that range from improving literacy to working with the disabled in residential-care facilities in Morocco. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One to 12 weeks; from \$2,250 to \$8,968. crossculturalsolutions.org.

Global Volunteers

This organization's motto is "Local people are always in charge." Established in 1984, it partners with resident groups in 17 countries from China to the U.S. Volunteer programs focus on things like teaching, planting crops, building and renovating homes, and helping health-care workers with hygiene programs. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One to three weeks; from \$1,045 to \$3,195. globalvolunteers.org.

United Planet

This nonprofit tailors programs according to participants' interests in education,



environment, and health. Volunteers, who work 25 to 40 hours a week, may be teaching English in Spain or working with a community organization in Cuba. Downtime activities include cultural exploration and excursions, such as taking in a musical theater performance in Havana. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Short-term projects from one to 12 weeks are available in 10 countries; longer-term projects are offered in 30 countries; from \$1,595, including language training and insurance. unitedplanet.org.

ADVENTURE VOLUNTEERING

REI Adventures Volunteer Vacations

Teaming up with the nonprofit Conservation Volunteers International Program, the outdoor-gear retailer combines projects like restoring wildlife habitats and archaeological sites with adventure travel in North and South America. The 13-day trip to Patagonia's Torres del Paine National Park mixes trail maintenance and hiking. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Seven to 13 days; from \$990 to \$4,395. rei.com/adventures.

Roadmonkey

This philanthropy-trip operator pairs adventure travel with volunteering. It creates excursions for groups of seven to nine people—climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, kayaking in Malawi, surfing in Nicaragua—followed by three days of work on a sustainable project with a local nonprofit. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Eight to 14 days; from \$1,800 to \$4,700. roadmonkey.net.

MULTI-OPTION PROGRAMS

Edge of Africa

With an emphasis on community and nature conservation, this 10-year-old organization

places people in a variety of projects in three African countries: HIV outreach and awareness, elephant research, and teaching schoolchildren English in South Africa; rural medical support and studying lemurs in Madagascar; and tracking gorilla movements in Cameroon. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Two to eight weeks; from \$1,095 to \$7,075. edgeofafrica.com.

Fronteering Travel Services

This group focuses on wildlife, the environment, sustainability, and remote communities in 16 countries. Volunteer opportunities include grooming and training sled dogs at a husky ranch in the

Arctic, building eco-friendly structures in the rain forest of Guyana, and breeding and releasing Tasmanian devils back into the wild. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Four to 16 weeks; from \$695 to \$2,495. fronteering.com.

Global Vision International

Founded in 1998, GVI works with volunteers on initiatives like reintegrating elephants into natural habitats in Thailand and teaching English to novice monks in Laos. Projects in 10 countries are run by local,

on-the-ground directors with 24-hour field-staff support. GVI also offers add-on excursions and activities. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One to 24 weeks; from \$1,600. gviusa.com.

Maximo Nivel

In Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Peru, this organization provides affordable opportunities for volunteers of all ages on projects as varied as working with children, conservation, construction, and animal care. Cultural extras

include salsa dancing and cooking classes. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** One week to one year; from \$595, including homestay accommodations. maximonivel.com.

Workaway

For an annual \$29 membership fee, volunteers can access a global network of hosts offering opportunities such as ice cream making in Iceland, living with Bedouins in Jordan, or teaching yoga in Nicaragua. In exchange for room and board, participants are expected to

volunteer for about five hours a day. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Varies. Conditions and agreements depend upon volunteers' skills and hosts' needs. workaway.info.

FOR THE LUXURY TRAVELER

Hands Up Holidays

This outfitter combines luxury travel with volunteer experiences for individuals and families. Travelers can stay at five-star eco-luxury resorts in 32 countries

and engage in such projects as kangaroo conservation, teaching business skills to microloan recipients in Peru, and building houses in Cambodia. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Average of 10 days; from \$5,000 per person. handsupholidays.com.

FOR THE BUDGET TRAVELER

Seeds

This nonprofit's projects in Iceland are short-term and include building hiking

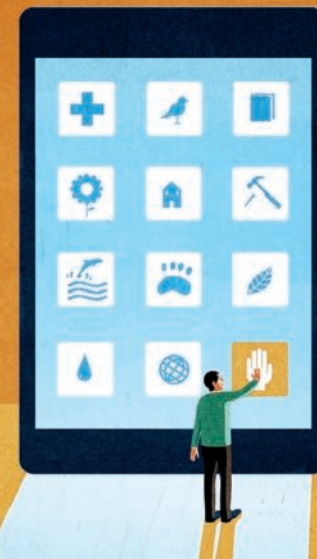
trails, cleaning up the coastline, refurbishing community centers, and organizing cultural festivals. **TRIP LENGTH & COST** Two to three weeks (programs running three to six months are also available); from \$159. seeds.is.

ONLINE EXTRAS

Read about hotels with volunteer programs at travelandleisure.com/travel-tips.

DIY VOLUNTOURISM

Looking to go it alone? Use these eight resources to help you plan your own philanthropic vacation.



1 CITIZEN CORPS

Part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, this agency works with local communities to train civilian volunteers to be first responders in the event of crime, severe weather and other

natural disasters, public health issues, and terrorism. ready.gov/citizen-corps.

2 GOABROAD

Launched in 1997, this is an online international portal

where volunteers can find travel opportunities in nearly 18,000 verified listings and funding resources. They can also share their experiences, travel tips, and program reviews. goabroad.com.

3 GO OVERSEAS

Started by a group of longtime travelers and overseas volunteers, this site offers a robust online directory of volunteer programs that are rated, ranked, and searchable by country and project. It offers a social platform for participants, too. gooverseas.com.

4 GOVOLUNTOURING

Working with Holidays for Humanity, this site aggregates information across the voluntourism spectrum, listing vetted programs in more than 120 countries in categories ranging from medical aid to environmental and wildlife conservation. govoluntouring.com.

5 GRASSROOTS VOLUNTEERING

Founded by Shannon O'Donnell, this online database connects travelers to causes and communities, provides information on ways you can support local businesses and communities, and helps you locate sustainable projects, all while

advocating for more transparency in the voluntour sector. grassrootsvolunteering.org.

6 MEDICAL RESERVE CORPS

As part of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, MRC operates as a national network of volunteer medical and health-care workers. It also trains and certifies non-health-care professionals to assist with emergency preparedness, health screenings, disaster medical support, and vaccination clinics. mrc.hhs.gov.

7 NATIONAL VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS ACTIVE IN DISASTER

Founded nearly 50 years ago, this nonprofit is an association of organizations across the U.S. that assists in disaster relief, directing interested volunteers to community and faith-based groups that will provide training for active programs. nvoad.org.

8 VOLUNTOURISM

A website and newsletter with information about volunteering programs and organizations, helpful trip-planning advice, and a resource page with weekly podcasts with guest interviews. voluntourism.org.