

Holidays That Help

Want to take a holiday that benefits the world? Here's how to do it right.

By Carla Avolio



It was during a trip to Croatia's gorgeous, glittering coast that Misha Donohoe realized she wasn't enjoying her holiday.

"I just had this uneasy feeling that I wasn't contributing," says the science communicator and travel lover. "The culture there is so rich and yet, by doing the typical touristy thing, I was just an outsider. I really wanted a holiday where I could give to a society rather than take away from it." For Donohoe, the solution was to combine travel with volunteering. She signed up with WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and went to work on a goat farm in the Yukon, on Canada's Western frontier.

"I forged deep connections with the land and people, which made my stay so much richer than your average holiday," she says.

Donohoe is one of millions of travelers who are seeking more from their vacations than the usual sightseeing and relaxation. This growing breed of conscious traveler wants to know that spending their tourist dollars somewhere might also mean that wildlife is better protected, more homes are built in disaster-ravaged communities or fewer trees are cut down.

It's a concept that has been gaining momentum

since the early 1980s when the term "eco-tourism" was first coined. Defined by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people," eco-tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global travel industry, increasing 20 to 30 percent every year, according to TIES.

While eco-tourism generally focuses on natural areas, another increasingly popular form of tourism seeks to help people in need. Volunteer vacations, also known as "voluntourism," see philanthropic travelers combining short-term travel with contributing labor or skills. Unlike simply donating money, volunteering shows you exactly how your efforts are helping to build wheelchairs for landmine victims or more village schools. And it's no longer just for skilled professionals like doctors and engineers. The volunteering industry now offers a wealth of opportunities for all kinds of passionate and adventurous people. With the huge growth in this sector, there are literally thousands of eco-lodges and charities offering holiday experiences for conscious travelers. So how do you know where to go? To find out, we asked the experts to list their top tips on doing conscious traveling the right way.

ENGINEERING ECO-TRAVEL

Andy Drumm, a sustainable tourism and eco-tourism expert who has been working with indigenous communities for more than two decades, says while many tour companies offer trips to natural areas, sadly, most are contributing to the pressures rather than helping.

"Surprisingly, it's usually the cheaper tours that actually pass on benefits to the community and environment, rather than just to the tourists," he says.

Drumm suggests asking the following questions to identify responsible operators:

- ➊ How do they contribute to conservation? For example, do they give money back to conservation projects and national parks in the areas they visit? Legitimate operators should provide clear evidence of this on their websites.
- ➋ Do they engage local communities? Responsible operators will provide social benefits to the indigenous community

either by hiring local guides, contributing financially or providing skills training. They also should have safeguards in place to protect the cultural integrity of the community.

- ➌ Where are you staying? Accommodation must have sound waste-management strategies and employ sustainable energy sources such as solar, wind or hydro.

ECO-OPERATORS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Cultural Experience: Huaorani Ecolodge, Ecuador

This multi-award-winning operation, conceptualized and developed by Drumm, is the gold standard in eco-tourism. Tucked in to a remote corner of the Amazon jungle, the lodge is owned and operated by the Huaorani, an indigenous tribe that has been in contact with the outside world for less than 60 years. This truly environmentally and socially sustainable operation provides visitors with a rare glimpse in to the culture of one of the most isolated tribes on earth.

- ➍ Do: Huao-guided rainforest hikes, kayaking and experiencing the Huaorani way of life.

- ➎ Sleep: one of five palm-thatched cabins built by the Huaorani from wood hand-picked by a forest engineer.

- ➏ Operated by: Tropic Journeys in Nature, an award-winning eco-tourism company specializing in Ecuador. destinationecuador.com



Photos by Misha Donohoe.



community rather than a foreign charity. It's far more likely that your work will have real benefits that way.

- ☛ Safety first. Your selected organization should come with medical insurance, liability insurance and a crisis plan in the event of a disaster.

The Visionaries:
Zábalo Cofán Community, Ecuador

Eco-tourism is just one of many innovative programs coming from the Cofán indigenous community in Northeastern Ecuador. In addition to tours, the Cofán run programs for training local rangers to protect 1 million acres of land, turtle repopulation, carbon management and making sustainable eco-canoes using traditional methods.

- ☛ Do: trekking, canoeing, fishing, rainforest camping.
- ☛ Sleep: swinging hammocks strung up in thatched roof huts.
- ☛ Operated by: Cofan Survival Fund. cofan.org



The Animal Experience:
Leopard Conservation, South Africa

With 10 days of elephant spotting, bush walking and sipping gin and tonics at sunset, this trip has all the trappings of a luxe safari. But don't be fooled; conservation is the main goal of this eco-tourism experience. Ingwe Leopard Research teamed up with a tour company to create an unbeatable trip that raises awareness and funds for threatened leopards.

- ☛ Do: game drives, bush walks, behind-the-scenes tour at a wildlife rehabilitation center, setting camera traps to help track leopard movements.
- ☛ Sleep: stylish, tented camps with plunge pool overlooking a mountain gorge.
- ☛ Operated by: Tribes, a U.K.-based tour operator offering tailor-made eco-holidays. tribes.co.uk

VACATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

Kimberly Haley-Coleman, executive director of volunteering site Globe Aware, says there are countless benefits to voluntourism, from gaining deeper cultural understanding, to increased personal happiness.

"It's such a unique, fulfilling sense of empowerment that there's simply nothing else like it!" she says.

To gain the experience of a lifetime, Haley-Coleman suggests considering the following:

- ☛ What's your story? Good organizations will assess your interests, language skills and how much travel you've done before suggesting a destination. For example, an English speaker who's never left the U.S. might be better matched to Puerto Rico than Cambodia. Deciding on a culture is probably more important than the type of volunteer service, be it building homes in Nepal or stoves in Peru.
- ☛ Show me the money. Volunteering organizations charge a huge fee, so you should find out how much of this is actually going to the community versus administration costs of placing volunteers. All nonprofits are required to publish their financials, which you can read on the website Guide Star. guidestar.org
- ☛ They know best. Make sure the volunteer project has been determined by the

TOP TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

The book: Recently updated in 2012, *Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others* by Bill McMillon is packed with 150 in-depth profiles of select organizations.

The website: Catering to families and the time-poor, Globe Aware offers weeklong programs in 15 countries. globeaware.org

The international option: In Habitat for Humanity's international program, Global Village, volunteers build and renovate homes to create sustainable communities throughout the world. habitat.org

The domestic option: The American Hiking Society offers 60 volunteer vacations each year, contributing to the beautification of trails in America's most iconic natural landscapes. americanhiking.org

On the cheap: While volunteering usually comes with a hefty fee, Peace Corps (peacecorps.gov) pays you a stipend for 27 months service and WWOOF (wwooof.org) provides board and lodging in exchange for a day's work on the farm.