

THE VALUE



OF VOLUN- TOURISM

When
your
vacation
involves
helping
people
in need,
everyone
benefits

By Julie Jacobs

For years, Patty Raab and her husband, Patrick, had stayed informed about the AIDS epidemic in Africa. The Colorado couple had always wanted to travel to the continent, and their concern over the growing crisis led them to a mission to not only visit, but also to help in whatever way they could.

Raab turned to the Internet to research volunteer opportunities in Africa and found a wealth of information, as well as numerous organizations that could get her and her family there through established, well-proven programs. She ultimately chose Cross-Cultural Solutions (CCS), an outfit based in New Rochelle in Westchester County, New York, after e-mailing back and forth with a previous customer and speaking directly with company representatives.

“We wanted to go someplace remote, more like a village, to get a small community experience,” recalls Raab. “I felt early on that CCS was well organized and really committed to making our experience as volunteers worthwhile.”

An American volunteer in Ghana lends a hand in a garden (left); volunteers in a home for the elderly in Costa Rica help a resident make music (right).





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In May 2007, Raab took off for Tanzania for three weeks with her husband and their daughter, Alex, who had just finished her junior year of college. She and Alex spent their mornings assisting a teacher of 40 children ages 4 to 7 in a one-room preschool with dirt floors, a single chalkboard, and 10 wooden benches. Patrick opted to work at an orphanage, where he held and played with babies and toddlers, victims of the epidemic who were in dire need of human touch. Together, the family, along with three other volunteers, also completed their own independent project restoring an old playground.

“It took us about a week to get acclimated and learn the children’s names along with some basic Swahili,” says Raab. “The kids were just fabulous and so happy to be at school, even though they had nothing but small tablets of paper and little stubs of pencils to write with. So when we brought new sharpened pencils, along with crayons and coloring books, that was like gold. They loved them.

“We may not have changed the world, but this trip changed us. It was so worthwhile,” she adds. She looks forward to returning with her two sons.

Raab and her family are among a growing number of Americans who are foregoing traditional getaways for volunteer vacations. According to the Travel Industry Association of America, more than 55 million people in the United States have become “volun-tourists,” going abroad or staying stateside to lend a hand. Projects can range from teaching conversational English to building homes to clearing wild lands to planting gardens. In many instances, time for tourism is incorporated so that volunteers can see the local sights and attractions.

Special abilities or foreign language requirements are not usually necessary to go on a volunteer vacation. Volun-tourists with professional expertise in fields such as medicine or business can put their skills to use if they wish.



A volunteer in Ghana gets into a soccer game (above left); a volunteer in Tanzania gets to know local children.

The experience is a win-win for all involved. Participants are afforded an authentic inside look at another country and its culture and are rewarded with the knowledge that their personal contributions will improve the lives of others. Host communities and villages are left with sustainable programs that can benefit generations to come.

“The concept of volunteer vacations has really emerged in the past five years,” notes Brandon Wick, senior manager of communications for CCS. “I think that traditional vacations can sometimes feel a bit exploitive, and that many people have come to want to do something new and different. They’re interested in having greater interaction with the communities they’re visiting and finding a meaningful way to work with others.”

CCS is a nonprofit that was founded in 1995 and launched its first program in India. Today it sends more than 4,000 volunteers year-round to Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Morocco, Peru, Russia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Thailand. Travelers stay at a safe and secure CCS home base, along with staff native to the area and other volunteers. There they eat local home-cooked cuisine and participate in cultural learning activities, such as excursions and language lessons.

CCS arranges for volunteers to work in the morning, return to their home base for lunch, and spend the afternoons either taking part in activities or doing as they like. Evenings and weekends are free time. The organization generally caters to college students, young professionals, and families, but



GET IN THE **KNOW** BEFORE YOU GO

A volunteer vacation can be the trip of a lifetime. Here are some points to consider and research while planning your adventure.

Location: Think about whether you want to stay stateside or go abroad and what type of accommodations—luxurious versus basic—you prefer. Also, figure out whether you want an urban or rural environment and a hot or cold climate.

Trip length: Determine how much time you can donate, particularly if your vacation time is limited or restricted to a certain time of year.

Type of volunteerism: Decide what kind of projects appeal to you and whether you would like to use your professional skills. For instance, are you looking to help build houses or teach the local people?

Cost: Because fees can vary, check what is included in an organization's package in terms of travel, food, and accommodations. Additionally, investigate nonprofits, which are regulated with regard to administrative spending and therefore tend to be less expensive.

Company reputation: Contact returnees to learn about their experiences, both good and bad, and log on to forums at sites like *independenttraveler.com*.

For more information

Cross-Cultural Solutions
800-380-4777; 914-632-0022
www.crossculturalsolutions.org

Globe Aware
877-LUV-GLOBE (877-588-4562)
www.globeaware.org

International Volunteer Programs Association
914-380-8322
www.volunteerinternational.org



In Ghana, a volunteer works on arithmetic with an attentive little girl.

also offers journeys for teens; many CCS volunteers travel solo. Its flagship program is two weeks, but it also coordinates vacations as short as one week and as long as three months.

“We partner with schools, orphanages, community centers, hospitals, and health care clinics. Our relationship-building with them comes from listening and finding out need,” Wick says. “Upon our founding, we developed a mission to effect positive change. We think that through these cultural exchanges, our volunteers learn a lot about cultural understanding and global issues.”

So how much does volun-tourism cost? Fees vary, based primarily on trip length and locale, but typically range from \$1,000 to \$1,700 a person for one week. Some companies feature discounts for young children and families.

Prices cover lodgings, three meals daily, project materials and staffing, travel medical insurance, emergency evacuation (if necessary), transportation to and from the airport, volunteer placements, and program excursions. Expenses for airfare, vaccines, passports and visas, independent side trips, and souvenirs are separate.

One upside to cost is that any expenditures related solely to doing the volunteer work, like program fees and airfare, are 100% tax-deductible. Another is an increasing variety of financial assistance options, including corporate scholarships and grants, industry sponsorships, and personal fund-raising through families and friends.

Travelocity, for example, offers a Travel for Good program that subsidizes volunteer vacations coordinated by designated volunteer travel partners. And the



Building Bridges Coalition, which connects nonprofit travel organizations, government entities, and schools with for-profit businesses to spread the word about the benefits of volunteerism on all levels, hopes to help move a proposed Global Service Fellowship Program Act through Congress. If passed, the new bill will provide funding to people who want to volunteer, but are prevented from doing so by economic constraints.

CCS is a member of both the Travelocity program and the coalition, as is Globe Aware, a Dallas-headquartered nonprofit that has been arranging volunteer missions for the past 15 years. The company began by running trips in Peru and Costa Rica and has since expanded to include Thailand, Cuba, Nepal, Brazil, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Jamaica, Romania, Ghana, Mexico, and China.

“Seeing the sights, taking photos, buying souvenirs ... that is very different from understanding the real beauty and challenges of our global community. We want our volunteers to get to know the real value of the cultures we visit and not view them as just postcards,” says Kimberly Haley-Coleman, Globe Aware’s executive director. “After 9/11, followed by the tsunami and Katrina, people started feeling that writing a check to distant lands wasn’t nearly the same as face to face. You put humans together to work on problems and they become sympathetic toward one another. It changes them fundamentally from the inside.”

Globe Aware, adds Haley-Coleman, likes to think of its volunteers as “lamplighters” who can illuminate global concerns after they’ve returned home.

Most of its participants are between the ages of 25 and 55, and more than half are female; many families also travel with the company. Lodgings differ from location to location, with villa-like guesthouses in Cambodia versus

compound-style homes with pumped-in water in Thailand, for instance. And as with CCS, volunteerism takes place in the mornings and early afternoons, followed by cultural activities or unstructured personal time.

Since its inception, Globe Aware has almost doubled its number of volunteers every year. To date, the company has engaged in such projects as assembling wheelchairs for landmine victims in Cambodia and building adobe stoves

A teacher volunteers at a primary school in Xi’an, China (above left); volunteers construct a soccer field in Cusco, Peru (below).

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HELPING AND YOUR HEALTH

While volunteerism is known to improve community life, it's also been shown to enhance the health of those giving of themselves. Studies have demonstrated that volunteering can foster well-being and self-esteem and reduce depression and pain. In one investigation conducted at Vanderbilt University, researchers Peggy Thoits and Lyndi Hewitt analyzed data from the University of Michigan's Americans' Changing Lives study. They divided the 3,617 respondents into two groups—people who volunteered and people who did not—and compared their self-assessments of six aspects of personal well-being: happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over life, physical health, and depression.

"Our findings were pretty straightforward," says Thoits, now distinguished professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "People who volunteered had greater well-being overall and, conversely, were more likely to volunteer because they had good mental and physical health.

"Speaking theoretically, not on data, people want purpose and meaning in their lives. One of the ways to find them is to give assistance to the community and feel that you're doing something that matters."

in Peru. "When we started, we would identify need through town hall meetings and direct outreach to community agencies. Now a lot of our work involves sorting through requests and, unfortunately, we have to turn down the majority."

One project that received the go-ahead was the building of a soccer field in a three-story educational compound in Cusco, Peru. Globe Aware volunteers dug through rocky soil, put down framework, laid stones, and mixed and poured concrete. They also tiled a hallway in the compound, sodded an on-site playground, and built mud stoves to replace open fire pits in two countryside homes.

Tim Redmond, a 33-year-old high-school history and government teacher from the Buffalo, New York, area, participated in the Cusco project. "I had always wanted to go to Peru, and the Globe Aware program fit easily into my schedule," says Redmond, who traveled solo on the eight-day trip.

He and his fellow volun-tourists stayed in the compound, where children from villages near and far came for schooling. The kids, aged 9 to 17, lived there during the week and returned home on weekends to farm with their families. "In the evenings we'd be with the students, playing soccer and board games and helping them with their homework," remembers Redmond. "They were so nice and very grateful. Toward the end, they threw us a party. They sang songs to us, taught us dances, and gave us little gifts.

"I was so happy I went. It was the first time I ever really saw poverty like that and it absolutely changed me and made me more appreciative of what I have," Redmond says. "I've done a lot of traveling, but never to do service and learn so much about a culture. I look at my pictures every couple of weeks and smile a huge smile every time."

A volunteer enjoys her time in Guatemala at a center for people with disabilities (above left); assembling wheelchairs for land-mine victims in Cambodia (top right); Cross-Cultural Solutions' home base in Dharamsala, India (below).



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