

Travel with Purpose: A Field Guide to Voluntourism

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A Field Guide to Voluntourism

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To my young grandson,

Wyatt Fowler Couperthwait.

The future is in your hands.

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Acknowledgments

It is with gratitude that I acknowledge the assistance provided to me in preparation of this guide to voluntourism. Certainly, I am appreciative and in awe of the numerous voluntourists who took the time to share their most memorable experiences, provide advice to prospective voluntourists, and offer a glimpse at their future plans.

Each interview I conducted, either by telephone or in person, provided insight into what drives these people, what gets them up in the morning, particularly the benefits they gain personally while doing good for others.

I'd also like to thank those selfless folks from the nonprofit community who took me under their wing and allowed me to participate in their own life's work. A shout-out in particular to George "Chief Cook" Basch of Taos, New Mexico, founder of the Himalayan Stove Project, who felt there was a better way to clear the air in Nepal, one fuel-efficient cookstove at a time. George opened my eyes to the unique challenges of fundraising.

Scott Hamilton of Stamford, Connecticut, president of Dooley Intermed International, asked me to serve as director of communications on two separate eye care missions to Nepal. He also taught me how a well-run expedition can achieve its mission safely and responsibly. I also learned from him important life lessons, not the least of which was avoiding salads or tuna fish sandwiches served by sketchy Nepalese street food vendors.

Then there's my literary agent, Terry Whalin of Highland Ranch, Colorado, who, when we first met ten years ago, told me how to write a book proposal, based upon his own book, *Book Proposals That Sell* (2005). He has shepherded me through the process of writing my first book, *Get Sponsored*, followed by this one. I've long valued his sage advice.

Finally, there are two mentors from my Wonder Bread years who have my undying gratitude for instilling in me a love of storytelling. First is Madeline Conway, who edited *Monti Matters*, my weekly high school column in the local Monticello, New York, *Evening News*. I still have the strip of hot type used to headline the column, back when it was set by linotype machine. Conway was first to show me how molten lead was transferred into my words using this now-outdated hot metal typesetting system. What magic it was to watch.

And Mike Greenstein of the *Syracuse New Times*, who let me write about a variety of quirky topics while attending Syracuse University, including a bizarre visit to a local casket factory. Both Conway and Greenstein apparently saw promise in a budding young cub reporter willing to accept a salary of ten cents per column inch. Back then the pay was so low, I might as well have been volunteering. But it was a great start to a career.

Introduction

A World of Voluntourism Opportunities

Imagine yourself in a schoolroom in Nepal, one of the most remote areas of one of the most hard-to-reach countries on earth. The Lower Mustang region to be exact.

Traveling there requires a fourteen-hour flight from New York to Doha, Qatar. Then four-and-a-half hours by air to Kathmandu, one of the world's worst airports.¹ From Kat it's a

127-mile flight to Pokhara, followed by a jarring, eight-hour Jeep ride over a vertiginous dirt road—one side is a mountain wall, the other side a two-hundred-foot vertical cliff.

Finally you arrive, but it's not just any schoolroom. It has been disinfected with formalin, an aqueous solution of formaldehyde (mean stuff but highly effective), and converted into an operating room so that doctors from New York Eye & Ear Infirmary can provide the gift of sight to twenty-four blind Nepalis. Prior to this, they lived in a world of darkness for no other reason than they had cataracts, the clouding of the eye's lens, easily corrected.

I know. I was there to tell the story of Dooley Intermed's "Gift of Sight" Expedition. That right there was my aha moment. I was in a foreign land as a tourist, but also as a volunteer.

A voluntourist, if you will—a mix of both travel and volunteering. The term is credited to travel writer Alison Gardner who wrote a feature article in 1994 about volunteer vacations for older travelers. She cites some of the earliest players in the fledgling field, including [Earthwatch](#) and Habitat for Humanity, both of which remain steadfast short-term voluntourism models to this day.²

Today, Gardner is publisher and editor of the Travel with a Challenge web magazine,³ read by 1.742 million senior travelers worldwide. Recently she tells me it was quite an honor in 2012 when she received a call from the publishers of the Oxford Dictionary in the UK, saying they were trying to trace the origin of the word, voluntourism, before they accepted it.

"They asked if I could send them a copy of the article in which I had first used the term in 1994. All done, and now it is an official entry in the Oxford Dictionary which is about as authoritative as it gets, I suppose."

Indeed. There it is, "a form of tourism in which travellers participate in voluntary work, typically for a charity."⁴

Over the past thirty years, voluntourism has grown with such momentum that both nonprofit organizations and for-profit advisory services and tour operators are scrambling to match many different agendas.

"With a firmly-entrenched Western world mindset of 'rest and relaxation = vacation,' who would have dreamed that working while on vacation would become such a fast-growing segment of the travel industry today?" asks Gardner.

I am a lousy vacationer, bored silly sitting on a beach or touring umpteen churches on cruise ship excursions. Being a regular tourist is not enough for me. I want a meaningful role when I travel and perhaps you do as well.

Average plain vanilla tourists returning from a do-nothing beach vacation like to tell family and friends where they traveled. Nothing wrong with playing Robinson Crusoe, sprawled on a lounge chair, umbrella drink in hand, salty breeze ruffling their hair as they post palm tree images to Instagram.

Voluntourists, on the other hand, not only describe where they've been but explain how the world became a better place as a result of their time and dedication on the road.

While lying on a beach marinated in Johnson's Baby Oil and iodine has its merits, I'm guessing you'll find voluntourism more meaningful, more memorable, and perhaps transformatively life-altering. What's more, many voluntourism opportunities you'll read about in the following

pages allow visitors to devote only a portion of their trips to service, leaving time aside for sightseeing, dining out, or yes, even vegging out on a tropical beach with that fancy drink.

Volunteering has been a part of my life, well, for as long as I can remember. As a prepubescent Cub Scout on New York's Long Island, I participated in beach cleanups. For the Boy Scouts I built check dams to reduce trail erosion.

In tenth grade, once I moved to the Catskill Mountain resort community of Monticello, New York, a group of us belonging to Key Club International, the high school service program, provided physical therapy on Sunday mornings to a young child with cerebral palsy. The exercises we performed were meant to repattern his neuromotor function. I've long wondered what happened to that little boy named Izzy.

In later years, I would go on to volunteer for the local ambulance corps, then the local Civil Defense office, manning headquarters at the tender age of seventeen when the full-time staffer elected to go home as that hippie tsunami, the 1969 Woodstock Festival, engulfed nearby Bethel, New York.

If you're like me, you're a participant in life, not merely a spectator. As a volunteer, I thrive on special access—working the high school theater lights from backstage, distributing newspapers at rock festivals, always organizing, planning, activating.

Voluntourism represents the combination of voluntary service and travel and tourism. By adding travel to the mix, no matter whether in the United States or abroad, you benefit from the best of both worlds. You get the opportunity to meet new people and better understand their way of life, experience different cultures, and help improve their lives.

In my case, voluntourism has included supporting a North Pole expedition, chaperoning high school students to Antarctica, and most recently, serving as director of communications for a second eye care mission to another impoverished village in Nepal—this one a grueling eight-hour trek from the nearest road to the epicenter of the devastating spring 2015 earthquake. More on that later.

My previous book, *Get Sponsored* (2014), was designed for hard-core explorers and adventurers, but after over forty book talks, I saw the need for a handy guide that helped everyone not only see the world but also make a lasting impact as they traveled. People asked me during presentations at bookstores, libraries, and travel clubs how they could participate in voluntourism if they didn't have the necessary outdoor skills to hike the Appalachian Trail or trek to Everest Base Camp.

There are millions of people who enjoy the outdoors and try to build adventure into their day-to-day lives yet would never dream of taking off from their jobs, leaving their families, or otherwise put their lives on hold—and possibly at risk—to scale Everest, K2, the Seven Summits, or trek to the North Pole. Those trips can generate lots of media exposure, sure, but they can also get you killed.

Voluntourism is open to anyone who wants to see the world and make a difference during their all-too-short time on Earth. It doesn't require great strength, or wealth, or connections in the travel business. It doesn't have to necessarily be time-consuming either. You can play an important role volunteering for a few hours, a day, a few days or a week, while also enjoying local sights, exotic cuisines, and fascinating culture as an everyday tourist. You don't have to devote an entire trip to it.

In fact, as we'll see further on, voluntourism doesn't even require a passport, or you traipsing off to

some region of the world you're likely to see on TV's Survivor or The Amazing Race. There are still plenty of volunteer destinations in the United States.

Isn't it hard work building wells, schoolhouses, or excavating ancient fossils? Thank you for asking. The quick answer is "very."

Voluntourism requires the drive, the resourcefulness, and, if possible, a particular skill you can share with others, be it music, art, sports coaching, or simply proficiency in speaking and writing English.

As for me, sadly, I'm not particularly gifted with any sort of teachable skill, although I can move English words around coherently (one hopes you'll agree by the time you finish this book). Oh, I'm proficient in Morse code, dating back to my days as an amateur radio ham operator, but dots and dashes don't come up too often in conversation.

Luckily, my expertise as a writer, blogger, corporate fundraiser, and publicist is something I've leveraged successfully to be invited along on volunteer projects.

If you've perfected a skill, even if it's a strong back and willingness to work hard, or maybe not, maybe your best skill is math or science or art, there are causes that would welcome you along, especially if you have the wherewithal to assist with funding or can pay your way.

One voluntourist you'll read about later, Houston real estate developer Joe Watson, sums it up simply, "Voluntourism sure makes traveling more interesting and meaningful and you have better stories when you get home."

Voluntourists are not necessarily celebrities, nor are they otherwise rich and famous. This book contains stories of inspiration from everyday people, everyday voluntourists, perhaps some just like you. These are the stories about the pitfalls, the rewards, and the hardships likely to be encountered. There are stories of ordinary people with extraordinary volunteer projects both in the United States and abroad. They all have definite opinions about the best way to approach that first volunteer vacation.

If you spend time considering your options, you'll find the door open to untold voluntourism opportunities. This book is written for you and hundreds of thousands of others who heed the words of Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), the French-German physician and humanitarian and winner of the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize:

Wherever you turn, you can find someone who needs you. Even if it is a little thing, do something for which there is no pay but the privilege of doing it. Remember, you don't live in a world all of your own.⁵

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Why We Travel

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.¹

—Mark Twain

I couldn't imagine life without travel. After all, the world is a huge and amazing place. It makes you feel alive when, through travel, you're touching as much of it as you can, gaining valuable insight on what's important to other people and why.

"The world's a rough-and-tumble, growing, fascinating, diverse place, and I think it's an exciting ride, and we can be part of it," travel book writer Rick Steves tells the Wall Street Journal.²

Amazon chief and space buff Jeff Bezos has famously said, "We know about the Solar System now. We've sent robotic probes all over the Solar System. Let me assure you, this is the best planet."³

But the global perspective that travel would eventually offer—the memories, the friendships, the business opportunities, the family memories—was a mere blip on my radar growing up in a small town ninety miles northwest of New York. Especially in the days before the Internet. What I knew about the world came from geography lessons in middle school and my singular mission to read through all A to Z volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia. With a Swanson's TV dinner balanced on my lap, my worldview expanded exponentially as I watched Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom on television featuring host Marlin Perkins and his sidekick, a young Jim Fowler, who, decades later, I came to know as a fellow member of the Explorers Club based in New York.

Then came the YMCA Tour-a-Camp program in the mid-1960s, and I hit the road in a bus alongside another forty teenagers on a tour of the United States. We alternated between campsites and hotels, heading as far west as San Francisco, before making our way back through Disneyland, then proceeding to the country's major national parks. The Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, Zion and Arches national parks—they were all on the itinerary.

Later, in a typical college boneheaded plan, I would drive to Aspen nonstop from Syracuse, New York. A stupid college marathon of driving, drinking copious amounts of coffee to stay awake, and eating gas station hot dogs cooked on those ubiquitous grease-filled roller grills. Just recalling the taste of those belly bombs creeps me out.

Those trips were rather straightforward. The only beneficiary was me. Traveling in this manner did nothing to help others.

Significant volunteer trips would elude me until I entered the working world, starting at two public relations agencies before establishing my own boutique PR agency. It was then that my horizons broadened. I was no longer a kid from the Catskills. I was experiencing the world and working on a number of worthwhile projects.

I promoted historic expeditions to the North Pole and across Antarctica; spent two weeks in Nome and Anchorage to serve as communications director of an expedition across the Bering Strait; in 2010 I was chosen as a volunteer chaperone on an international high school students trip to the Antarctic peninsula where I lectured on the subject of exploration; and later that year, I volunteered as the media relations director of history's longest sea voyage, a nonstop 1,152-day self-sufficient journey by extreme sailor Reid Stowe.

I was traveling at that time as a participant in someone else's project rather than as a spectator or tourist. Which isn't to say there's anything wrong with tourism.

By all accounts, despite terrorist attacks, political upheavals, and natural disasters, tourism in the last decade has continued to grow, demonstrating its resilience in an unpredictable world, according to the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) report, *20 Adventure Travel Trends to Watch in 2018*.⁴

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) found that in 2016, travel and tourism was responsible for just over 10 percent of global GDP and 10 percent of the world's jobs—one of every ten jobs on earth. Visa estimates that by 2025, 280 million households will be traveling internationally, with much of that growth fueled by emerging markets. Tourism is also growing faster than the global economy and other industries such as manufacturing, retail, and financial and business sectors, reports the ATTA.

The ATTA, which serves over one thousand tour operators, tourist boards, and other travel organizations in one hundred countries, reveals that many destinations that experienced declines in 2016, such as Turkey and France, recovered in 2017, and China continued to produce staggering numbers of outbound travelers (136.8 million in 2016 alone).

International tourist arrivals globally grew to 1.3 billion in 2017, according to the United Nations' World Tourism Organization. The Wall Street Journal reports that figure is up from 674 million in 2000 and 278 million in 1980, propelled by the rise of budget air travel, social media, the emerging Chinese middle class alluded to above, and technologies that make distant places easy to navigate.⁵

"Tourism, which many countries once considered a business niche that could yield easy revenue, has become a mega-industry," writes the Journal. "And those millions of tourists who descend each year on small towns, once-lovely beaches and historic sites are generating a global backlash."

This becomes evident when you try to make reservations during peak travel periods. Summer in Iceland, for instance. You're not going to get rooms in the best hotels or at the best prices when the weather is the most favorable and you have to compete with thousands of other people hoping to check that scenic island off their bucket list.

The Journal points to an overtourism crisis in New Zealand, where rented camper vans leave trails of waste, tens of thousands of helicopter trips land on glaciers once the realm of expert climbers, and double-decker tour buses clog two-lane roads.

One thing about voluntourism will become crystal clear once you read further: many of the destinations that need volunteer help the most are often unvisited, sometimes unknown destinations, frequently in Third World countries. Overtourism is generally not an issue. Your priorities become remaining safe, comfortable, well fed, and well rested.

Travel in general has made me a better person; travel to Third World destinations in particular have been life-altering experiences that have helped me better cope with everyday challenges back home. Decidedly First World issues such as a fender-bender, a missing mortgage payment, and lost concert tickets pale by comparison to how millions of underprivileged people struggle to survive, such as the woman I met in Nepal who was blind for three years because she lacked the resources to pursue outpatient cataract surgery.

The experience of travel can be transformative, it can actually be beneficial to health, and for younger generations, a great resume builder, especially now that trends indicate this is a great

time to travel, as you'll learn below.

Travel Is Transformative

The latest buzzword in travel is transformational, slowly replacing experiential and authentic. The Transformational Travel Council (TTC) is an industry group founded in 2016 that uses research, speaking engagements, consulting, media interviews, and workshops to help tour operators and their traveling clients understand how travel can transform lives.

"In today's world of cultural turmoil, spiritual chaos, and global unrest, we find ourselves over-connected at a shallow level and under-connected at a deeper, more meaningful level. We have allowed digital addictions to pull us away from what's important: ourselves, family, community, and our planet," according to the TTC website.⁶

The TTC believes that now more than ever, we need travel to do what travel has always done: build bridges, foster understanding, enlighten humanity, and bury fear, insecurity, and intolerance. For some people, whether young or simply young at heart, the TTC believes travel is the best and most exciting way to foster real growth, change, and transformation in your life.

The process of transformational travel involves, in part, venturing off to a place that is dramatically different from home, purposefully engaging with the local people to learn about their culture, which is where voluntourism often comes into play.

"Simply put, the end goals of any transformational travel experience are to inspire, empower, and support people in using travel experiences to create positive changes in their lives," cofounder Michael Bennett, EdD, tells travel editor Everett Potter of EverettPotter.com.⁷

Travel Is Good for Your Health

It may be a significant disconnect, one of those hard-to-believe factoids you see embedded in online clickbait, but travel is actually good for us. Hard to comprehend, I know, especially after traveling to Nepal for seventeen hours while trying to survive on airline food, airline terminal snacks, and otherwise subjecting myself to a digestive assault upon my delicate Western stomach.

Travel can actually help boost your well-being and reduce the stress of everyday life. Traveling somewhere new can enable you to immerse yourself in new surroundings, boost your brain power, and fully recharge. It can help you get back in shape, especially if there's a lot of walking or other physical exertion involved, and it can improve your emotional state.

According to a 2014 study conducted by Nielsen on behalf of Diamond Resorts International, those who commit to taking vacations on a regular basis are generally happier, healthier, and have better relationships than those who don't. The study, titled "Vacation Integration towards an All-Inclusive Lifestyle" or VITAL, has become a key part of Diamond Resorts' message on why vacations are important.⁸

The VITAL survey compared the happiness, health, vitality, relationships, and job satisfaction of two groups of survey respondents: those who reported that they vacation at least once per year, and those who reported that they never vacation. More than two thousand respondents aged twenty-five and older participated in the survey, which yielded compelling conclusions—a significant majority (at least 76 percent) of annual vacationers are more satisfied and happy with their lives overall, compared to people who never vacation.

Dr. Dale Atkins, Diamond Resorts International's so-called Vacation Doctor, states, "Vacations should not be considered a luxury—they are a must for our happiness and health in an increasingly stressful world."

The study also shows that vacations can make you feel energized: 72 percent of yearly vacationers report feeling "energized and full of life all the time," compared to just 34 percent of those who never take a vacation, the study shows.

Students Can Expand Their Horizons

Traveling abroad offers a unique opportunity for students to become global citizens as they experience and learn about life in different parts of the world. I think back to my semester abroad between my junior and senior years at Syracuse University. Living in London to study international broadcasting, my classmates and I seemingly had the world—or at least Europe—in the palms of our hands. Frequently, we would travel to Dublin, Paris, Copenhagen, or Rome on long weekends, getting a sense of the world at the tender age of twenty.

Traveling expanded our understanding of other cultures, helped us better appreciate life in America, increased our self-confidence, and bolstered our sense of independence. While volunteering wasn't part of the game plan at that time, what I learned from the trip helped me discover my true north.

"For college students, studying abroad offers the chance to travel, earn credit and gain work experience. Students may opt to take language-immersion courses or even earn grants for working on subject-based projects (for example, doing scientific research on the Great Barrier Reef or filming a documentary in Egypt)," says Maya Wesby, writing in *Newsweek*.⁹

"Yet one type of study abroad involves volunteer work in developing nations, and willing participants can travel the world while gaining a sense of community alongside fellow volunteers and the native population."

Happily, the time has never been better to travel, believes "Travel Detective" Peter Greenberg, a multiple Emmy-winning investigative reporter and producer and the travel editor for CBS News.

In early 2018, Greenberg came to the Denver Travel & Adventure Show and impressed an audience of four hundred with his encyclopedic knowledge of almost every corner of the globe. What are the best countries to visit this year that are off the beaten path? Greenberg recommends Faroe Islands, Malta, Portugal, and Rwanda. The white-bearded celebrity talks knowledgeably about the cost of passports (they're going up), requesting hotel rooms no higher than the fifth floor and away from noisy booster pumps, and the importance of travel insurance. He was like a walking Google search engine.

"Every nation wants a piece of the (travel) pie—especially when those numbers are expected to continue to grow," Greenberg posts on his website.¹⁰

While the numbers of foreign travelers coming to the United States are down substantially due in part to the Trump administration's immigration policies, this actually works to the benefit of volunteers looking to serve overseas.

"What would have been foreigners' return seats are now our outbound seats, and the law of supply and demand rules—lower airfares because there are fewer folks flying. Those lower airfares are expected to continue on foreign routes throughout this year," he reported in early 2018.¹¹

This suggests that travel to overseas destinations will be easier on the pocketbook, which, in turn, may encourage more people to consider foreign volunteer destinations where previously their focus was solely on opportunities in the United States. That said, less costly airfare is only one of the factors leading to the growth in voluntourism, as you'll read in the next chapter.

• II •

The Growth of Voluntourism

Darryl Salerno and I go way back—to the mid-1970s when we both worked at a large public relations firm in New York City. What I didn't know then was what impresses me most about him now: his decades-long commitment to voluntourism.

He shares with me the parable of the starfish:

One day, an old man was walking along a beach that was littered with thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore by the high tide. As he walked he came upon a young boy who was eagerly throwing the starfish back into the ocean, one by one.

Puzzled, the man looked at the boy and asked what he was doing. Without looking up from his task, the boy simply replied, "I'm saving these starfish, sir."

The old man chuckled aloud, "Son, there are thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?"

The boy picked up a starfish, gently tossed it into the water, and turning to the man, said, "I made a difference to that one!"¹

The parable says much about how Salerno, a strategic consultant in marketing communications based north of New York, views his role in the world today. Since 1999, sometimes alone, sometimes with family, Salerno flies to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, hops on a bus with the rest of his group and their personal luggage packed with aspirin, prenatal vitamins, toothbrushes, and other supplies, and travels for hours to Rancho el Paraíso in the Agalta Valley in Central Honduras. There he stays for one week at a time working with Honduras Outreach (HOI), the Tucker, Georgia, nonprofit that organizes mission trips to Honduras and Nicaragua.²

HOI volunteers work side by side with Hondurans on a variety of community projects. Salerno's group, based at Rancho el Paraíso, poured cement floors and helped build two schools, a library, soccer field, and a highway bridge. They have also taught English and music, worked in nearby clinics, and installed new water filtration units and a computer room purchased through their fundraising efforts.

Salerno has accompanied dentists, audiologists, and veterinarians there to neuter dogs. Through this model, he believes short-term mission teams can make a long-term impact.³

"There was something in me that said I had to do this," Salerno recalls, explaining that his purpose in Honduras became vividly clear when he visited a ramshackle home in a nearby community.

"It started to rain, both the humidity and the temperature was in the 90s, and we took shelter in a run-down, single-room shack. A mud floor, two hammocks, and three benches. That was it. The family of six cooked outdoors on an open fire. Through a translator, our host asked if the homeowner, a middle-aged man who looked way older than his years, had anything to say.

“He wanted to thank Honduras Outreach for making the life of his family so much better over the past years,” Salerno remembers.

“I couldn’t help think, if this is what his life is now, what was it like before HOI arrived?”

“The fact that the man was living in what most people would consider to be total squalor, and yet felt his life had improved dramatically, I knew I had to keep coming back.”

Salerno has visited the Rancho el Paraíso almost twenty times over the years and has worked on efforts to help underprivileged Hondurans become more self-sufficient.

“We had success bringing in a potter to show the locals how to use a potter’s wheel. Now, instead of making crude bowls and cups to sell to tourists, they make clay rings for vent pipes to sell to other Hondurans, pipes that vent smoke from their homes.

“Look, I’m a lucky human being to have been born in the United States. I could have been born anywhere else in the world and struggled to exist. Anyone can volunteer while traveling. It doesn’t take any sort of specialized experience. The best I can offer are my muscles and brainpower. This costs me just \$850 for food and lodging for the week, plus airfare, and whatever supplies I carry in my luggage.

“I’m not trying to save the world. I believe it’s better to make a big change in a small place than a small change in a big place. I can witness the progress we’re making in this region of the country. I see the same kids year after year; they remember me and I’ve been watching them grow and improve,” Salerno says.

“There was something in me that said I had to do this,” explains New York–area marketing communications consultant Darryl Salerno about his two decades of volunteer work in Honduras. Photo by Meryl Salerno.

“One week a year in Honduras sets my mind straight.”

Salerno’s experience points to a growing trend: of travelers looking to make a difference, to become better tourists, to leave the destinations they visit a little better, whether it’s through mission trips, volunteer vacations, mornings helping the underprivileged in cruise ship ports, or by simply bringing donated supplies in their baggage.

While numbers are hard to determine, and there are many definitions of voluntourism, as you’ll learn within these pages, the industry in 2014 was estimated at about \$2 billion annually by Wilson Quarterly.⁴ That’s based upon an estimated 1.6 million active voluntourists per year, according to NPR.⁵

Within sub-Saharan Africa alone, the youth travel market, including volunteer tourism, is one of the fastest-growing tourism niches and offers potential for continued development.⁶

Travel writer Alison Gardner created the term voluntourism in 1994 in an article she wrote about “volunteer vacations.”⁷ Another early use was by the Nevada Board of Tourism in 1998 to honor residents of Nevada who volunteered to support travel and tourism in the state. Before the 1990s, the term simply didn’t exist, according to the Voluntourism Institute.⁸

Today voluntourism is a growing sector of the travel industry. It has been studied by academics, covered endlessly on social media, and is the subject of a variety of books.

There are a number of factors leading to its growth.

The Rise of Citizen Diplomacy

As we learned from Darryl Salerno, volunteer vacations can change your perspective on the world, teach you new skills, and greatly affect the lives of others.

“A ‘citizen diplomat mindset’ means being intentional when interacting with individuals from a different country by believing that one of your roles is to positively represent the United States,” Jennifer Clinton, former president of citizen diplomacy nonprofit Global Ties, tells *Travel & Leisure* magazine.⁹

“Our reality today is that citizens around the world are having much greater influence on local, national, and international relations.”

Being a citizen diplomat means not only representing your country but also engaging in meaningful interactions across cultures to create shared understanding.

Preston Sowell, an experienced expedition leader from Boulder, Colorado, believes: “People should contribute to the world. It’s a privilege to go to these remote areas. It can be an enriching experience to engage in an altruistic activity away from the traditional tourist routes, then bring that perspective back home to your own culture.

“Too often, tourists never walk much beyond the main street. If you want to see a place and experience it, roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty,” Sowell says.

Adds Richard Bobo of Cultural Vistas, an international exchange nonprofit, “It’s OK to have balance. Spend a few days in a resort. Then spend a day or two out in the country to really experience the culture,” he tells *Travel & Leisure*.¹⁰

Volunteering Has Positive Health Benefits

Assuming you don’t become sick or injured, as I’ll warn about in a coming chapter, volunteering is actually one of the many paths to good health. According to a 2013 study called “Doing Good Is Good for You,” conducted by UnitedHealth Group, volunteers feel better—physically, mentally, and emotionally.¹¹

Volunteers told researchers they are convinced their health is better because of the things they do when they volunteer. People who volunteer manage their stress better and feel a stronger connection to their communities. Some 96 percent of respondents reported that volunteering enriches their sense of purpose in life. In all of the pathways taken to good health, being a volunteer can help to make a meaningful difference, according to the study.

Wait, wait. There’s more. Emerging science about the health benefits of volunteering help keep people engaged and stimulated, especially those in their retirement years. One seventy-three-year-old retiree from the bridal gown business, now a fifteen- to twenty-hour-per-week volunteer in New York, tells the *Wall Street Journal*, “You have to interact with people or your brain really dries up.”¹²

A 2017 study by UnitedHealthcare and VolunteerMatch found employee volunteerism positively affects the health and well-being of the people who participate and strengthens their connections to their employers.

The report, titled the “2017 Doing Good Is Good for You Study,” reveals 75 percent of US adults feel physically healthier by volunteering. The mental and emotional benefits of volunteering are even greater, with 93 percent reporting an improved mood, 79 percent reporting lower stress levels, and 88 percent reporting increased self-esteem by giving back. Also, volunteers are significantly more likely to feel they have greater control over their health and well-being.¹³

Another study, this one involving more than sixty-four thousand subjects age sixty and older from 1998 to 2010, suggests volunteering slows the cognitive decline of aging. The author of the study, Sumedha Gupta, an assistant economics professor at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, found that an individual who is volunteering one hundred hours a year scores on average about 6 percent higher in cognitive testing than a nonvolunteer.¹⁴

Unlike paid work, there is a “different subjective well-being” or “warm glow” that a volunteer experiences from helping people. Volunteering is also unique “because it supplies mental, physical and social stimulation in one package,” Gupta tells the Wall Street Journal.

“You have to move around, you interact with people, you think about activities.”

Whereas completing a Sudoku puzzle offers one type of intellectual stimulation, she says, volunteers get all of these types of stimulation simultaneously.¹⁵

One logically concludes that combining the health benefits of travel mentioned in the previous chapter with how volunteering positively affects mind and body creates a win-win opportunity, the best of both worlds. Besides, as I hope you gather by now, it’s the right thing to do.

Today’s Millennials Are More Interested in Volunteering

Millennials aren’t just staring at their smartphones all day. OK, maybe many are. But they’re also getting shit done. One study indicates they are more likely than their older counterparts to travel with a purpose. Eighty-four percent of millennials say they would travel abroad to participate in volunteer activities, according to a 2015 survey by Marriott Rewards Credit Card. Furthermore, 32 percent of millennials are interested in taking a charitable trip, while only two in ten Generation X travelers (18 percent) and baby boomers (17 percent) are interested in doing the same. Moreover, female travelers (28 percent), regardless of age, tend to be more interested in taking a charitable vacation compared to their male counterparts (17 percent).

“Other generations may not assume millennials would use their most precious assets, their time and money, to give back to international communities they visit, but today’s young travelers are reframing that mindset,” said Vibhat Nair, general manager, Chase Card Services.

“We’ve seen in the past that this generation of travelers value rewards and perks from travel services, and now we’re seeing how they could be using those rewards for a larger purpose.”¹⁶

When Sam Daddono was a junior at Rumson-Fair Haven High School in New Jersey, his whole Spanish class relocated to Antigua to sharpen their Spanish skills. They also hiked up the side of a volcano every morning to help tend to a coffee plantation—and learn about what life is like in Guatemala, according to an NPR report by Carrie Kahn.¹⁷

“The way I view things now is a lot different than before,” Daddono tells NPR. “I’ve visited other countries, but I’ve never done hands-on work or really talked to the people about the problems that they face in their lives.”

That worldview for many American teens is a lot different than it was two decades ago, says Ken

Jones, who owns Maximo Nivel, a volunteer tourism company based in Antigua. He got his start in the travel business, offering only Spanish-language classes. But young people today, he says, want a richer experience.

“It used to be beach and beer,” Jones tells NPR. “And now it’s, ‘Well, I want to come down and learn something and figure out how to help or be a part of something.’ It was more superficial twenty years ago, maybe.”

Matt Wastradowski writes in [RootsRated.com](https://www.rootsrated.com), “This new generation of travelers is traveling abroad to earthquake-proof buildings, teach in schools, paint classrooms, and install toilets.

“Volunteer travelers are looking for culturally immersive experiences. Volunteer tourists are no different than most travelers in one key regard: They want to see new, different parts of the world, and doing so while doing something good for the local community makes the experience all the more appealing,” states Wastradowski.¹⁸

Dr. Marc Mancini, a travel industry consultant, agrees. He writes in a 2015 post for the Travel Institute an article titled, “The Five Things You Must Know About Millennials,” “One of the most admirable Millennial traits is their desire to make things better, to fix the society they’re inheriting. That explains why they’re attracted to ‘voluntourism.’ They want to help hurricane-ravaged towns get back on their feet, do something about poverty in developing nations and experience authentic places, not tourist-enhanced ones.”¹⁹

Advances in Technology Encourage Citizen Science

Today’s volunteer field researchers are more likely to wear baseball caps than pith helmets, and instead of lugging large wooden cameras and tripods, they’re carrying handheld Garmin GPS units and data loggers, some no more complicated than an iPhone.

Later in the book, we’ll explain how scientists seek field research from tourists who travel the world. One woman studies plastic pollution in the seas. Other volunteers collect information about wildlife–vehicle collisions, and even study animal feces.

Tourists at the Maasai-owned Il Ngwesi Group Ranch in northern Kenya, a local conservancy, are collecting data on animals they observe and study the state of the soil, while still enjoying traditional sightseeing activities such as participating in game drives, sunbathing near the pool, or visiting the in-house beauty/massage therapist.

In short, technology is opening the doors to extraordinary data collection by ordinary travelers.

Nigel Winser, an environmental consultant based in Oxfordshire, England, one hundred miles west of London, has a front-row perspective on technology’s role in encouraging citizen science. For ten years he was executive vice president at Earthwatch, which has helped over one hundred thousand citizen scientists participate in impactful field research that disseminates world-class scientific research. Winser also serves as a trustee of the Nekton Mission,²⁰ which is studying the bathyal zone, the largest and least understood ecosystem in the known universe, located 3,300 to 13,100 feet below the ocean surface.

“Volunteer tourists without any formal science training can play a significant role in our understanding of the planet. It’s becoming easier and easier to collect meaningful data from the field using handheld smartphones and laptops,” Winser says.

“Volunteers can record field observations and capture their exact locations down to one single

meter.”

Using the right tools, anyone can study water anywhere in the world, for instance, then feed the data to an organization such as Earthwatch Freshwater Watch, a research project investigating the health of global freshwater ecosystems.²¹ All it takes is a smartphone with the FreshWater Watch App or paper data sheet and a collection bottle.

“Millennials have become increasingly knowledgeable about the state of the world and are particularly adept at using social media, which can share concepts such as voluntourism exponentially across boundaries,” he says, citing the growing popularity of the so-called Three Minute Rule practiced in the Arabian Sultanate of Oman, where Winser often consults. Local environmental groups, including the Environmental Society of Oman, ask for just three minutes per person to clean up plastic from local beaches, hoping, of course, for more time than that.

“Ten people volunteering for three minutes equals a half-hour’s work and a carload of beach litter, all carefully documented on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, thus promoting the concept to several thousand online visitors.”

Winser cites the increased popularity of global databases, especially those focused on the planet’s biodiversity, such as the UK’s National Biodiversity Network (NBN), a nonprofit composed of UK wildlife conservation organizations, government, country agencies, environmental agencies, local environmental records centers, and many voluntary groups.²² The NBN Atlas holds over 217 million biological records, the largest biodiversity database for any country in the world, according to the NBN website.

Winser also recommends a similar database called the Encyclopedia of Life (EOL), a free, online collaborative encyclopedia intended to document all of the 1.9 million living species known to science. It works with iNaturalist.org so that anyone can share observations from their schoolyard, backyard, from their walk to work and around town, or as part of a structured citizen science activity.²³

In September 2016, Winser, a former deputy director of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), wrote the Society’s Geographical magazine review of Harvard conservation biologist E. O. Wilson’s book, *Half-Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life* (2016).²⁴

Winser writes, “Respected internationally as the ‘father of biodiversity’ [Wilson] has witnessed first-hand global habitat loss and the impact this is having on the estimated eight million species of the world.

“Sadly the trends of habitat loss, species extinction, global warming and ocean acidification continue to threaten the functioning of our life-sustaining biosphere. To give nature a chance, Wilson advocates a collective commitment to aim much higher than the level that the global conservation movement is currently achieving.”

Winser’s book review continues: “And so, with increased moral reasoning, helped by global messaging platforms and our individual hand-held devices, all of us can take a much greater interest in our landscapes and vote for increased protection. In short, now is the best of times to work collaboratively and innovatively to keep biodiversity at the top of the political, scientific, teaching, economic, and conservation agendas, for food, water, and energy security for all.”

Recently, Winser shared with me his opinion that “improvements in technology and field-guided apps are allowing average tourists without specialized training help collect pieces of the geographical jigsaw.”

Growing Acceptance of Fair Trade Learning

The voluntourism industry has increasingly adopted the concept of Fair Trade Learning, a framework for ethical engagement by host communities, nonprofit organizations, and (potential) volunteers alike. It arose out of criticism over young voluntourists more interested in sightseeing and partying than a true partnership with local communities.

The subject of a number of studies, Fair Trade Learning is a global educational partnership that prioritizes reciprocity in relationships through cooperative, cross-cultural participation in learning, service, and civil society efforts. It fosters the goals of economic equity, equal partnership, mutual learning, cooperative and positive social change, transparency, and sustainability.²⁵

Fair Trade Learning involves participants who give and receive something from others that they would not otherwise have. By volunteering in economically marginalized communities, participants contribute otherwise unavailable (human) resources. This may include English language tutoring, infrastructure development, and a variety of other skilled and unskilled contributions.

Volunteers offer direct labor and share resources. Community members share housing, cooperate in labor projects, tell stories, and orient volunteers to other ways of being.

Fair Trade Learning also involves the sharing of knowledge between the voluntourist and the local participant, and it's the process whereby participants produce something new together that would not otherwise exist.

Significantly, community members have a strong participatory voice in planning and implementation, reducing the risk of unwanted projects and paternalistic assumptions. Volunteer projects must be community driven to be effective.²⁶

In effect, it's a code of conduct that encourages utmost respect on both sides to help create a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.²⁷

Voluntourism Builds Resumes

Think back to your college application. I can remember padding it with as many extracurricular activities and jobs as I could conjure up. Counter man at a Catskill Mountains bowling alley. Check. Bar waiter at the famed Concord Hotel in the New York Borscht Belt. Check. I even worked with comedians Don Rickles and Milton Berle, although they were entertaining on stage and I was serving club sodas in the back of the nightclub to senior citizens. No matter. Technically, we worked together, at least together in the same room.

The process hasn't changed much for college and job applicants. If college applicants, admission officers, and potential employers can agree on one thing, it's that international experience can improve a person's chances of college acceptance, and later, finding a job and succeeding in the global workforce.

Graduates with international experience find employment faster than those without it, and they find that their languages, intercultural awareness, and overseas contacts are valued by their employers, according to the 2016 Kaplan study, "Going Global: Are Graduates Prepared for a Global Workforce?"²⁸

"Respondents who had gained international experience during their studies were twice as likely to be employed within six months of graduation than those who did not have the same

opportunities," says Kaplan, which serves over 1.2 million students globally each year through its array of higher education, test preparation, and professional education services.

Keith Bellows, the late editor-in-chief of National Geographic Traveler, believed that "true learning happens between the poles, not just between the ears."²⁹

When young students expand their horizons by volunteering, no matter whether domestically or internationally, they come away with far more than they give.

Alice Hawkes fondly recalls her own travels to Fiji at age eighteen, conducting volunteer work for three months during her gap year between high school and college. Today she's director of marketing for Global Vision International (GVI), a British company based in Cape Town, South Africa, that organizes conservation and community development programs worldwide.³⁰

"We're keen for young people to become volunteers and develop personally and professionally as they make a difference in the world. In addition to providing employable hard skills like collecting scientific data in the field, learning to dive, and studying the health of coral reefs, volunteering abroad also helps develop soft skills such as confidence, teamwork, problem solving, and cross-cultural fluency, that they'll use their entire career," Hawkes says.

GVI offers 150 different volunteer projects in thirteen countries around the world, attracting approximately 2,500 volunteers a year, ranging in age from the teens to the eighties. Projects last anywhere from one week to six months. All volunteer work abroad projects are run in collaboration with local partners and communities. For the volunteer, costs are generally \$1,700 per week (minimum one week), including food and accommodations. Airfare is additional. *

Imagine yourself in a schoolroom in one of the most remote regions of one of the most hard-to-reach countries on earth. Nepal. The Lower Mustang region to be exact. To reach it takes a 14-hour flight from New York to Doha, Qatar. Then four hours by air to Kathmandu. Transfer at one of the world's most dangerous airports to a 90-minute flight to Pokhara, followed by a jarring, eight-hour Jeep ride over a vertiginous dirt road; one side is a mountain wall, the other side a two-hundred foot cliff.

Finally you arrive, but it's not just any schoolroom. It has been converted into an operating room so that doctors from New York Eye & Ear Infirmary can provide the gift of sight to 24 Nepalis who were blind due to advanced cataracts.

Jeff Blumenfeld witnessed this first hand. He was there as a traveler, but also as a volunteer.

A voluntourist.

People often wonder how they can explore the world and help the less fortunate even if they don't possess specialized skills. These are people who make lousy vacationers. They're bored sitting on a beach or touring umpteen churches

on a cruise ship excursion. They want a meaningful role when they travel.

That's where voluntourism comes in; a mix of both travel and volunteering. Is it hard work building wells and schoolhouses or excavating dinosaur bones? Yes, it is. But voluntourism doesn't take a particular outdoor skill, just plenty of sweat and the desire to see the world and leave it a better place.

Travel With Purpose deals not with celebrities, nor the rich and famous. Instead, it relays examples from Blumenfeld's travels and many others from Las Vegas to Nepal. From health care facilities to impoverished schools. These are stories of inspiration from everyday people, all of whom have definite opinions about the best way to approach that first volunteer vacation.

You don't need to be wealthy to travel to foreign lands to volunteer; you may not even have to go to foreign lands, as opportunities may exist within your own state. Blumenfeld shows readers how to identify the right location and volunteer situation, how to go about planning trips and preparing for activities, how to reach out, how to help. Through vivid examples and first hand stories from both recipients of volunteer work and the volunteers themselves, Travel with Purpose may make you rethink your next vacation.

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Travel with Purpose: A Field Guide to Voluntourism (English Edition) eBook: Jeff Blumenfeld: Amazon.com.mx: Tienda Kindle. Voluntourism: How Can Responsible Volunteer Travelers - Ken Budd: The Voluntourist Learn About Volunteer Travel - Shop & Books. Travel with Purpose: A Field Guide to Voluntourism To reach it takes a 14-hour flight from New York to Doha, Qatar. Then four

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