

CONTENTS

01 INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING: AN OVERVIEW	6	Top Tips for Female Volunteers	96	How Do They Work?	185	ORGANISATION LISTINGS	273
Why Volunteer?	8	Money	97	Fun, Fun, Funds	186	Directories & Useful Organisations	273
Is International Volunteering the New Colonialism?	10	Keeping in Touch	103	Pros & Cons	190	Grassroots Charities & Non-profits	274
Types of International Volunteering	11	If It All Goes Wrong	108	Development Placements	195	From Mongolia to Laos on a Volunteering Adventure	275
Archaeology	17	Useful Websites	110	ORGANISATION LISTINGS	196	.....	.....
Sharon's Story	18	.....	.....	Thinking of Taking the Kids?	200	09 COMING HOME	278
Package Placement or Do-It-Yourself?	19	04 TYING UP LOOSE ENDS	112	Volunteering Unwrapped	206	Leaving	279
Useful Websites	25	Job	113	Dear Diary	210	Reverse Culture Shock	280
.....	.....	Finances	115	Conservation & Wildlife Placements	211	Settling Back In	283
02 CHOOSING YOUR VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE	26	Taxation & National Insurance	120	Way Down Deep...	218	Virtual Volunteering	287
Arranging a Worthwhile Placement	27	House	120	Skilled Volunteering	225	Next Steps	289
The Ethical Volunteering Guide	32	Vehicle	124	Options for the Under 30s	227	Getting Funding	300
Long-term Volunteering with Your Partner	50	Partner & Children	125	.....	.....	Going Into Business	303
Summary of Questions	54	Power of Attorney	127	07 RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS	194	.....	.....
Do You Have What it Takes?	55	Voting	127	How Do They Work?	232	10 START YOUR OWN CHARITABLE PROJECT	294
The Ills & Cures of Long-term Volunteering	58	Useful Websites	128	Pros & Cons	234	The Idea	296
More Information	60	.....	.....	Building Bridges	237	More Harm Than Good	297
.....	.....	05 ORGANISED VOLUNTEER PROGRAMMES	130	ORGANISATION LISTINGS	238	Getting It Rolling	302
03 THE PRACTICALITIES	62	How Do They Work?	132	Development Placements	238	.....	.....
Application & Selection	63	Pros & Cons	134	Kibbutzim	246	.....	.....
Raising the Money	66	Major International Placement	137	.....	.....	11 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & INDEXES	308
Creative Fundraising	72	Programmes	137	08 DO-IT-YOURSELF VOLUNTEER PLACEMENTS	215	Thanks	309
Preparation	72	ORGANISATION LISTINGS	141	Is DIY Volunteering Right for You?	258	Index	312
Airline Tickets	75	Options for the Under 30s	141	Pros & Cons of Going It Alone	259	Destinations Index	315
Passports, Visas & Travel Insurance	79	Volunteering Plus	157	The Search Begins	264	Organisations Index	318
What to Pack	84	Development Placements	162	Unexpected Volunteering	265	.....	.....
Ten Top Tips from Two Volunteers	90	Conservation & Wildlife Placements	166	Choosing a Mutually Beneficial Placement	270		
Health & Hygiene	91	Skilled Volunteering	175	Further Preparation	270		
		Emergency & Relief	179	Maximising Your Contribution	271		
		Minimising the Risks of Independent Volunteering	271		
		06 STRUCTURED & SELF-FUNDING VOLUNTEER PROGRAMMES	182				

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Matt spent countless hours researching volunteering organisations around the globe for this book. When he's not managing Lonely Planet's sub-Saharan Africa content as a Destination Editor in London, he's writing about everything from epic adventures to responsible travel in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

ETHICAL VOLUNTEERING

The ethics of international volunteering are complex, particularly with development work. On the surface it sounds like a match made in fairy tales: you help local people to help themselves; you benefit; they benefit and you all live happily ever after.

Of course, the reality may not be quite so 'charming.' The more you find out about international volunteering, the more aware you become of some key ethical issues. When this happens you start to ask yourself more questions and, hopefully, ask more questions of the organisations you are researching. This is a healthy process, as getting answers to some key questions is exactly what is required to ensure that everyone benefits for the long term from your volunteering experience.

Below are some basic questions you might have swirling around in your head. Responses follow, although they are often more 'grey' than 'black' or 'white' (reflecting the complexity of some of the issues involved).

Team building, literally.
A group from the
British Exploring
Society hard at work.



How do I know if the host community or country will really benefit from my volunteering?

That's a crucial question. There should only ever be one reason for a volunteer programme to exist, and that is to meet the needs of a local community. Just as importantly, all volunteer programmes should do this in a sustainable way.

For instance, there's little point in a one-off placement where you're parachuted into a school, orphanage or community centre to work for a month or two and then leave. What happens to the work you were doing? How is it continued? Has your departure created a vacuum that no-one can fill? Has your work been more of a hindrance than a help?

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Perhaps you had a specific aim to achieve and you trained a local person to take over from you. That would be useful and classified as a sustainable volunteer project. However, you are more likely to find sustainable projects with sending agencies that have a long-term relationship with their partner programmes.

So, the bottom line is this: if you volunteer on a well run programme (whether you apply through a sending agency or go direct) you will make a contribution that should be of benefit to those you wish to help.

If I only have a short amount of time to give, will I be able to make a difference?

This is a tricky one and is discussed in more detail on p36. The answer very much depends on the aims and objectives of your project. The shorter the time you have, the more specific your project needs to be. For instance, volunteers with the faith-based charity Habitat for Humanity (p238) go overseas for one or two weeks and help build a house for a low-income family in great need of shelter. At the end of their week or two they have achieved something tangible and worthwhile.

Am I actually doing more good by volunteering than just donating my money?

The two short answers to this question are 'yes' and 'no'. All organisations working overseas need money to implement their programmes. But sending yourself, as opposed to sending your money, means you are making a very special contribution.

How valuable your contribution is depends on the effectiveness of the volunteer programme and feeds into the response given to the first question in this section. To some extent it also depends on what work you are doing. If you are passing on your skills to local people so they can do your job when

03

The Practicalities

This is where the fun really begins. You've done your research, you have an idea of what you'd like to do, where you might like to go and you've set aside the time. All you have to do now is make it happen...

APPLICATION & SELECTION

Most international volunteers apply to sending agencies eight to 12 months before they wish to volunteer. This time frame works well for three reasons: it gives you and your organisation enough time to find the right volunteer project; it allows you sufficient time to save the money; and it means you've got months in which to organise your life at home so you can go abroad (see Chapter 4 for more details on this).

If you are not as organised as this or have decided to volunteer at the last minute, don't worry. Most sending agencies will still work with you to find a placement with only a month or two's notice. However, places on the most popular conservation and wildlife expeditions can fill up a year in advance, and many of the organisations placing skilled volunteers need at least four months' notice.

In Australia and New Zealand, some sending agencies specialise in short-term placements and place volunteers without a great deal of experience or tertiary qualifications. Placements such as these are usually for self-funding volunteers. Long-term placements, however, mostly require a commitment of at least a full year and people must have a minimum of a couple of years'

TOP TIPS FOR FEMALE VOLUNTEERS

1: Pack your common sense and have your wits about you at all times. If you wouldn't normally walk down a dark alley or deserted street at night in your home town, don't do it when you're volunteering overseas. Jacqueline Hill remembers the following incident in Bangladesh:

I was careless one evening and had my bag strap around my shoulders with the bag on full view as I travelled through Dhaka on a rickshaw. A taxi drove up alongside me and a hand came out of the window and attempted to snatch my bag, resulting in my being pulled out of the rickshaw as the taxi tried to make off. I was badly shaken and bruised but hung onto my bag.

2: Be informed about where you are going, so that you have a rough idea of a town's layout and any areas that may be unsafe. (This is particularly relevant if you travel to a larger town to change money or if you travel at the weekends.) Poonam Sattee, who volunteered in Guatemala City recalls:

There are a lot of areas within the city that are incredibly unsafe and without prior knowledge, it is easy to accidentally wander into these. Gang rivalry also operates within the city and you don't want to get caught up in their activities.

3: Pay close attention to your instincts. If you're in a situation that feels wrong, even if you don't know why, move to a place where you feel more secure. Michelle Hawkins, who volunteered in Ghana and Costa Rica, remembers:

I was suddenly surrounded by four little old ladies. They were all muttering Americana. Being British, I was a bit confused. I was confused further when they started pushing in on me from all sides, with hands grabbing my waist for my money belt. After a comic half-hearted fist fight, I fought my way out of the ambush. Had I really been overrun by little old ladies? I took my daypack off, and saw that it had been slashed with a knife – just centimetres from my ribs.

4: If you feel like having a few too many drinks then do so in a safe environment (your room, your friend's house or the bar at your hotel).

5: If you're going out at night on your own, tell someone (another volunteer, your host family etc) where you're going and what time you expect to be back.

6: Instead of going out after dark on your own to explore, make the most of your waking hours and get up really early in the morning.

7: If you're a self-funding volunteer and fixing up your own accommodation, make sure you do so in a safe part of town. If you're on a trip at the weekend, pay a little extra to stay in a hotel in a better area. Poonam Sattee advises again:

Guatemala City is not safe and I do not recommend that anyone lives in the city. It is better to live in Antigua, which is a 45-minute commute on a bus. Although Antigua is touristy, it has none of Guatemala City's problems, due to the high levels of tourist police operating there.

8: Pay attention to what you wear and cover up. In many regions of the world, skimpy shorts and T-shirts relay a very different message to what you may be used to at home. Poonam Sattee again:

Don't wear jewellery of any type – even if it is only studs in your ears or religious symbols. It attracts attention – I was mugged a number of times and on one occasion, had the studs taken out of my ears (they weren't even gold or silver).

9: Take a taxi more frequently than you might at home but make sure it is bona fide. Ensure you always have enough cash on you to get home this way if you need to.

10: Think about doing a course in travel safety before you leave your home country. In the UK you can arrange one through **Objective** (www.objectivegapyear.com). Australians can prepare themselves for difficult situations by doing a course with **RedR** (www.redr.org.au) which offers intensive personal security in emergency training.

08

Do-It-Yourself Placements

If you've read this far, you're probably seriously considering volunteering as part of your travels, or even as the sole purpose of an overseas trip. Previous chapters may have given you an idea of the type of work you'd like to do (see p11), and which continent or country you'd like to volunteer in. What you may be weighing up at this point, however, is the benefits and risks involved in teeing something up yourself versus paying an intermediary to arrange it all for you.

You may have arrived at this point by doing some online research and have been overwhelmed by the hundreds of agencies offering their services and charging a fee for it. But you may not feel comfortable paying a sending organisation – it may not fit with your image of what volunteering should be about. Simon Roberts, who taught English to underprivileged children in Bolivia, shared this sentiment:

After initial research we decided we didn't want to volunteer for an organisation where we had to pay for the experience, as we felt this was contrary to our idea of volunteering. The institution we went for was very small and had a grassroots feel to it.

How, then, do you follow in Simon's footsteps and find volunteering opportunities independently of a middle man? And what are the issues to consider when volunteering independently? For instance, would it be better to arrange the placement before you leave home, or once you arrive at your destination? And how can you ensure that you make a worthwhile contribution as a volunteer and have a good time while doing it? This chapter will give some answers to these questions.

IS DO-IT-YOURSELF VOLUNTEERING RIGHT FOR YOU?

In many cases the decision to do-it-yourself stems from the frustrations caused by the high costs and time restrictions associated with volunteer placement organisations. However, many prospective volunteers make a hasty decision to go it alone without properly thinking through the demands and challenges. Reflecting upfront on your strengths and weaknesses, your preferred ways of working and your skills and values will help you decide whether a do-it-yourself placement is right for you.

Kirsi Korhonen, who took on a few volunteering roles in Bolivia, including one at the animal refuge Inti Wara Yassi (p274), and a position at the boy's home Amanecer, made an informed decision to volunteer independently:

We chose to find our own opportunities, to make sure the money went where it was needed and to give ourselves more freedom. Plus, my friend and I are both very experienced in travelling and in all things travel-related.

All volunteers must possess certain core qualities if they are to make a worthwhile contribution (see p55). However, going it alone places special demands on the volunteer. No matter how much research you've done, there'll be an element of the unknown. You will have to assume complete responsibility for yourself and your actions, as you will have no support network to fall back on. In addition, you will often be out of your comfort zone.

Elizabeth France, who performed a variety of roles with United Action for Children in Cameroon (p277), suggests that self-motivation and persistence are vital for a successful DIY experience:

From my experience, the most valuable people are those who have a 'stick-to-it' attitude, as they won't give up when the going gets tough.

Other key attributes which help in facing the kind of unpredictable situations that can crop up when you're volunteering independently include self-reliance, maturity, patience, communication and interpersonal skills, sensitivity to cross-cultural issues and a good sense of humour. In working out whether do-it-yourself volunteering is for you, you need to ask yourself honestly whether you can consistently demonstrate such qualities amid the inevitable challenges of a placement.

PROS & CONS OF GOING IT ALONE

PROS

Lower costs, and payments usually goes directly to the project

With some grassroots organisations you may not need to pay any placement fee; for others you will be expected to make a donation or fundraise. Jason Rogers, who volunteered at schools in Thailand and Laos, paid a donation for his Thailand placement:

There was a pretty strict volunteer fee for Thailand, which included buying presents for the kids. Some of the money went directly to the centre and some went towards the Christmas presents. I think it was about US\$350 total.

Elizabeth France, who volunteered in Cameroon, wanted to ensure that any fees she paid would go directly to the project:

An important factor in my decision was that the costs were to be paid directly to the NGO, without a cut taken by any intermediary organisation.

Also, a large proportion of agency fees goes towards practical arrangements for volunteer placements such as board and lodging – if you're going it alone you can save money by making these arrangements yourself.

Greater ability to tailor the role to suit you

Most local charities and grassroots NGOs are small scale and do not have structured volunteer programmes, and this means you can often define your own role, matching your aptitudes and objectives to a project's needs.

The lack of structure on her Bolivian placement was a positive for Amanda Guest-Collins, who volunteered as an English teacher:

The set-up was very informal, so our roles and work weren't particularly structured. This meant, however, that we had the flexibility to make the roles our own.

Joan Hodkinson, a language teacher, chose to look after orphans at a day school in Kolkata (Calcutta), India, because she was confident the pupils would benefit from her skills: