

Virtuous Vacations

Let's face it. Some of us just never adjust to the idea of doing nothing. If lying around doing nothing for a week sounds like your own personal version of the third circle of Dante's Inferno, perhaps you should consider a volunteer vacation.

Jane Stanfield, an American in her mid-40s who grew up around volunteering, fits the demographic of this new phenomenon. When she took an adult education class called Volunteer Vacationing, the idea of "virtuous vacationing" took hold.

"I thought about picking one or two that I would like to do," she says, intending to spread her choices out, one per year. But then she received a legacy and "I realized there were three, that I wanted to do very badly and they were at different times of the year and in different parts of the world."

Stanfield faced the fact that she would have to quit her job in order to do all three, but she did not want to make three total round-trips from the States. Her solution mixed volunteer stints with pure vacation adventures over the course of a year. "And that is how I came up with a full year going around the world doing 12 placements in 12 months."

Alison Gardner, a writer who specializes in alternative vacations for people over 50 years of age, lists five hallmarks of what she calls voluntourism.

- Unlike a long-term volunteer effort, the participant pays all of his or her own expenses so that their help does not use project money. Often a built-in fee contributes to the project.
- Assignments take from a week to a month, fitting into regular vacation time.
- Organizers offer opportunities to learn and explore the region as part of the program.
- When participants are pleased with the organization, they may choose to donate money or carry the message of the project to other people by writing or lecturing when they return home.
- Volunteer vacations require the sponsoring organization to consider the service they provide to the volunteer – as a client – in order to maintain a good reputation and perpetuate the program.

Individuals make personal decisions about how much time to spend and whether they want to emphasize cultural adventures or "hands-on" volunteering. Fortunately, organizations offer many kinds of programs. Projects available range from a relaxing vacation where your fees help a community or environmental cause, to spending long days working side by side with scientists or teaching English.

"CCS [Cross-Cultural Solutions] have a number of sites and it was quite difficult to choose, but in the end I opted to go to Guatemala for four weeks," says British volunteer Julia Norton. "They ask you to complete some questionnaires to get a feel for your likes and dislikes and interests and use these to assess the most appropriate placement."

WRITTEN BY VERA MARIE BADERTSCHER



Above: Volunteers heading into the forest on an Earthwatch project to save Cameroon's rock fowl. Opposite: Jane Stansfield working in close quarters with wildlife during her volunteer stint in Africa.

This was Norton's first volunteer vacation, but like Stanfield, she is going to schedule multiple projects in the next year. "I am going with CCS again and will be working with them in India, Thailand, and

"VOLUNTOURISM' IS THE INTEGRATED COMBINATION OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE TO A DESTINATION WITH THE TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM - ARTS, CULTURE, GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND RECREATION - WHILE IN THE DESTINATION."

DAVID CLEMMONS, FOUNDER, VOLUNTOURISM.ORG

China. I am traveling in Asia, Australia, and the States for seven to eight months and wanted to break it up and spend a bit more time in these countries doing the voluntary work."

A 2007 poll of 1,500 U.S. travelers showed that one-quarter (24 percent) of respondents were currently interested in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation. In a Travel Industry





Above: A Guatemalan woman selling fabric at a local market. Part of the draw of a volunteer vacation is that participants get to experience a culture other than their own. Right: An i-to-i volunteer does his part for animal conservation in South Africa.

Association survey, more than one in 10 travelers (11 percent) said they were more interested now than five years ago in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation.

As a result, commercial travel Web sites like Cheap Tickets and Travelocity are now touting volunteer travel. A search tool on Cheap Tickets that is run by United Way helps Americans find volunteer

“VOLUNTEERS ARE SERVANT LEARNERS, NOT PROBLEM SOLVERS.”
WEB SITE OF GLOBAL VOLUNTEERS

opportunities in the United States, and offers discounts to groups traveling to volunteer. Travelocity encourages people to become “Change Ambassadors” through their “Travel for Good” program. Their partners include Earthwatch, Globe Aware, and Cross-Cultural Solutions.



Photo courtesy of Cross-Cultural Solutions

Photo courtesy of i-to-i Meaningful Travel



A volunteer tutors a Cook Islands elementary school student in reading and English phonics classes.

But Michele Gran, founder of Global Volunteers, worries that as volunteer vacations become trendy, travel organizations will “pass off standard tours as volunteer vacations.” She urges potential volunteers to “go with an organization that is rooted in development.”

Why the increase, and who are these people? Gardner says, “It was only when the concept of volunteer vacationing surfaced about 15 to 20 years ago that the entire menu of possibilities expanded into an army of people of many different ages and abilities, but especially the older person, say, 45 to 80, who has good health, more flexible time to play, a strong desire to “give back,” a curious mind that loves to learn, and a delight in exploration and adventure beyond the boundaries of their everyday world.” That particularly applies to older women, Gardner notes.

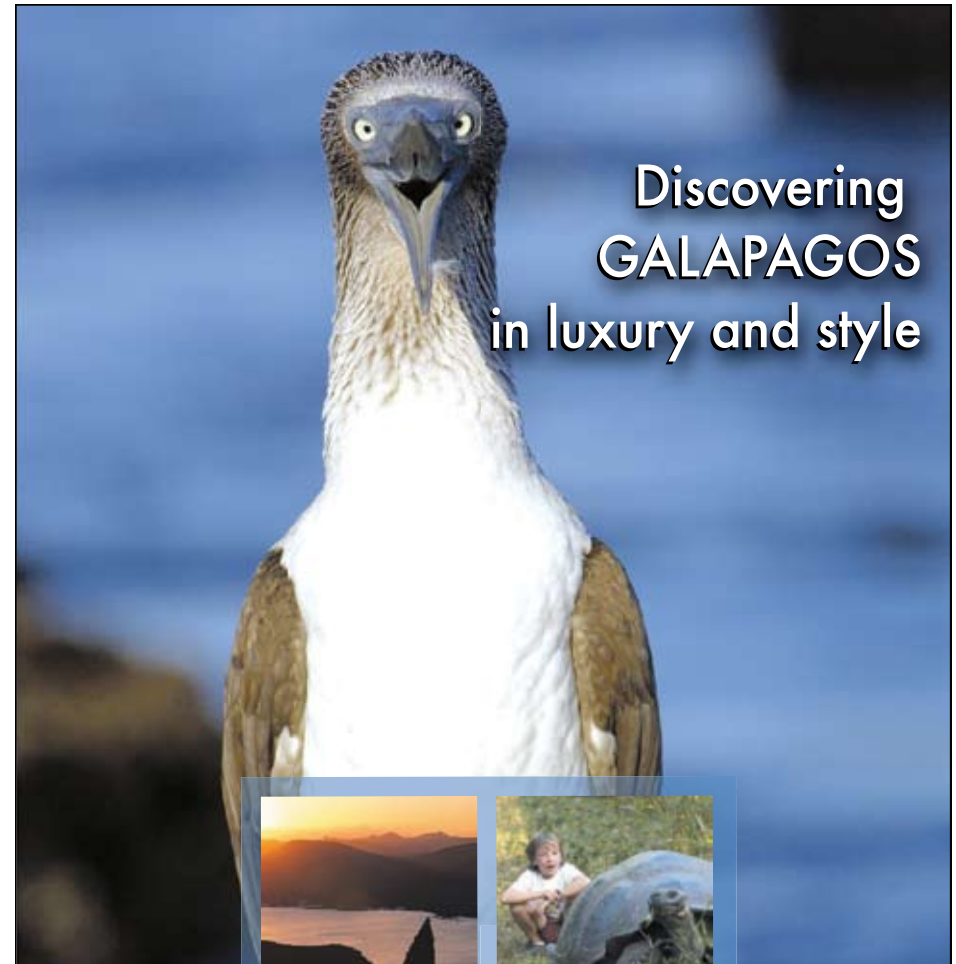
Gran says in her organization, “Being older is not a barrier. More than half [in the Global

Volunteers’ programs] are 50 or over.” Particularly in their China program, they have many in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s.

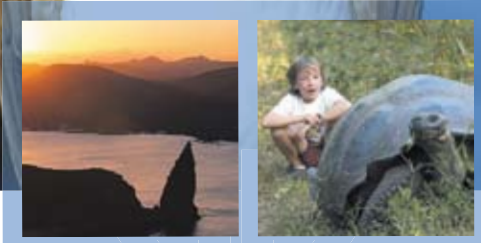
Stanfield observed that about 80 percent of the participants in the programs she joined were women, and in the rougher jobs, Stanfield, in her mid-40s, could be the oldest member of the group. “They all tend to be extroverts,” Stanfield said of the people she met.

Jay DeChesere of Colorado, who recently retired and sold his architecture and construction companies, and his wife Heather traveled together. Heather says, “At the airport coming home, we talked about how glad we were that we did it together. It is such a life-changing experience that it would be hard for the other one to understand what you went through.”

Heather had experienced volunteer trips through her former job overseeing college



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JANE STANFIELD'S ITINERARY

Note: Stanfield sandwiched independent travel between volunteer placements.

Global Volunteers, Lima, Peru: Working at an orphanage, 2 weeks

Earthwatch, Khorat, Thailand: Archeological dig on the society thought to have built Angkor Wat in Cambodia, 2 weeks (plus return for 2 weeks following year)

Global Volunteers, Cook Islands: Teaching English and other projects, 2 weeks

Earthwatch, Australia: Working with koalas, 2 weeks
i-to-i, Rockhampton, Australia: Working with wallabies, 2 weeks

Earthwatch, Kangaroo Island (near Adelaide), Australia: Working with echidnas, 2 weeks

i-to-i, Sri Lanka: Helping at an elephant orphanage, 4 weeks

Enkosini, Kruger National Park, South Africa: Caring for baboons, 2 weeks

Enkosini, Capetown, South Africa: Working with penguins, 2 weeks

i-to-i, Kruger National Park, South Africa: Working with lion cubs, 2 weeks

Pueblo Inglés, Spain: Speaking English to Spanish business people, 1 week

students in an international program, but for Jay it was a new experience. They chose Cross-Cultural Solutions because, Heather says, "Their philosophy resonated with us – having the opportunity to learn and be part of the community. When you think about 'global understanding' that is only going to come from getting to know other people." Heather goes on, "You not only do volunteer work, but experience the culture so you can come back and share with other people."

Stanfield did a test run to be sure that this sort of trip would suit her. She signed up to go help a French organization based in Provence: La Sabranenque. This nonprofit organization utilizes international volunteers to help reconstruct medieval structures in France and in Italy. Volunteers do hands-on work, learning old techniques of stone-cutting and construction.

"I came home so jazzed up that I knew I wanted to do it for a whole year," she says.



Top: Judith Clair Rixon, from the UK, was a volunteer in Guatemala twice, first in 2003 and then in 2004. She volunteered at an elderly woman's home. Above: A 50-plus program participant forms a bond with a local in India.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR SELECTED ORGANIZATIONS

C.A.R.E. – Rescue, rehabilitation, and release of baboons in South Africa; limited opportunities for volunteers • www.primatecare.org.za

Earthwatch – Domestic and international scientific volunteer placements • 1-800-776-0188
www.earthwatch.org

Enkosini – South African wildlife; a variety of programs • (+27) 82-265-5955 (S.A. office) 206-604-2664 (U.S. office) www.enkosiniexperience.com

Global Volunteers – Domestic and international education-based volunteer placements • 1-800-487-1074
www.globalvolunteers.org

i-to-i – International volunteer placements; wide range of topics • 303-991-5407 www.i-to-i.com

La Sabranenque – Historic reconstruction projects in France and Italy • www.sabranenque.com

Pueblo Inglés – Conversational English Weeks in Spain (+34) 913-913-400 (Madrid)
www.vaughanvillage.com

The round-the-world aspect complicated her first task, which was to choose projects. Archaeology drew her to Earthwatch excavations of the lesser-known Angkor temples of Thailand. "Once I hit Thailand I knew I had to keep going west," she said.

Because she has a degree in animal science, Stanfield particularly liked working with animals and at various times during her trip she worked with penguins, baboons, koalas, Australian echidnas (aka spiny anteaters) and goannas (lizards), wallabies, lions, and eagles. In Peru and Romania, she helped care for orphaned children. She also helped people learn English skills in the Cook Islands and in Spain.

"I picked organizations that had been established for well over 10 years," she said, "ones that had a track record." Besides knowing the history, she wanted to know, "What is the long-range plan for this project?"

"The nice thing about going with both Global Volunteers and Earthwatch," she said, is that "because they are American nonprofits, and a large percentage of the money you pay to them goes to the project, I can write that off on my taxes." But she goes on to point out that although Americans cannot write off non-American organizations, those based in Europe or Africa tend to cost less.

For example, La Sabranenque costs less than \$1,000 for two weeks. (Participants pay their own airfare with all the programs

SOME ORGANIZATIONS THAT CARE ABOUT YOUR COMFORT

Ambassadors for Children: Helps children from impoverished communities in many countries through construction, setting up clinics, schools, etc. Provides cultural and sightseeing activities for volunteers, who frequently stay in hotels near the project.

317-536-0250 (U.S.)

info@ambassadorsforchildren.org

www.ambassadorsforchildren.org/www2

Blue Ventures: Marine research. Volunteers dive or work on land and live in cabins on the beach in Madagascar with chef-prepared meals.

(+44) 208-341-9819 (UK)

volunteer@blueventures.org • www.blueventures.org

Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions:

Historic preservation projects throughout the Caribbean. Volunteers in the one-week winter program work 5-6 hours a day, stay in hotels, cabins, or guesthouses, and have time to explore on their own or with a group. A new venture of CVE takes place in Nova Scotia in the summer.

607-962-7846 (U.S.)

ahershcv@aol.com • www.cvexp.org

i-to-i: See previous sidebar.

Cross-Cultural Solutions:

1-800-380-4777 (U.S.)

1-800-380-4777 (Canada)

(+44) 845-458-2781 (UK)

www.crossculturalsolutions.org

National Trust Working Holidays:

This British organization's various historic and nature conservancy projects include a few Premium programs that provide hotel accommodations. Open to people from around the world besides British citizens.

(+44) 1285-644727 (U.K.)

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/volunteers

Passport in Time:

U.S. Forest Service program, similar to Britain's National Trust. Volunteers help with archaeology, historic preservation, and museums. Some camping, some cabins, or some with hotel accommodations.

1-800-281-9176 (U.S.)

www.passportintime.com



Rebecca Wasserman was a volunteer in Africa, helping villagers in Ghana.

discussed in this article.) Pueblo Inglés, a program that helps Spaniards become proficient in English, costs nothing for the volunteers who sign up to do nothing more than have conversations all day with eager learners.

The introduction to *Volunteer Vacations*, the resource book that Doug Cutchins co-edits with Anne Geissinger, lists 10 questions that will help you make decisions. Stanfield has introduced us to some factors – interests, geographical choice, cost. The book also suggests that because many volunteer organizations are religion-based, or have overt political goals, you need to ask yourself, “Do I have the same goals and values as those of the organization?” Other questions: “Will I be working with a group? What are the demographics of the volunteers?” The authors also stress the importance of inquiring about training, particularly if you will be working with a culture vastly different than your own.

Evaluating the organizations may seem daunting, but several sources can help. Cutchins says, “Very few times [will you find] a really bad organization or a bad volunteer – usually [problems

arise because] it is a bad match.” Like most participants and organizers, he recommends doing plenty of research in advance.

The DeCheseres, who went to Thailand with Cross-Cultural Solutions, found that the organization gave them some concrete preparation but also presented them with situations where they must learn on the job. Jay says, “We did not know until two weeks before we left that we were going to be teaching English. Didn't know exactly what projects were going to be...they think that part of the learning process is...getting ready to go with the flow.” CCS suggested ideas like bringing photograph albums.

So what were some of the things the DeCheseres did learn? “Initially I had the urge to take things to the people and leave them with them, but it is really about being there yourself and having a personal relationship. Do not take something they will not be able to replenish. We left ideals and experiences. And relationships.”

Obviously, preparation for these trips entails more than just checking the expiration date on your passport and booking your flight. Experts and people who have previously volunteered will share their ideas about being ready for your adventure. Besides



A 50-plus program volunteer amid a grateful Indian family.

Web sites and catalogues, the best way to find out which program fits you, says Gran at Global Volunteers, is to “talk to one of our volunteer coordinators who will steer [you] to [your] personal level of adventure.” (See some additional sources at the end of this article.)

Stanfield says, “I think a person needs to sit down and figure out with one’s self ‘the absolute minimum standards I will accept in accommodations and catering.’” Determine if you are flexible enough to do the project that piques your interest. After all, “you can’t rehabilitate a wild animal in the middle of a city,” Stanfield says.

Volunteers must ask themselves, “If they camp, do they have to have a tent? Do they mind using a pit toilet? Do they mind sharing showers? Do they mind sharing cooking responsibility?”

Not ready for primitive living conditions? Some sponsors of volunteer vacations definitely do not expect you to hike rock cliffs and sleep on a bed of twigs. In fact, Blue Ventures, a British organization that works in marine conservation and research, speaks about comfort in their entry in *Volunteer Vacations*: “a volunteer needs comfortable accommodations and good food to be able to enjoy the project fully. Just because you are on an expedition doesn’t mean that you have to suffer!”

Global Volunteers offers three levels of personal comfort and predictability. “We try to make people comfortable enough that it is not an issue,” Gran says.

“People who want to know exactly what they will be doing each day will be happy in a program like the school program in the Puglia region of Italy. Each day is pretty much the same. On the other hand, those who want to rough it, [may] like something like the work they do in four or five communities in Costa Rica,” Gran says of Global Volunteers.

The UK-based travel agency i-to-i specializes in culturally and ecologically sensitive travel as well as opportunities to volunteer with local community organizations around the world. In 2006, i-to-i launched a program called “Premiere,” available for many of their other projects.

Jo Bearcroft, who administers the program, says, “... Premiere is the option for people who want to work hard during the day but come back to something that is a bit more luxurious and is their own personal space. As we mature, our ability to deal with some of the things like ‘roughing it’ goes down. You like to know you’ve got a decent bed, you’ve got air conditioning, you have your personal private space.”

You can find other organizations that prioritize your comfort in a sidebar to this article.

Like Stanfield, i-to-i’s Bearcroft suggests that even before the volunteer thinks about the kind of bathroom they will encounter, they need to consider what they really want from the experience. “Work out exactly what you want to do,” she recommends. “It all depends on what kind of person you are and what you want to get out of it. For example if you want to do teaching – [it] is quite structured. Community work [is for you] if you are all about caring and want to do something more informal.” If you want to do something physical then sports and construction will be the choice.

Stanfield agrees, pointing out that she got a taste of teaching in the Cook Islands with Global Volunteers, but decided that was not her calling. However, she loved working with the Peruvian orphans and later with Romanian orphans in programs also run by Global Volunteers. At Earthwatch, she worked with archaeologists in Thailand and zoologists in Australia, in strictly scientific programs.

As to the work load, Stanfield says that every project she experienced provided alternative work that would suit every age and capability. Fortunately for English speakers, most projects, even those based in other countries, have English-speaking staff.

Everyone agrees that volunteers bring home more than photographs. “[For] some people, it has changed their lives,” says Jo Bearcroft. “They’ve gone on a different tack in their lives. [For] some people, it just makes them realize what they have at home, what not to take for granted. And for others, they’ve developed skills that they didn’t have before.”

PLACES TO GET GENERAL INFORMATION

WEB SITES

Voluntourism.org

This Web site serves the volunteer and the travel industry.

Volunteerinternational.org

Site of the International Volunteer Program Association, which has principles and practices to which members adhere. The member organizations tend toward long-term volunteering, but the site is valuable because its list of principles gives you criteria for judging.

Travelwithachallenge.com

Site dedicated to soft adventures for ages 40 to 80 plus.

Travelocity.com

Cheaptickets.com

READING MATERIAL

Volunteer Vacations

by Bill McMillon, Doug Cutchins, and Anne Geissinger

How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas

by Joseph Collins, Zahara Heckscher, and Stefano DeZerega

Volunteer: A Traveler’s Guide to Making a Difference Around the World

by Charlotte Hindle, Nate Cavalieri, Rachel Collinson, and Korina Miller (A Lonely Planet Guide)

The director of the International Institute of Tourism Studies at George Washington University, Kristin Lamoreaux, says, “There’s a lot of debate as to how much ‘help’ this kind of tourism actually provides, although I know in a lot of cases it is phenomenal how this helps. But I think one of the most important things about voluntourism is how it impacts the volunteer. Time and time again people coming back from trips say the experience was ‘life-changing.’”

Stanfield has not returned to her nine-to-five job, opting instead to give lectures on her experience and work on a book about volunteer vacations. Norton is proceeding with a career change that she tested out with her Guatamala stint. The DeChereses are thinking of doing much longer-term volunteer work, similar to the Peace Corps.