

Hands-On Holidays

More and more travelers are combining the joy of helping others with the thrill of adventure for a richer vacation experience. Will you be next?

by amanda castleman

FORGET THE CLASSIC “FLY AND FLOP” VACATION.

Why not embark on a trip that not only feels good, but also does good? From archeological digs to mapping marine life, opportunities abound for you and your family to make the world a better place while escaping your daily routine.

It's called “voluntourism,” and 20 percent of travelers reported that they'd taken such a journey in a 2008 survey sponsored by msnbc.com and *Condé Nast Traveler*. Another 55 percent said a volunteer vacation was on their to-do list.

Such engagement is part of a proud tradition modeled by the Peace Corps for 51 years, says Charyn Pfeuffer, voluntourism expert for travel website Women On Their Way and founder of the Global Citizen Project. By the 1990s, when the first voluntourism guidebooks appeared, do-good vacations had become a niche industry. “Events like 9/11, the recession and recent earthquakes and tsunamis may have prompted some people to re-evaluate their priorities,” Pfeuffer says. “Many of us have felt compelled to contribute to the bigger picture—whether that's texting a donation or rolling up our sleeves and pitching in. It doesn't take much, really, to make a difference.”

Many voluntourists prefer to make an impact closer to home, where they can foster deep connections with the communities they help. While lending a hand in their own backyard, these travelers get to acquire new skills, experience some great adventure and even make a friend or two along the way. The catch? Once you get started, it can be hard to stop. The msnbc.com survey showed that 95 percent of voluntourists plan to do it all over again.



Photography: Yoka Hejlskov (Mammoth Site); Janna Nichole (REEF); Earthwatch; Getty Images; additional photography by Jodi Pudge

A Mammoth Opportunity

WHILE ROAD-TRIPPING IN 2003, retired financial analyst Ruth Clemmer took an unscheduled turn after a brochure caught her eye. The detour led her to South Dakota's Mammoth Site.

The area has an ancient allure: Once a steep-sided watering hole, it attracted hundreds of Great Plains animals, trapping and preserving them during the Ice Age. Today, the world's largest on-site collection of Columbian and woolly mammoth remains is housed inside a climate-controlled building.

"I'm not a big gardener, but I walked through the doors and, as I saw the bones and tusks sticking up from the earth, all I could think was: 'I want to dig,'" Clemmer recalls. In 2007, she contacted the Earthwatch Institute, then drove from her Pennsylvania home to join the site's volunteer team. She now returns for a month every summer. "It's an incredible feeling," she notes. "You're out there, gently scraping dirt with a small paintbrush. Then, wow, you find something—what is it?"

One lucky day in 2009, just before the excavation season wrapped, she hit pay dirt, unearthing a mammoth skull roughly two and a half feet across. "No human has probably ever seen this before," Clemmer says reverently. "It hasn't been in the open air for approximately 26,000 years."

The site's principal investigator, Larry Agenbroad, says this thrill of discovery satisfies a longing in people: "They see a glimpse of a lost world." Marriage, family and the need to earn a living can often derail youthful dreams of adventure. "But anyone can be Indiana Jones with us for two weeks."

The lost ark probably won't surface in the site's fossil bed, but volunteers add to our understanding of climate change and mammoth behavior, which can guide efforts to help save the ecosystem and today's elephants. Volunteer Roberta O'Connor cherishes this aspect. "I'm not only learning but also making a contribution, however small, to research," she says. "It's very meaningful in my life."

O'Connor uncovered her passion for science after losing her husband in 2007. She prefers delicate work and often winds up feathering dried mud away from bones and fragments. "I'm not a very large or strong person," she laughs, "so I'm not so good at excavation. But give me a dental pick—it's my favorite part."

The Earthwatch expedition welcomes a wide range of participants, from 18-year-olds upward. "One fascinating woman, Vertis 'Vee' Lamb, had been going to the mammoth site for more than 20 years," says O'Connor. "She must have been in her early 90s the last year she joined us—and never complained. The other volunteers had a very good role model."

Luckily, they also draw inspiration from Agenbroad and his crew chief, whose enthusiasm brings the same Earthwatch diggers back year after year.

"Even when someone has a little accident and a fossil bone gets chipped or scratched, they never make anyone feel stupid," O'Connor says. "You're treated like a human being who's doing their best. You feel treasured. That's rare."



JOIN IN

Two-week trips cost \$3,095, are tax deductible, and include accommodation and family-style meals. mammothsite.com and earthwatch.org



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The Life Aquatic

DAVE GREENDA GOT CAUGHT IN THE SWELL of volunteer vacations, and it changed his life. Following a distinguished military career, he started donating his time as a scientific diver at Tampa's Florida Aquarium. This led him to the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) in 1998. One of his first trips landed him on a live-aboard boat for a week in the Dry Tortugas, 70 miles west of Key West, Fla.

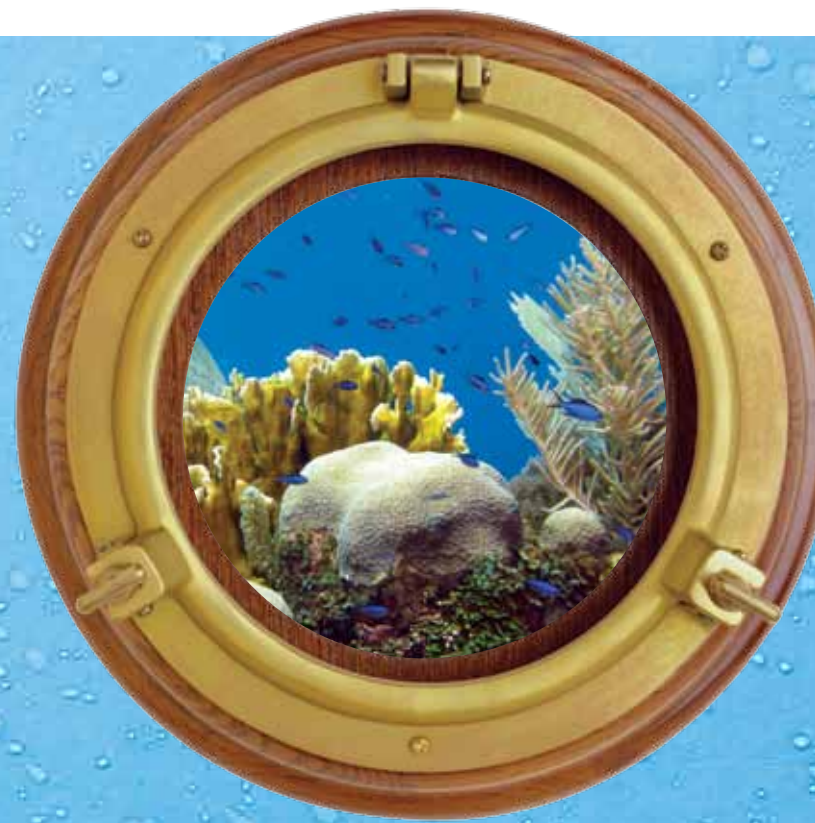
The conservation group invites divers and snorkelers to gather data on marine life along both U.S. coasts and in Central America. Water babies can start close to home and then head farther afield on survey trips as they grow more experienced. "After a while, a diver needs a challenge to keep it interesting, like photography or wreck penetration," Grenda says. "But almost everyone will enjoy fish identification." REEF uses the data in scientific papers and to recommend fishing quotas.

"I've totally embraced the 'citizen scientist' concept and devote entire summers to research diving," says Grenda, who's now a member of the REEF Advanced Assessment Team. His skills quickly became in-demand with aquariums, universities, the U.S. National Park Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. But you don't have to be an expert to help. Common fish and marine life need to be counted as much as rare and cryptic critters. "It's like a treasure hunt on every dive," he says.

And the magic can happen anywhere, not just on the longer charity-organized jaunts. "That's what makes the REEF program so great," Grenda says. "You can dive where you want and still help the underwater world, just by sharing what you see."

JOIN IN

International survey trips start from \$903 for a week. Local projects vary from free day dives to inexpensive multiday field trips. reef.org



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TRAVELING TEACHERS

A volunteer project brought Lillie Marshall to teaching. Her teaching skills took her around the world. With her wealth of energy and experience, she founded TeachingTraveling.com, a site that lets instructors share their stories and inspire others who are eager to trade their briefcase for a backpack.

"We teachers work our tails off," explains Marshall, a 7th-grade Boston Latin Academy instructor. "But we have a remarkable gift of vacation time that no other career has. We really should take advantage of it."

She encourages dreamers to leap in, as travel is cheaper than most realize. By forgoing a car, for example, you could save thousands of dollars a year, she points out, which could pay for a year-long trip with careful budgeting. Many of us have skills that could be valuable to others. It's just a matter of finding the right fit.

Love of the Land

Affordable Voluntourism



JOIN IN

Weeklong trips start at \$315, including all meals and snacks. sierraclub.org



JILL McINTIRE DOESN'T JUST LOOK AT NATURE. She smashes and slashes it—all for a good cause as both a volunteer and service-trip leader for the Sierra Club.


The Californian grew up in a logging town where, she says, environmentalists weren't exactly popular. But a friend coaxed her onto a Sierra cycle trip in Hawaii. A few years later, McIntire began guiding tours.

"I can't sell anything and I fall asleep in meetings," she says. "But I can wield pruning shears and a shovel. All ways of protecting our Earth are worthwhile—from speaking in public to pulling weeds. I'm just better at pulling weeds."

Her most recent adventure led her to Koke'e State Park on Kauai Island, where volunteers cleared invasive blackberry and ginger plants. Now when people walk the trails, they can look into the forest and see native birds. "I don't know of any park that is sufficiently funded," McIntire says. "Everyone depends on volunteers to keep the land in shape, and it's good to know my work counts."

Roughly a thousand people sign up for Sierra Club volunteer vacations each year. The program dates back to 1958, two years before John F. Kennedy challenged students to serve their nation by living and working in developing countries, inspiring the creation of the Peace Corps. Attendance has been stable over the past 15 years, says Jason Halal, marketing manager for Sierra Club Outings. "It helps that 80 percent of our service trips are under \$700."

These volunteer vacations—from seeding grasslands to breaking rocks—cater to all fitness levels. Multigenerational projects appeal to families, like the week of trail-building in Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness (\$495 for adults, \$395 for children). The Sierra Club, and similar groups like the American Hiking Society, are part of 2012's hottest travel trends, says David Clemmons, founder of VolunTourism.org. With the upcoming Olympics, he predicts this year will see a boom in active, helpful vacations. And because of the economy, more North Americans will look for domestic projects rather than heading abroad, especially students on their year off.

"Voluntourism is slowly but surely weaving its way into our global collective consciousness," says Clemmons. It's a return to a forgotten way of life, one where people help each other along. 

CulinaryCorps (culinarycorps.org)

Chefs and other professional foodies help underserved communities. Weeklong projects include creating menus for people living with HIV and AIDS in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and launching an after-school cooking program for the Boys and Girls Club of the Gulf Coast. Participants pay a \$300 fee and raise funds to cover costs.

HelpX (helpx.net)

A listing service that lets you trade your time for room and board at a host of farms, ranches, hostels—even sailboats. It's not all mulching and cabin-building, though. The ads seek bookbinders, vegan chefs, recipe testers, music producers and mustang trainers, among other specialists.

Idealist (idealist.org)

A network that connects people seeking practical solutions to social and environmental problems. Some projects even provide stipends, like leading walking tours for Boston By Foot, teaching kids yoga in the greater Washington, D.C., area and running screen-print workshops at the San Francisco Public Library.

WWOOF-USA (wwoofusa.org)

Dig into the organic-farming movement with this worldwide network that swaps work for meals and accommodation. Locations include an Idaho bakery, a Vermont dairy farm, a Texan alpaca ranch, a Hawaiian macadamia orchard and a lavender farm in North Carolina.

Want other affordable ideas? You'll find 500 pages of suggestions in the new book "The Frugal Volunteer" by travel expert Nola Lee Kelsey.



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