



FINDING MEANING THROUGH

Voluntourism

‘Working vacations’ allow travelers to immerse themselves in a different culture — while also giving back

BY GREG RIENZI

The scenic Pongo de Mainique gorge, on the lower Urubamba River in Peru, is near the base of operations for ProWorld—a service travel organization that develops long-term relationships with needy communities (see page 23 for more). Opposite: A Peruvian in traditional garb.

CAN'T CHOOSE BETWEEN PARIS OR THE CARIBBEAN FOR YOUR VACATION DESTINATION? THEN HOW ABOUT A TRIP TO ROMANIA TO TEACH ENGLISH IN AN ORPHANAGE, OR TO COSTA RICA TO HELP REBUILD A RURAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL? IF ANIMAL RESCUE IS MORE YOUR THING, THERE'S A PROJECT FOR THAT, TOO.

The “voluntourism” industry has grown during the past decade as a growing number of people want to add a humanitarian facet to their travel. These volunteer or service vacations allow participants to immerse themselves in a foreign culture and also give back. In a global economic downturn, the prospect of spending a few weeks in an exotic setting for a relatively modest sum has additional appeal.



The concept of volunteering abroad dates back to World War I, when college students offered to drive ambulances in the European Theater. In the 1960s and 1970s, organizations such as the Peace Corps and Habitat for Humanity came on the scene, attracting legions of altruistic 20-somethings.

Today, hundreds of providers offer more bite-sized volunteer experiences, from a few days to a month, for people of all ages and backgrounds.

“It’s a big, broad market now,” says Richard Webb, founder of ProWorld, a volunteer vacation provider since 1998. “We’ve seen our demographic continue to expand. The core draw is [people] wanting to help and connect with other cultures. In this global economy, people want to find more meaning.”

Organizations such as ProWorld and others offer trips to destinations all over the globe—from Latin America to China—for projects that fall under the broad categories of health (malaria prevention, community clinics); environment (clean

water wells, conservation efforts); social and economic development (after-school programs, rural literacy); and wildlife (counting sea turtle eggs). Most tour companies provide applications that match up personal interests and abilities.

Although prices vary greatly, a two- to four-week experience can range from \$1,000 to \$3,000. The price typically covers room and board, airport pickup and dropoff at a program site, onsite transportation, and weekly adventure and cultural experiences. Some program fees also include foreign lan-

guage lessons and health and travel insurance.

To keep prices down, travelers forgo luxury accommodations and traditional amenities such as room service and an on-site spa. Instead, participants often opt to stay with a host family, at a project location (such as a health clinic) or in a modest group-living accommodation or low-end hotel.

Randy LeGrant, executive director of GeoVisions and a 30-year veteran of international education and volunteering, says that organizations like his look for communities with a demonstrated need and sustainable, result-oriented projects.

“We want to add value to the community,” LeGrant says. “And we want to make sure volunteers can participate in a meaningful way and leave the experience feeling good about themselves and what they did.”

Here are just three examples of people at work and play on vacation.



From top: During Chad Goebel's travels in India he snapped photos of the Golden Temple of Amritsar, top, and a local man on the street. Goebel's work at a "de-addiction" clinic included a mural project. Bottom: Mary Pat Ryan gets down and dirty for a filtration project in Peru.

CHAD GOEBEL, from Tucson, Ariz., chose his volunteer vacation destination on a whim. A friend told him she was going to India to work on a project with Cross-Cultural Solutions, an organization out of New Rochelle, N.Y.

Goebel, who has traveled all over the Western Hemisphere and Europe, had never been to eastern Asia or volunteered abroad. "And India had always fascinated me," he says. "I told her, 'Sign me up.'"

Cross-Cultural Solutions placed him at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Dharamshala, a city in northern India near the Tibetan border.

On his application, Goebel mentioned he had an art background. A representative later asked if he'd like to paint a mural at the center. "I went there with that intention," he says, "but I did wonder right away how that would fill my three weeks."

Goebel had little clue then to what places—physically and emotionally—his adventure would lead him.

He arrived in New Delhi and spent a few days there to get acclimated to the time change and the environment. Cross-Cultural Solutions hosted a class about the customs in India and what to expect the rest of his trip.

Then, it was onto Dharamshala and the "de-addiction center"—an all-male clinic with nearly 40 patients of various ages. He was paired with another volunteer who had already been in the country for a while. Through an interpreter, Goebel explained the mural project and asked them what they wanted to see. The consensus was a building with a strong foundation and a blue sky above. He worked up a sketch and the patients asked when they could get started.

"I never picked up a paintbrush. They wanted to do it," he says. "We got started right away. They really enjoyed it. It changed their daily activities and gave them something to look forward to. It turned into art therapy for them. It was absolutely wonderful."

Goebel also gave lectures on leading a drug-free life. With no background in counseling, Goebel said he just used himself as a role model. "I told them because I didn't have drugs in my life, I was able to have a job I enjoyed, to travel when and where I wanted, to do the types of

things I wanted to do, and that they could do the same."

He volunteered at the center each weekday from 8 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. His afternoons were filled with Indian language lessons, yoga, guest speakers and field trips to heritage sites such as the ancient Kangra Fort—the largest fortification in the Himalayas and oldest of its kind in India.

Goebel stayed in a large house with dorm-style bedrooms divided by genders. The weekends were his, and he took advantage of the inexpensive country and exchange rate to shop and take day trips to sites such as the spectacular Golden Temple of Amritsar, the holiest site in Sikhism. The temple, built in the 16th century, sits on a structurally contained lake and is one of the region's most popular tourist attractions.

"This was a completely different experience for me," says Goebel, of his work at the de-addiction center. "I have some friends who are nurses and psychiatrists back here in the United States, and they told me what I might expect to see. But nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. To be a part of these men's lives, see what they are going through, and then impact them, in whatever small way, was immensely gratifying."

A CLASSIC SCENE from television's *I Love Lucy* shows the title star in Toro, Italy, stomping grapes barefoot in a massive wine vat. Mary Pat Ryan had her "Lucy moment" in spring 2010—except in her case she danced pant leg up in a pile of mud and sawdust in a small town in Peru's Sacred Valley.

Ryan, a New York-based advertising executive, traveled to the South American nation for a two-week project focused on water filtration systems. Her mud play was actually work, as she used her feet to form a mixture that would later be turned into ceramic water-filtering pots (picture a primitive Brita filter). The pot's tiny holes help purify water contaminated by bacteria and make it safe for human consumption.

The need for such devices is great. Annually, 1.7 million deaths worldwide — mostly children under the age of 5—are attributed to unsafe water, according to World Health Organization figures.

Volunteers like Ryan, 45, help build the filters, develop campaigns to promote their use, install them in community homes,



Blackfoot dancers delighted the Picard family during their stay on the reservation.

educate families on use and conduct public health workshops on clean drinking water.

Ryan, who has traveled extensively and done some charity work, previously visited Peru in 2009 for a three-day conference in Lima. Then she stayed in

an upscale hotel in what she described as a “posh” region of the city. In essence, she saw the five-star version of the country. Afterward she was eager to see how real Peruvians lived.

“I wanted to experience this place so much more, and to give back to a community that I felt could use some assistance,” she says.

Ryan also wanted physical activity and an opportunity to improve her Spanish. She learned of ProWorld, which has strong roots in Peru. While Ryan spent the majority of her time on water filters, she also provided some after-school care and worked on ProWorld’s cleaner burning stove project, in which volunteers construct and install stoves in rural homes and then conduct follow-up visits. The stoves help reduce the amount of firewood used by the family and, more importantly, decrease the amount of smoke inhaled while cooking—a major public health issue in the area.

ProWorld’s in-country base of opera-

tions is Urubamba, a village in southeastern Peru near the Urubamba River under the snow-capped mountain of Chicon. The town is located one hour from Cusco, the capital of the Inca Empire, and near a number of significant Incan ruins.

Ryan resided with a family in a modest home right off the town square in Urubamba. She describes the home as rustic, but clean, and devoid of modern conveniences such as cable TV, a refrigerator and air conditioning.

“The experience certainly pushed me out of my comfort zone,” Ryan says. “I got to see their living situation, which was very simple, and see up-close the serious health problems that impact people there.”

Each weekday morning, she woke to a home-cooked meal and then was off to the water filter project site. She came home for lunch, and then left again for Spanish lessons in a farm-like setting in the shadow of the Andes. At after-school care, Ryan volunteered for playtime duty.

Tips for the Would-Be Volunteer Traveler

Before you go

Ask yourself, what do you want out of the experience? If the answer is a few days of kayaking/hiking and a hands-on project where you can see tangible results before you leave, odds are such an experience exists. “Find the mix, the balance you’re looking for,” advises ProWorld’s Richard Webb. “The value is in immersing yourself in something that is fun, rewarding and also a bit uncomfortable at times. Think about the culture you want to experience, the language you want to learn, the climate you want to be in. Pick and choose.”

Do your homework Find out what the organization is all about. Experts say to look for an organization that has a year-round presence in the country/community and staff on the ground or nearby to assist. “That is really important both from a safety and quality standpoint,” Webb says. “Talk to them via e-mail, phone. Get some personal connection beforehand, a good sense of who they are.”

Talk to project alumni Most organizations will gladly put you in touch with past participants. Don’t just ask them if they had fun; dig deeper and find out if they had a rewarding experience and would do it again.

Skills not required Skills are useful and most organizations will

help match your skills with a project. However, volunteer vacation providers say you don’t have to be a health care provider, a seasoned handyman or fluent in a foreign language to be helpful. Can you paint a wall or read a bedtime story to a toddler? You have value.

Found a project/destination. Now what?

Bring a positive attitude/realistic expectations You can’t fix anything overnight, or even in four weeks, says Greg Smith, an engineer in his early 60s who recently traveled to Peru with his son to work in orphanages near Lima. “I would tell people to go with an open heart and an open mind,” Smith says. “There are cultural differences that you just won’t understand. Roll with the punches. Just give freely. You’re in a place where any help you can give is good.”

Not Club Med Come prepared to get your hands dirty. Volunteer/service vacations are not about luxury accommodations, spas and lazy afternoons in hammocks. The goal is to immerse yourself in the community and culture. You’ll have time for fun and to take in the sights, experts say, but be prepared for an eye-opening, up-close look at a real community at work. —GR

"I taught the kids the Hokey Pokey," she says. "They loved it."

Ryan says the working vacation, which cost a total of \$1,800 plus airfare, was one of the best travel experiences of her life. In her free time, she visited Incan ruins, hiked trails, shopped in markets and visited the "breathtaking" city of Cusco.

"I had a fabulous time," she says. "The people there were so nice to me. The weather was warm, but dry, and you got to live and work in a completely beautiful setting. I would go back in a minute."

EACH SUMMER, the Picard family runs the traditional vacation gamut: beaches, cabins and visits to national parks. But a few years ago, Matthew and Suzanne Picard wanted to do something different with their three children. Give back.

"We thought, we have all that we need and more. It's time for us to take a vacation to serve others," says Suzanne.

The Picards did some research and

discovered Global Volunteers, an organization that hosts domestic volunteer vacations. The family chose a one-week stay at the Blackfeet reservation in Montana's Glacier National Park.

For Suzanne, the trip meant getting back to her roots. Before she married, she had served in the Peace Corps. She spent two years in the Republic of Cameroon during the mid-1980s primarily advocating best practices at freshwater fisheries. Husband Matthew, a neonatal physician in Silver Spring, Md., also has a history of volunteering.

The family traveled to Montana in August and participated in a number of projects on the reservation. They painted high school bleachers, cleaned up a field area, planted tree seedlings, taught in a preschool and volunteered at a nursing home.

Eldest daughter Alyssa, then 14, helped prepare meals at the nursing home and was involved in a building construction project. Greg, 11, and Sonia, 8, painted and planted 1,000

seedlings at the park, which had suffered a massive forest fire that year, and played with other kids in the reservation's Head Start program.

Mom and Dad did a little bit of everything.

Suzanne says it was nonstop activity and full eight-hour workdays.

For fun, the family attended a traditional pow-wow and sweat lodge, and swam and boated on lower St. Mary Lake. The Picards had no shortage of bonding time; they ate and slept together in family accommodations.

Looking back, Suzanne says that they had a wonderful time and that she was especially proud of her kids. "They worked harder than some adults on the trip," she says.

The experience certainly had an impact on their oldest. Last year, Alyssa earned a Maryland Governor's volunteer service award for her many hours of service, including 500 hours for Habitat for Humanity. She's since been accepted at both Yale and Harvard. ■

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