



GOOD TRAVELS ADVISOR



Tips for Having Meaningful Volunteer Experiences

You travel for all sorts of reasons: to get away from it all, to stretch your cultural horizons, and to see the world and its wonders. Whether it's a favorite place or somewhere new, increasingly there are opportunities to dive deeper into communities by volunteering, for part of a day, part of a week or far longer. Volunteering has the potential to make a real difference and to deliver very powerful, authentic and interactive experiences, especially for well crafted short-term experiences (e.g. two weeks or more).

Last year, Americans gave **\$258.51 billion** to charitable organizations and over a quarter of the adult population volunteered **7.9 billion hours**. Furthermore, a study found that 55% of all travelers have given back to a leisure destination, either with their time (volunteer work) or through cash or in-kind donations.

Volunteer service is valuable for the volunteer and destinations. Volunteer programs can provide the labor and the funding to support worthwhile projects that might not otherwise have the resources, and some activities even involve bringing new skills to local communities in need.

Volunteering in destinations is not without its challenges. Experiences that do not involve local communities and focus more on the needs of travelers don't usually turn out well, for either party!

We developed this tool to help you have an enjoyable and meaningful volunteer experience. It has two sections: (1) tips for choosing a meaningful volunteer experience and (2) tips on being a good volunteer.

Choosing a Meaningful Volunteer Experience

Tip #1: Look for sponsoring organizations with strong connections to the community that offers projects grounded in local needs.

Local organizations serve the communities, know about their needs and guarantee local involvement. Check to see if there is a long-term agreement between the volunteer operator and local group, which is often a nonprofit or non-governmental organization (NGO).

It's important that local communities, not tour companies, define the needs that are worth tackling in their communities - and that they are involved in the project, too. Ideally a community-driven needs assessment and long-term plan will frame the work for groups, aligning the flow of volunteers with true community needs. Another telltale sign of a strong partnership: any reporting that uses monitoring and evaluation to track progress towards a plan.

Tip #2: Be sure the project is a good fit for you

Know what you are getting into and be honest about how much work you want to do on your vacation. Good volunteering is hard work!

Is the work suited to your skills? Bringing a specific skill set can add real value to an organization. Can the organization provide a brief job description to let you know what you will be doing? Important considerations include physical exertion expectations and language requirements. For activities of a day or longer, the expectations need to be clear, and you need to be clear about what you are able to do. Also, be careful that you are not doing a job that a local could do; don't be a substitute for local employment!

Tip #3: Go with a tour operator who has volunteering as a regular part of their business, or with a specialist volunteer agency

Good volunteering projects do not happen casually - they take a lot of work and preparation, so make sure the group arranging your project has done this before and properly supports that part of their business.

Do they offer many such trips and have the staff capacity that comes with that?

Will there be someone who speaks English at the site to manage the project and troubleshoot? Check to see if the group offers pre-trip preparation, training and support.

Do they have a volunteer code of conduct or best practices? If the organization works with children or vulnerable groups, does it have policies and procedures in place to protect them?

Tip #4: Insist that any company you travel with makes a financial difference too, and has a real partnership with local organizations

Cash is king, even in the world of volunteering. It is important to be aware of the financial arrangements any tour company may have with the communities where they volunteer. Does some of your trip fee go to the community? What sort of standing financial agreement is in place? In all cases, learn about the financial sustainability of the project, including upkeep, staffing, future supplies and maintenance, etc.



Tip #5: Be extremely cautious about projects that involve children

Working with children can be a rewarding and interesting experience but sometimes your best intentions may not be enough. Children are inherently vulnerable, especially with international visitors and in a setting of poverty and abandonment.

“Orphanage tourism” is especially suspect: there’s often a lack of transparency around orphanage operations and finances, and visitors often unwittingly end up supporting institutions that keep children from reunifying with family members. Worldwide, 80% of all children in “orphanages” have one or more living parents.

International volunteering in such centers have become very popular and creates the demand for more “orphans” and “orphanages”. Experts have also pointed out concerns that volunteers may disrupt children’s routines (such as education).

Before volunteering with children’s groups, here are some questions to think about:

- * Do you speak the local language and can you communicate effectively with children if the activity requires it?
- * If you are involved in “English lessons”, is that program fully supported by the host, with ongoing staff and materials to really drive learning English?
- * Are you willing to undergo a background check if working for any extended period of time?
- * Do you have professional skills that would benefit the staff of the children’s group? That may be the best way you can help.
- * Can you stay longer than two weeks? Although not practical for most travelers, some organizations recommend not volunteering with children for less than two weeks, to really guard against casual, ineffective interactions.

Check out [Childsafe Alliance](#), which has a list of member organizations and trusted partners who offer volunteer opportunities.



Tips on Being a Good Volunteer

Tip #1: Be prepared

It is exciting to immerse yourself in a community that is far away and different from your own. But volunteers undergo a range of emotions when settling in their destination, including 'culture shock'. Before you leave, study up on how to deal with it. It's also useful to ask yourself a range of questions: do I understand my own strengths and weaknesses; can I cope with some personal hardship; and can I find solutions to problems?

Tip #2: Be humble, respectful and open-minded - and commit to the experience

Bring all your energy and enthusiasm, as volunteering gives you a chance to learn and experience new things and get involved in a deep experience. But be respectful of the local culture and the people you meet. Behave and dress appropriately when at the volunteer site. The best interest of people you are helping should be your primary focus. A revolutionary tip for some: help immerse yourself by limiting selfies and social media and even photos, at least for portions of your journey.

Tip #3: Be prepared, practically and culturally

Consider purchasing travel insurance for particularly immersive experiences, in case you are injured or items are

stolen. Also, as many good projects include some kind of homestay and eating 100% local food, read up on the local diet, pack snacks and preventive medication and/or treatment, especially for food-borne illness!

Be sure to ask about local attire and what is appropriate to bring. You want to be comfortable working on your project but at the same time, respectful of local customs.

Tip #4: Support good organizations you meet

If you really believe in your volunteer organization and project, consider financially supporting it. Get your family and networks to contribute too, and be sure to support the organization and its strategic needs.

Tip #5: Share meaningful experiences and stay involved

After your trip, share your awesome experiences with family and friends on Facebook, Instagram and elsewhere! Stay involved with your project and be an advocate, watching the group's progress from afar and continuing to support it. You may even try to volunteer your skills remotely.

Your travel agent is a certified Good Travels Advisor, part of an industry training and learning community focused on maximizing travel giving and volunteering so you can make the greatest impact possible – and have the greatest experience possible!

Sources: Giving USA 2016, Independent Sector, The Ethical Volunteering Guide, ChildSafe Movement, Better Care Network, International Voluntourism Guidelines for Commercial Tour Operators, Culture Shock When Volunteering Overseas, Travelers' Philanthropy Handbook



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