

Stepping Out and Giving Back

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It's a boom that defies generational and professional boundaries, attracting recent graduates, retirees, corporations and families alike. The international volunteering industry, known as voluntourism, has boomed in the past decade, with an increasing number of vacationers skipping the spa treatments and beachside cocktails, opting instead for a more memorable, authentic local experience.

Tammy Leland, a pioneer in the industry and co-founder of Crooked Trails, a small non-profit in Seattle, explains, "We began doing this kind of work 14 years ago. There were very few companies doing community-based travel that gave the locals the power to make decisions about tourism in their own communities. People were talking about ecotourism benefiting the environment but not cultures."

Edge of Seven was founded in 2000 when Erin Guttenplan noticed an upswing in the interest to volunteer abroad. Seeing an opportunity to connect volunteers with meaningful opportunities in developing countries in a more affordable way, the non-profit is constructing a hostel in the Everest Region of Nepal that will house 40 girls from areas where education sometimes means a three-day walk each way to the schoolhouse.

When a traveller commits their hard-earned vacation time or savings to go on a trip, they often come away with more than the locals they have come to assist. "The moment that a volunteer has a personal transformation and recognises the need for global social change, those are the moments that inspire me," says Guttenplan.

The organisational support these groups bring is one of the main growth drivers for the industry. According to a 2009 study by GeckoGo, volunteering with an organisation was by far the preferred option, with 89 per cent of respondents saying they would like to volunteer with an operator versus 11 per cent who prefer to organize the trip themselves.

Founded in 2004 and based in Sydney, Australia, Inspired Adventures bills itself as a 'charity challenge company' that keeps the focus on pre-trip fundraising for various charities. The company works directly with the charities to activate their donor base, getting supporters to raise money for them, with the reward of an exciting travel challenge in an exotic location. The average participant raises RMB 33,000 above their travel costs through a variety of events, such as hosting charity dinners, raffles or chocolate sales.

In May, a group of 10 adventurers who raised well over RMB 330,000 for The Heart Research Centre will spend

10 days in Beijing and trek along the Great Wall while spending the night in local villages. Kyle Taylor, Business Development Manager of Inspired Adventures, explains, "Since I started leading trips last year, I've already had four people change their careers. They realized they needed to do more to help people."

Unlike most other forms of voluntourism, not every trip is exclusively focused on helping charities on the ground where the adventures take place. Taylor explains that Chinese charities are often difficult to engage with, but many of their other trips do offer a chance to volunteer for several days with children, or provide medical services in Vietnamese villages, for example. These interactions also help to bridge long-term connections between the Australian charities they support and local communities that need it most.

"We're at a stage now where everyone who can afford to travel has probably travelled. They've done Europe or a safari, but this is a way to say, 'How can I go back and have a unique experience, get off the beaten path and do something for a cause that I'm proud to support?'" says Taylor.

Leland has seen first hand that the tourism industry has responded to the uptick in interest in recent years. "We are seeing literally hundreds of operators with volunteer service programs. This, of course, scares us a little bit that once again the tourist industry is looking to make money off of indigenous people who have a project or program to connect with people from the outside world."

Journeys Within, a tour company that offers an experience with bed & breakfasts and charitable foundations, has a slightly different approach by taking visitors to see what their donation has made possible. They call it 'active philanthropy' because travellers don't just write a check to a charity, but instead travel and visit that charity, participating in the English class they helped fund, meeting the recipients of the well they provided or having lunch with the scholarship student they're supporting.

Critics are quick to point out that spending upwards of USD 1,000 or more on airfare for volunteers or philanthropists to travel around the world could be better used by the local communities themselves, but proponents argue that voluntourism is not just about the immediate impact of the volunteer work. Establishing long-term ties and transforming the volunteer into a life-long supporter of the cause is an important part of the process.



Guttenplan points out that many of the past volunteers return to their home countries and become advocates, helping to secure grant funding, host fundraisers or speak in their communities about their work. It's a sustainable approach that has helped Edge of Seven maintain and grow its operations to Cambodia, India and Thailand with meaningful projects.

Leland warns, "The impacts from this kind of travel can have enormous benefit to both hosts and guests, but it can also have many negative impacts if not properly done." With that in mind, it's always a good idea to check the background of any company offering these services and check online for opinions and stories from other travellers before you commit.



There are thousands of international volunteer agencies helping connect voluntourists with local NGOs working on virtually any cause. Here are just a few to get you started.

Bali Bound Volunteer + Touch of Luxury

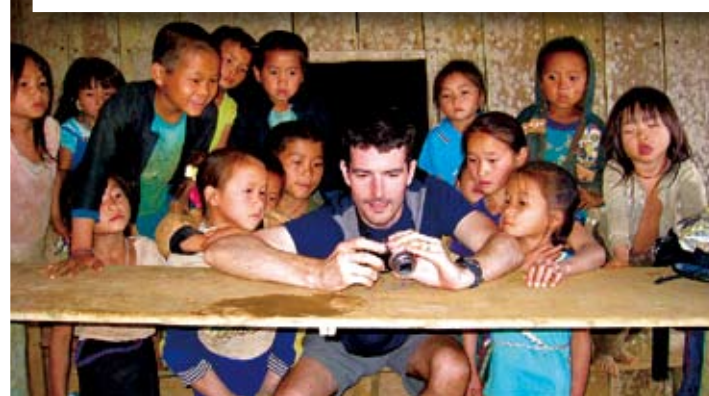
Hands up Holidays' "Bali Bound" itinerary offers a luxurious week of sightseeing, rafting and visiting local communities before a four-day volunteering stint. Participants choose from activities like teaching English in a local school or working with an organization that helps disabled youth become independent. Animal lovers can help local vets by caring for stray cats and dogs by feeding them and helping them socialise. The accommodations are five-star and the trip ends with a luxury spa day. This 12-day itinerary is priced at USD 2,950, not including airfare.

Web: www.handsupholidays.com

A Climb 2 Remember

Voluntourists looking for a challenge can celebrate World Alzheimer's Day with Inspired Adventures in Tanzania. Participants will summit the tallest freestanding mountain in the world and trek for seven days while enjoying incredible views. Glaciers and camping out under the stars will make all that fundraising worthwhile, with proceeds benefiting Alzheimer's Australia New South Wales. The fundraising target for this trip is AUD 8,950, plus an AUD 700 registration fee and the trip is scheduled for this September.

Web: www.inspiredadventures.com.au



Orangutan Eco Tours

Along with the Orangutan Foundation International, Dr Biruté Mary Galdikas hosts an unforgettable eco trip visiting orangutans deep in their natural environment at the Borneo Rainforest. Participants travel down rivers underneath a thick forest canopy to reach the primates' habitat, where they take part in feedings, visit the orangutan orphan nursery and wander freely about the forest. In addition to orangutans, visitors can expect to see proboscis monkeys, barking deer, rhinoceros hornbills and Bornean wild pigs. Three trips are scheduled this year in late June and early July. Price of the tour is USD 3,795 per person based on two person occupancy and includes a donation to the foundation.

Web: www.orangutan.org

Give As You Go Tour

The 14-day trip starts in Bangkok and continues to Chiang Mai, where you'll see temples, markets and the famous Elephant Nature Park. You'll travel on to Luang Prabang where you'll be hosted by a family in a local village and spend a day volunteering in a classroom, finally ending at the Journeys Within bed and breakfast in Siem Reap, where you can explore the city. The adventure starts at USD 3,280 based on double occupancy, including a donation to the Elephant National Park, Laos' schools and one clean-water well in Cambodia.

Web: www.journeys-within.com