

Getting Started

Answers to some of the most common questions about volunteer vacations

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WHERE CAN YOU GO to work and pay for the privilege of doing so? Volunteer expeditions. Regardless of their nature or focus, most of these adventures allow participants to mix the pleasures of travel with a larger purpose, not the least of which is the sense of extending their charitable spirits or thirst for learning into what otherwise would be an ordinary vacation.

Those who have been on such projects or field trips say they find themselves viewing people and places they visit with new insights and a new appreciation, whether it's isolated villagers in Cameroon or whales in the waters of Washington's Puget Sound. The rewards also come from the sense of being engaged with the world, of contributing to a particular project or cause, and often of giving a helping hand to those in need. Add to that a universal sense of camaraderie and it's easy to understand why volunteer adventures are becoming increasingly popular.

What follows are answers to some of the most common questions about these trips.

What are volunteer expeditions?

The projects themselves are typically divided into two categories: humanitarian or service projects, such as caring for orphans with AIDS in Zimbabwe; and academic or scientific projects, such as studying orcas. Each program typically has a project leader, or in the case of academic research programs, a principal investigator, as well as a support staff.

Volunteers, who pay for their own transportation to and from projects, are assigned various tasks. Special knowledge or skills are required at some sites. Most programs, though, can use anyone willing to take up a hammer, a spade, a camera or a notebook, or who can simply push a wheelbarrow, make a hospital bed or comfort a child. Willingness is as important as skill.

In exchange, the project usually provides accommodations, training, meals (or a place to prepare them), a team of

companions, equipment and an aegis, or the authority given to an institution to operate in a country. They often operate in countries and areas where tourist groups, much less foreign individuals, aren't allowed to travel freely.

Who sponsors these projects?

Several dozen large organizations—among them the United Nations, Earthwatch Institute, Habitat for Humanity and the University of California—today operate or provide the umbrella for hundreds of projects world-wide. Many smaller groups offer programs, as well.

How difficult is the work?

It varies. Although the terms "volunteer vacations" or "expeditions" suggest that the experience resembles a family holiday—carefree, nonrestrictive and fun—this may or may not be the case, depending on the nature of the project and its location.

On one scientific project we visited on the Klamath River near the Oregon-California border, volunteers and staff spent their days under a pitiless sun, picking at the earth, screening for artifacts. At night, they slept in tents. A second project, by contrast, had participants cruising on blue waters photographing whales by day and sleeping in a comfortable house overlooking the Puget Sound at night. But both groups were enthusiastic about what they were doing.

How much "science" is involved in a scientific project?

Tasks can involve anything from the mundane, such as household chores, to hands-on experience with scientific subjects, such as dolphins.

A call to Earthwatch Institute led us to the University of Hawaii's Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory in Honolulu, where the popular project "Exploring Dolphin Intelligence" has been going on for more than two decades. There, guided by the founder of the Dolphin Institute, Louis Herman, and his staff, teams of six to 10 volunteers of all ages work with student interns (and resident dolphins) on studies such as "Visual Acuity and Auditory Discrimination" and "Communication Through Underwater Television." In the former study, for example, sign language is used to tell dolphins to assemble selected floating items in a pool in a given order and to deliver them to specific volunteers or staff.

After an initial briefing, a volunteer's days at the pools are occupied with experimental work, training and socializing

with the dolphins, feeding, pool maintenance and data processing, as well as household chores.

How does that compare with a humanitarian or service project?

The dolphin project is principally an illustration of a scientific effort to learn, to know more about the world we live in, to make contact with the other species on Earth and to help them to somehow know us. But service and humanitarian projects are designed to improve the well-being of other people.

Don Foran, 58 years old, a professor of English and philosophy at Centralia College in Centralia, Wash., gave two weeks of his time to Environmental Service Projects Within the Americas. "I worked in the Hamlet of Hope project in the Caribbean country of Dominica, mostly surveying a site where an environmental center is being created to teach rain-forest ecology," he says. "The work was exhausting but very rewarding. Camaraderie, nature, work, contact with native people—[the project] has it all."

Gary McGee, 47, a civil engineer from Houston, has made four trips to Bolivia and Guatemala as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity's Global Village International. In helping to build homes for the disadvantaged, he has worked as a carpenter and team manager. His wife, Sara, meanwhile, has worked alongside the soon-to-be owners, wheeling dirt and bricks and stacking concrete blocks.

Is there a wide variety of projects?

The names of a few expeditions offered by two of the largest volunteer-supported organizations, the Earthwatch Institute and the smaller University Research Expeditions Program at the University of California-Davis, are enough to entice anyone with even the slightest sense of adventure, or a commitment to environmental or humanitarian causes (or both).

University Research Expeditions operates projects ranging from ecological efforts to arts-and-culture programs and others in the fields of archaeology and animal studies. One project is the Watershed Restoration on the Cape Peninsula, South Africa, an area of about 90,000 square miles that is second only to the Amazon jungle in its biodiversity. An alien plant, the Giant River Reed, is wreaking havoc on the region, pushing out other plants with its rapid growth. Volunteers will assist principal investiga-

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tor Gretchen Coffman in documenting plant diversity in the threatened river system, assessing the damage and finding means of controlling the incursion of the rapacious reeds.

Meanwhile, the Slave Traders on Lake Nyasa, Malawi, project falls into UREP's arts-and-culture category, where volunteers will assist Marty Otanez and Jim Chimbiya in interviewing local villagers, documenting their stories, memories and dances in order to determine the effects of the period when Malawi was a source of slaves for the European and African slave trade.

For the geologic expedition impressively named Himalayas on the Move: Paleoenvironmental Change & Landscape Evolution at the Edge of the Tibetan Plateau, Northern India, volunteer teams will live in camps some 400 miles northwest of Delhi. There they will map and document the age of landforms and collect geological samples in order to help formulate geologic models to evaluate changes in the mountain belt. All these projects are well described on www.urep.ucdavis.edu/.

For the archaeologically inclined, the Earthwatch catalog and Web site describe the excavations of Roman forts on England's River Tyne and on the Danube in Romania. Those concerned with animal behavior and conservation can join biologist Jeff Short to study the endangered bettongs and bandicoots, small insect- and plant-eating marsupials, near Useless Loop in western Australia. Or they can embark on the demanding predator-prey expedition in Nepal to uncover the reason for the country's declining population of snow leopards—which, like wolves in the U.S., prey on farmers' livestock.

Birders might work with Gabor Lovel of the Danish Institute of Agricultural Sciences and his colleagues in Hungary, Italy or Kenya in the study of Europe-Africa songbird migration, where volunteers are used as spotters and data processors, among other jobs.

Some of the most important projects are devoted to world health and the medical field. Ever wonder what happens to all the used eyeglasses collected by Lions International? Participants in Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity, or VOSH, have an answer. Tens of thousands of pairs of spectacles are sorted, cleaned, repaired, calibrated and packaged each year by Lions members and others, and then distributed world-wide. Anyone can volunteer for VOSH missions, often to remote villages, to help bring the gift of sight to countless individuals.

What should a would-be volunteer look for in a project?

A successful field expedition provides benefits to its target group, to the institution or organization that is making the effort, and to the volunteers and field staff. It is important, therefore, to study a project's purpose and to inquire into the history and success of the project. Obtain brochures and study them, along with the Web sites, making sure that the organizations of interest are nonprofit.

Lending a Hand

Selected groups that sponsor or support volunteer vacations and expeditions

Action Without Borders

idealist.org
TEL: 212-843-3973
E-MAIL: info@idealist.org

American Council for International Voluntary Action

interaction.org
TEL: 202-667-8227
E-MAIL: ia@interaction.org

Association of Voluntary Service Organizations

www.avso.org
TEL: 011-32-2-230-6813 (Brussels)
E-MAIL: avso@bigfoot.com

Caribbean Volunteer Expeditions

www.cvexp.org
TEL: 607-962-7846
E-MAIL: ahershove@aol.com

Cross-Cultural Solutions

crossculturalsolutions.org
TEL: 800-380-4777 or 914-632-0022
E-MAIL: info@crossculturalsolutions.org

Dolphin Institute (& Maui Whales project)

dolphin-institute.org
TEL: 808-593-2211
E-MAIL: correspondence@dolphin-institute.org

Earthwatch Institute

www.earthwatch.org
TEL: 800-776-0188
E-MAIL: info@earthwatch.org

Global Volunteers

globalvolunteers.org
TEL: 800-487-1074
E-MAIL: email@globalvolunteers.org

Habitat for Humanity International

habitat.org
TEL: 800-422-4828 or 229-924-6935
E-MAIL: publicinfo@hfh.org

And, finally, telephone them if you have questions or uncertainties.

What are some of the best sources of information?

For anyone with a few computer skills, the Web opens the door to numerous volunteer expeditions. In general, check for Web addresses by using suffixes ".org," ".edu" or ".gov" rather than ".com" with organizations' names. Some organizations actually operate field programs, while others serve as a conduit to them. Of the latter type, some good bets are: the International Volunteer Programs Association; the Association of Voluntary Service Organizations; the American Council for International Voluntary Action; and Action Without Borders.

Rima Anand, from New Delhi, India, found out about the Dolphin Institute's work from the Internet. Two participants

Health Volunteers Overseas

hvousa.org
TEL: 202-296-0928
E-MAIL: info@hvousa.org

International Executive Service Corps

www.iesc.org
TEL: 203-967-6000
E-MAIL: iesc@iesc.org

International Medical Volunteers Association

imva.org
TEL: 508-435-7377
E-MAIL: info@imva.org

International Volunteer Expeditions ('IVEX') & Environmental Service Projects Within the Americas ('ESPWA')

espwa.org/ivex.htm or *espwa.org*
TEL: 767-446-1702 or 510-496-2740, ext. 4550
E-MAIL: ivexinformation@espwa.org or ivex@espwa.org

International Volunteer Programs Association

volunteerinternational.org
TEL: 617-496-8414
E-MAIL: ivpa@volunteerinternational.org

United Nations Volunteers

www.unv.org
TEL: 011-49-228-815-2000 (Bonn, Germany)
E-MAIL: information@unv.org

University Research Expeditions Program

urep.ucdavis.edu
TEL: 530-757-3529
E-MAIL: urep@ucdavis.edu

Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity

vosh.org
TEL: 407-330-5261
E-MAIL: voshflorida@hotmail.com

from England, Jane Meikle and Colin McLardie, said they volunteered through the Earthwatch office in Oxford.

How does the process work?

Typically, projects provide information about fees, terms and expedition dates. Reservations are made at least six months in advance, in most cases. A deposit is made, along with an agreement to commit the specified time, normally from one to four weeks.

Whether the project is based in Mississippi or Mongolia, more explicit information will soon follow, including details about transportation arrangements, where and when to arrive, and how and by whom volunteers will be met. Once participants are assembled, the project team leader or other staff will take over, providing such services as final transportation to the site and field orientation. ■