

VOLUNTOURISM

THE NEWEST TRAVEL
TREND IS CHANGING
THE WAY PEOPLE
SEE THE WORLD.

by **Andrew Mersmann**



You needn't be the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa to have a deep desire to do good for the world. More and more travelers are finding the impetus to give back to the communities they visit while on vacation. The movement behind the recently-coined catchphrase "voluntourism" has emerged into one of the most rapidly growing niches in travel in the past few years. Volunteer vacations give travelers an opportunity to gain an intimate knowledge of the places they visit, working side-by-side with locals for the betterment of the region. Bookings in the category of volunteer vacations nearly doubled from 2006 to 2007.

As the world has become more accessible, and travel more ubiquitous, the needs of travelers have become more human in scale. Craving authenticity and immersion, there is an increasing demand to get beyond the resort walls and away from the costumed and choreographed "cultural shows" that many bus tour itineraries provide. While vol-

untourism and similar pursuits were once the domain of idealistic, fresh-from-college youth, this category of travel now appeals to seasoned travelers of all ages.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, visitors to New York City wanted to convert a feeling of helplessness to helpfulness. Without a channel for this energy, the inclination most often translated into financial contributions to aid organizations and fire and rescue workers, but many found this unsatisfying. The area around "ground zero" was quickly cut off from the city so direct donations of food and clothing were impossible, as was the chance to actually get in and help in a productive way. The need to give, however, was ignited in a way that would soon ripple through much of the nation and the world.

A couple of years later, the tsunami of December 26, 2004 that devastated parts of Thailand and surrounding regions of the Indian Ocean inspired Americans to donate to foreign aid efforts in record numbers, far



exceeding the initial outreach of our government. Vacations to Phuket, however, were cancelled and the tourism industry of the gay-popular region was devastated, but a curious thing began to happen. Travelers came anyway and went to the beaches to clear away wreckage and debris, rebuild and repaint, and help return the popular international locales to their former status.

Some of the motivation behind these efforts was spurred on when America learned that Fernando Bengoechea, the lover of Oprah's design partner Nate Berkus, had died while the couple was vacationing in the area when the tsunami struck. Because of this tragedy, the United States embraced and accepted the widowhood of a gay man, perhaps for the first time, and simultaneously found a genuinely altruistic desire to help in a foreign land.

The third horrible incident in the triumvirate of tragedy that proved the tipping point for voluntourism was Hurricane Katrina. The devastation of New Orleans and the entire Gulf region left our nation feeling helpless and horrified, but in the months (and sadly, years) following the storm, many visitors to New Orleans found time before bar hopping on Bourbon Street to put in some hours with Habitat for Humanity, the Red Cross, and various local aid organizations.

The Lower Ninth Ward remains a scene of devastation that should shame the gov-

ernment, but while the bureaucracy is slow, tourists haven't hesitated to get their hands dirty to help. Alternative spring breaks have been incredibly popular in the region, with vacationing college students rolling up their sleeves and working in the recovery efforts (sometimes for course credit), instead of partying into oblivion.

The desire to help others in times of need often outweighs the peer pressure and infomercial frenzy for a better house/car/job/lover/body. When people look objectively at the world, they often realize how good their lives are already.

If you've volunteered before, you already know that you get much more than you give. For first-time volunteers, here are some important things to know.

Part of the process is knowing what excites you: saving animals, caring for the environment, preserving and supporting foreign culture, educating young people, providing healthcare, etc. If there is something you already find inspiring at home, getting deeply involved while away from home will be most fulfilling—you have to own a problem to solve a problem. You will feel great at the end of the day after you have become a part of the culture instead of just looking out the window of an air-conditioned tour bus. Remember also that a large part of the money you spend on airfare, food, accommodations, etc. may be

tax-deductible depending on the tax status of the organization with which you travel.

Begin your planning at home. Many places you frequent may offer brochures or information about possible volunteer vacations. For instance, Starbucks has an alliance with Earthwatch, and The Home Depot has a partnership with Habitat for Humanity. **Travelocity**, whose internal polling of users shows that 38% of travelers are likely to take volunteer vacations in 2008, has launched a voluntourism community forum with **igougo** (<http://travelforgood.igougo.com>) as part of their "Change Ambassador program." They also offer "bite-size volunteer experiences" via their "Travel for Good" programs.

Meanwhile, **United Way** has partnered with **Cheaptickets.com** to launch a volunteer vacations website (www.volunteersolutions.org) and **Orbitz** links customers directly to **National Parks Service** volunteer vacation opportunities (<http://eco.orbitz.com>).

There are many opportunities for voluntourism around the world in 2008. Here are some of the organizations whose programs may inspire you to help make a difference during your next vacation.

There isn't yet a broad range of gay-specific volunteer outreach opportunities, but the major one we have access to, the **Rainbow World Fund**, makes up in quality for the dearth of choice. The RWF is a way the LGBT community can be of service to the rest of the world, advocating on behalf of other LGBT and oppressed communities across the globe. Founder and Executive Director Jeff Cotter's enthusiasm for their international and domestic projects is palpable, and he is particularly excited about the upcoming Guatemala humanitarian aid tour, July 18–27 where volunteers work with and learn from local gay activists while also delivering medical and educational supplies. In the spring, their Rainbow Bus will visit Tijuana, Mexico to work at an HIV clinic, school, orphanage, and medical facilities to bring hope along with medical and school supplies and toys. Other projects include a June 18–19 opportunity to visit Washington D.C. and be trained one day to speak on Capitol Hill and the next day go and advocate in the fight against global poverty and HIV/AIDS. (www.rainbowfund.org).

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter still pick up an occasional hammer to help **Habitat for Humanity**, and the organization's enormous

efforts in the Gulf States after Hurricane Katrina put them back in the spotlight, but you can also travel abroad to help build homes for poor families through their "Global Village" programs with nearly 100 international affiliates. Most trips are a one or two week commitment. (www.habitat.org)

To help in the rebuilding of historic stone structures in beautiful Provence, France, the hard but rewarding work of **La Sabranenque** will exhaust and inspire you as you restore 14th- and 15th-century homes, chapels, farms, and medieval ruins for one to three weeks (www.sabranenque.com).

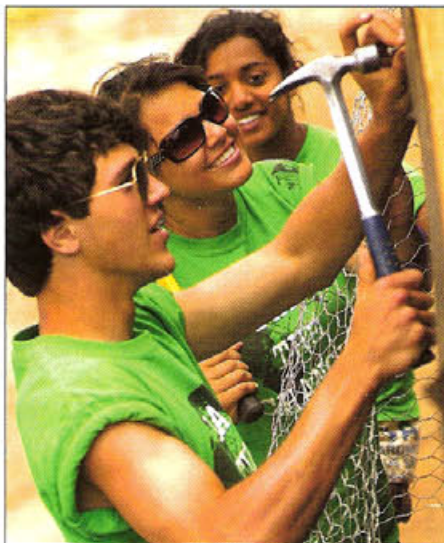
The grand dame of experiential volunteer travel is the **Earthwatch Institute** that supports the scientific field research of programs around the world focusing on wildlife, environment, cultural preservation, and more. 4,000 volunteers travel with Earthwatch projects annually to do such wild work as tagging crocodiles, working at a lion orphanage, recording lost and dying languages in Chinese cave villages, and charting the course of bottlenose dolphins in Greece. The opportunities, most lasting from one to three weeks, are as diverse as the participants from around the world (www.earthwatch.org).

WWOOFers do volunteer work on organic farms for several hours a day in exchange for room and board. There are dozens of nations that have **WWOOF** (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) programs to keep you busy and exhausted while immersing yourself in the rural culture of another land (www.wwof.org).

The volunteer vacations arm of the **American Hiking Society** organizes 100 one- and two-week trail work trips throughout the U.S. where you work on conservation in America's most remote and wild places (<http://americanhiking.org>).

The **Sierra Club** has over 350 outings in which to get involved nationally and internationally, and 90 of those trips are environmental service trips that include volunteer work to rebuild and maintain trails and wilderness areas, help with animal research, assist archeological digs, and eradicate non-native vegetation. Service trips are one week or more (www.sierraclub.org).

Combine incredible island-based adventures in and out of the water with good old fashioned hard work at one of **Seacology's** international project sites to help save island and marine habitats as



well as indigenous culture around the world in 41 countries and 90 islands (www.seacology.org).

Turn your next cycling or hiking vacation in beautiful destinations into a full-blown charity event with **For a Cause**. Challenging walking and biking tours in Ireland, Italy, Spain, and other places involve fully supported week-long journeys. Funds raised go 100% to the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation or the Y-ME Breast Cancer Organization as well as other beneficiaries you can choose (www.rfac.org).

Olivia Newton-John is getting physical as she and a platoon of volunteers will walk the Great Wall of China to raise funds for cancer research and treatment with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity known as **The Great Walk to Beijing**. The three-week charity walk will be a hike of 228 kilometers and leads up to the opening cere-



monies of the Beijing Olympic Games (www.greatwalktobeijing.com).

At the end of the year, December 27, 2008–January 7, 2009, **amfAR** (American Foundation for AIDS Research) will undertake another of their epic AIDS treks. This year they will visit Thailand, where volunteers will not only face the physical challenge of a long-haul overland trek, but also see amazing back country while working and learning on the front lines with the top AIDS experts and researchers in Asia (www.amfar.org).

Global Volunteers has spent many years arranging intensive service vacations in underserved communities the world over. For two or three weeks, you live among and work with community members in foreign nations (and some U.S. projects as well) to teach English as a second language, care for at-risk children, work on building structures, and assist with health care outreach. (www.globalvolunteers.org).

Working to bring sustainability and equanimity to one of the more challenged regions of the world, trips with the **Habitat Aid Initiative** work directly in rural eastern African communities, building schools and clinics, delivering medical supplies, developing wells and irrigation, and providing farm equipment and training (www.habitataid.net).

Choose from 12 countries in which to spend 1–12 weeks working side-by-side with locals to further the goals of the community with **Cross-Cultural Solutions**. 4,000 people each year use CCS to create meaningful excursions that benefit both volunteers and recipients alike in far-reaching projects emphasizing quality of life for children, the elderly, women's empowerment, and more (www.crossculturalsolutions.org).

Business experts and consultants volunteer with the **International Executive Service Corps** to travel to developing nations and lend their expertise via more than 200 integrated development programs, working with budding entrepreneurs to promote economic growth and sustainability (www.iesc.org).

Of course, this list only begins to scratch the surface of ways you can bring authenticity and altruism together in your travels. To get your imagination working even more, visit these general websites for international volunteer opportunities. **IVPA** (the International Volunteer Programs Association. www.volunteerinternational.org) and **Interaction** (the American Council for Voluntary International Action. www.interaction.org).