

MAKING A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Travels that can really change you

For the volunteer-minded vacationer, the journey can lead away from the worries at home and toward a better world.

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The anatomy of travel is self-evident. We choose a destination. We make our travel arrangements. We pack. We go. We arrive. We devour. We satiate our desire to experience something new.

For the most part, we barely skim the surface of the culture.

But travelers can have a richer experience on the road.

"In helping others, we shall help ourselves," South African-born industrialist Flora Edwards wrote, "for whatever good we give completes the circle and comes back to us."

My journeys across the world relying on the kindness of strangers, chronicled in my TV show "Amazing Adventures of a Nobody," have shown me a different way to travel. I've come to know a motley group of individuals who travel to give. Dubbed voluntourists, these ambassadors of good traverse the globe collecting a different variety of souvenir in the shape of moments of life spent giving and memories to match.

I joined their ranks five years ago when I quit my office job, packed a backpack and turned my back on a privileged life in London. I never went back. Since then I've gallivanted to

more than 50 countries where I've been fortunate to experience the complexities of human nature.

I've learned that in hard times a helping hand has the power to foster hope, revealing the most common denominator that binds all mankind: the human heart.

Responsive tourism, conscious tourism, travel with a heart — whatever you want to call it, it is a powerful movement. Volunteer tourism can inspire a change in the people around you, in yourself and in the world.

Urubamba, Peru, was my induction into the movement. This town is nestled in the heart of the Urubamba Valley, about 30 miles from the magnificent Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. Urubamba lacks many basic amenities, leaving much room for improvement.

That's what prompted me to enter the world of the volunteer tourist. After searching the Internet for weeks, I felt as though I had found the ideal environment to create lasting change working through www.projects-abroad.com.

I spent a month working in a local school trying to foster learning and cross-cultural enlightenment. Leading English classes for 30 Peruvian children was a baptism by fire. But it was inspiring to nurture them, if only for a short time.

The sense of satisfaction from being with these kids — kids who had a sense of wonder about them — was priceless. These 8- and 9-year-olds craved knowledge, and the fact that a strange-looking foreigner was leading their class seemed to increase their desire to absorb something



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CONNECTING: Urubamba, in Peru's Sacred Valley, is often visited by tourists headed to Machu Picchu. The author taught English there.

I lived with a Peruvian family whose members were as fascinated by me as I was by them. (They received a small fee for hosting me.) Despite our apparent differences, we found a lot of common ground.

By the end of my 30 days, I felt as though I were a part of this magical town and its energetic and colorful people. I had connected with many wonderful inhabitants, some of whom I still consider friends.

One of them was a member of the organization I worked with. Duska Chavez, who recently founded the Mission America Peru school (www.missionamericaperu.org), understands how volunteer tourists make a difference.

"Mature volunteers who come with a real desire to help always make a positive impact on the local community," Chavez said. "Local families develop close relationships with volunteers that last for many, many years, and children, either in families or also in the local schools, overcome the speaking barrier, and they start to have interest in the foreign language.

"Especially here in the Sacred Valley, it will be more and more important for them to speak and understand English as tourism grows. . . . It is an exchange of culture, Peruvian children affection from volunteers, and volunteers realize the needs children and people have over here as well. It's definitely a give and take."

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/streetkids and /neworleans

Over there, over here

In Southeast Asia, training restaurants offer hope and a career to poor teens. Meanwhile, volunteers still flock to Katrina-ravaged New Orleans to help rebuild the city.

This direct contact with the heart of Peru touched a part of me that had been locked away most of my life. I finally embraced the concept that a life lived without giving is incomplete.

So, are you interested?

How to do it? You can be proactive and connect with nonprofits that cater to your cause and who work in the country of your destination. Or you can find an agency that specializes in such ventures.

Websites such as Voluntourism.org complement private travel sites that offer diverse volunteer experiences. And, sure, you can stay home and volunteer in your own community, but a total change of scenery might be good for you too.

At times I wrestle with my motives. Are they sincere, or am I doing this to assuage guilt? No matter what the cause, when you share a smile with a stranger and hear yourself laugh, your soul is humbled. Motives no longer matter.

"We make a living by what we get," Winston Churchill once said. "We make a life by what we give."

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