

If you are spending your money and valuable free time to volunteer abroad, you're likely doing so with good intentions. You have done your due diligence, conducted in-depth research into international volunteer opportunities, asked the right questions and chosen an option that both meets your goals and aligns with your personal values. But choosing an ethical international volunteer placement does not automatically make you an ethical international volunteer.

Whether you're volunteering with vulnerable populations in a remote village in the Andes, or at a social enterprise in a large urban center like Bangkok, you will undoubtedly find yourself in situations that have ethical implications. Being an ethical volunteer means acting in a way that is honest, respectful and shows humility. It also means ensuring that your time overseas is mutually beneficial for both you and your hosts. This article provides you with tips to help you be a more ethical international volunteer.

Before You Go

A little bit of effort before your trip will go a long way to ensuring that you're on the path to having a positive impact on your host community.

Do your research: Inform yourself about your host country by learning its laws, customs, religion, history and language. This will not only set the stage for more meaningful connections while abroad, but may prevent you from naively offending your hosts. There are plenty of ways to prepare yourself before you go:

- Attend pre-departure sessions offered by your school's international office.
- Connect with people at your school who were born in or have visited your host country.
- Take a language course at your school.
- Read the news from your host country to get up-to-date.
- Visit a local restaurant that serves the cuisine of your host country.

While In-country

When you arrive in your host country, you will encounter behaviors and practices that you're not accustomed to. Culture shock can be overwhelming, but this is the perfect time for you to improve your intercultural competency and adapt to your exciting new surroundings! (See: [Understanding Culture Shock.](#))

Getting to know your host community: Here are some tips to help you act ethically while adjusting to your host community.

- **Make an honest effort to get to know your host community.** Consider living with a local family to fast-track your cultural immersion. If you're invited to a celebration – go! Participating in events shows an interest in local culture and traditions. Enlist a local tour guide to explain cultural norms and teach you appropriate dress and behavior, especially when visiting significant historical sites.
- **Step outside your comfort zone.** Resist the urge to gravitate to what's familiar by only socializing with expats, or eating at restaurants that serve meals similar to those back home. The more you immerse yourself, the more your understanding and appreciation of the local culture will increase.
- **Be respectful of your host country's rules, customs and laws.** To some locals, certain places, monuments or traditions may be sacred. Follow the rules even if you don't understand or agree. And if you're in doubt – ask!
- **Practice humility.** Try not to be judgmental. Look inward, reflect and understand your personal cultural values and how these may frame how you view your host community. Acknowledging your own prejudices and assumptions will help you better understand others. No matter where you travel in the world, a common thread of humanity prevails which we can all identify and appreciate.
- **Recognize your tourist high.** When you arrive, you will experience high levels of energy and excitement. Be aware of this and don't over-interpret these reactions. Some students misunderstand the tourist high, either by superficially over-identifying with the host culture ("I found my home!"), or by reacting strongly against it. Take time to observe and reflect before reacting.

The international workplace: Walking into a new job for the first time is always daunting, but doing so in an entirely new country may present you with specific challenges. Here are some tips to help you ethically navigate your role as an international volunteer.

- **Understand different approaches to work.** Though you are a volunteer, you will be expected to conform to the same workplace norms as regular employees. This could mean working long hours, following rigid workplace (or village) hierarchies, or adjusting to a mid-day "siesta." Be flexible and adaptable. You'll use these skills in your future employment!
- **Focus on your skills and abilities.** Your international volunteer application was successful because you have a lot to offer. Be honest about your skills and level of education. If you're asked to do a task and aren't sure if you should say yes, ask yourself, "Would I be qualified to do this job at home?" If the answer is no, it is not ethical for you to be doing the job abroad either.
- **Embrace reciprocity.** Ethical volunteering is about reciprocity. Remember, you will learn as much from your hosts as they will learn from you. Avoid the common international volunteer misconception of thinking you are there to solve or fix things. Work in partnership with your hosts and let them lead the way.
- **Don't try to change the system.** Occasionally, you may find that some of the guiding moral principles of your host nation conflict with your own. Never engage in behavior that you consider morally wrong, or that makes you uncomfortable. That said, refrain from making judgments about others and don't try to intervene in issues of morality or ideology.
- **Befriend locals in your workplace.** Converse directly with locals to learn more deeply about the culture (including work culture). This will automatically enrich your understanding and build your empathy for the host population.

When You Return

Your ethical volunteering journey doesn't end just because you're home. After your trip, you can continue to have a positive impact.

Share your experiences responsibly: Whether it's on social media, in person or in writing, think about the potential impacts of what you're saying or posting, and how you are representing your host community. Ask yourself:

- How would someone from my host community feel if they read this? Would they be happy with how I represent them and their way of life?
- Am I generalizing the community or posting anything that is a stereotype?
- Did I ask permission from individuals in my photos to post them online?

Volunteer in your home community: Continue your ethical volunteering journey at home. There are many ways to get involved:

- Join an international club at school or volunteer with a local organization that works with international populations.
- Volunteer at school, helping with pre-departure sessions and preparing outgoing students for their own volunteering adventures!
- Offer to speak publicly about your experience.

Make friends with international students: This is a "pay it forward" strategy. Befriend those who are new to North America and make them feel welcome, just as you were welcomed abroad.

Carry your cross-cultural skills into the workplace: Your time abroad taught you to listen, observe and measure your reactions. In the workplace, these international skills make you more diplomatic, a better negotiator and a valuable employee in any multicultural environment. Use them in your career!

A Last Word

Following these tips will help you think and act responsibly while abroad. Remember, nobody is perfect, but keeping ethics in mind will help you be a better international volunteer.

WANT MORE INFO ON GOING ABROAD?

MyWorldAbroad has everything you need. Register for FREE access at www.myworldabroad.com/register

Reproduction rights for this Quick Guide granted to schools with a site license for MyWorldAbroad.com

© Intercultural Systems / Systèmes Interculturels (ISSI) Inc.