

**VOLUNTOURISM:
MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH
TOURISM**

DATE : FEBRUARY 2011

GOING BEYOND JUST BEING THERE

The arrival of the twenty first century brought with it an array of challenges to global stability and connectivity. Crises, both natural and man-made, have caused people around the world to look around and question not just how it all fits together, but how they fit in. Finding meaning has gone beyond our traditional borders. Growth in global communication is causing a growth in global awareness and compassion. A sense of *“it has to be about more than just me”* is emerging. Generation ‘I’ of the past is making way for Generation ‘Why’ of the present.

This heightened sense of collective conscience is having an impact on the way travellers view the world. Being there, seeing that, and buying the t-shirt is no longer enough. Increasingly travellers are seeking experiences which allow them to get closer to the places they visit.

Making an impact, making a difference, has become an important part of making a holiday meaningful. As a result the quest to discover new places and people, becoming a participant in their world and not simply a passer-by, has given life to a powerful new Tourism niche: Voluntourism.

Voluntourism, also referred to as Edu-Tourism and Volunteer Travel, effectively turns holiday time into a project. The fusion of getting away and giving back caused a dramatic rate of growth over the past ten years. More and more travellers are wanting to combine down-time with social responsibility. This niche, while small at present, is proving to be an invaluable fuel for the (re)building of local communities in need of support, be they skills, muscle power or otherwise.

The nature of the projects varies as widely as the nations in which they are conducted. Voluntourism spans across a number of areas of activity. In some destinations the need is language skills, e.g. teaching English in villages in rural India. In others it is conservation, e.g. rhino protection in South Africa. In others it may be restoration, e.g. preservation of the Terracotta Warriors in China. And in others it may in fact be post-crisis recovery of communities, e.g. following devastation to coastal villages in Thailand and Sri Lanka following the Tsunami. The need is great, the choices rich, the experiences enriching. And, importantly, the conditions of participation are few. Travellers from six to sixty six can take part in Voluntourism projects. The scope of projects offered across the globe make it possible for travellers across the age, skills, fitness and comfort spectrum

to find a project which taps into their needs. Voluntourists do not seek payment for their contribution – what is gained from the experience can be simply priceless.

Ultimately, nations creating Voluntourism as a key niche for tourism sector development create an ability of travellers to play a part in destination sustainability. The ethos of the destination is shared, practically, with visitors. And the destination Brand takes on a strength of heart.

This niche acts, therefore, as a valuable strategic and operational means of advancing the tourism sector, attracting invaluable skills, support, exposure and experiences.

ENSURING A POSITIVE IMPACT

There is, however, a need to ensure a healthy approach is taken to Voluntourism. The quest to make a difference, even with the best of intentions, can sadly have a negative impact if purpose, projects and people are out of balance.

This is one of the reasons Voluntourism has become shunned in some corners. Concerns are valid.

From a project perspective, how is legitimacy of projects managed? How is the wellbeing of local communities managed with a flow of visitors effectively moving in? How can projects protect themselves from dependency on outside support? How can quality of impact be managed when voluntourists come with varied backgrounds and capabilities? How can travellers signing up for projects know that the project leaders are working in the best interests of the people of the destination, in partnership with the local government and industry?

From a traveler perspective, how sustainable can a contribution really be when travellers are participating on projects for short periods of time? How can completion of projects be planned when traveler flows are inconsistent?

And of immense importance, how can the dignity and motivation of local communities be maintained so that they do not feel they are recipients of charity, handouts, and even worst, pity?

For any nation looking to develop Voluntourism as a niche within the greater travel and tourism sector it is critical that the niche be designed with clear operating principles so as to ensure that all projects and project leaders are honouring both the communities being helped, and the travellers helping. Measurement and monitoring of projects, within the greater framework of both national development and tourism sector advancement, is a must.

Ultimately, both travellers and destinations need to be clear of the impact they are seeking to make through Voluntourism.

At the heart of successful Voluntourism is keeping the fundamentals firmly in place, ensuring that doing the right thing is based on doing things right, starting with:

- **Respect:** Voluntourism projects must contribute to the self-respect and shared respect of the people of the community. Cultural awareness and appreciation of those entering into a project is critical. No individual wants to be treated like a project, a charity, or a tourist attraction.
- **Responsibility:** Voluntourists are utilizing their holiday time to partake in a project, voluntarily. Still, the tasks behind the projects require commitment to delivery. For this reason building play-time into a project allows Voluntourists to get the rest and relaxation they need, while also making the difference they seek.
- **Relationships:** the power of Voluntourism rests in the relationships which are formed between the Voluntourists and the people of the projects on which they participate. The work matters, but it is the effect that it has on the people, both through the process of creation and the outcome of the project its final form, which gives it meaning.
- **Realistic Expectations:** the ability to make a real difference must be realistically examined vis-à-vis the time and energy a Voluntourist is able to commit to a project. Voluntourists should not expect to change the world in two weeks of teaching a child a language. Voluntourists should seek to be stitches within a greater community development fabric - important, strong, colourful stitches.
- **Results:** Voluntourism projects need to have clear goals and metrics to ensure delivery is achievable and impact is sustainable. Visible results are critical to yield a valuable harvest. That said, the simple act of

planting seeds of hope, confidence, inspiration and appreciation can have an impact far outlasting a period of a few days of project activity.

When structured and managed carefully and comprehensively, Voluntourism can play an invaluable role in destination development, economically, socially, and sustainably.

Importantly, Voluntourism is a mirror of the desire of people to come closer, making rich, meaningful connections to people and places around the world. Because it's the right thing to do.



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