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COVER STORY

Feel-good tourism

Vacation or work? For local voluntrippers, it's both

By Kyra Kyles

RedEye

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Last year, Amanda Schulze spent weeks hiking through the scorching Kenyan desert scooping up animal excrement.

The Wicker Park distance-learning executive clocked some 12-hour days and spent late nights filling out detailed reports about the feeding habits and locations of leopards, lions, hyenas and other carnivores.

She slept in a cabin she shared with a roommate. They bathed in rain water because there was no running water, Schulze said.

And she paid \$3,500 for the experience.

"I've always wanted to go to Africa, but I wanted to volunteer while I was there," Schulze, 34, said of the three-week [EarthWatch](#) Institute excursion she took in August. "I love animals and I got so much more out of the experience than I would have just looking at the animals through the window of some safari truck."

Schulze is part of the newest wave of volunteer vacationing -- or "voluntourism" -- an activity long dominated by retirees and college students on spring break who have been more apt to mix vacation travel with community service.

More busy young professionals have entered the voluntourism fray over the last few years, using valuable vacation days and paying thousands of dollars to engage in activities from saving sea turtles in Costa Rica to caring for children with cancer in Brazil.

Bob Wurmstedt, a former director for the Peace Corps in Kenya, thinks the increasing popularity of volunteer vacationing among the twenty- and thirtysomething set has to do with the Internet making the world a smaller place. This mode of travel also gives busy professionals the ability to give back without having to uproot their lives, Wurmstedt said.



"You can do this without having to sell your car, quit your job and give up your apartment," said Wurmstedt, now a spokesman for Denver-based Volunteer Adventures, a 3-year-old spin-off of a language-training company that offers travel-and-community service packages in countries including Thailand, India and Ecuador. "Not everyone can make that kind of sacrifice."

Voluntourism industry consultant Alexia Nestora has another name for volunteer vacations: "Peace Corps.-lite."

Nestora said it isn't clear what exactly pushes young professionals toward volunteer vacations. She thinks devastating world events such as the 2004 Indonesian tsunami may be part of the inspiration. Another facet of the trend, Nestora said, is pre-teens traveling with their voluntouring parents and perhaps catching the bug to return to such service as adults.

"A lot of for-profits, as well as your standard not-for-profits, are finding themselves in high demand," Nestora said. "Think about it: You can help a community while gaining a cultural experience for yourself."

But make no mistake: Most volunteer vacations are far from a Sandals-style getaway, and even the most well-intentioned participants can find it difficult to deal. During her three weeks in Kenya, Schulze and six other volunteers were limited to just one hour of generator-powered electricity per night. Simple meals of fish and sandwiches sparked a processed-food withdrawal Schulze wasn't aware she had.

"Let's just say I didn't go there for the food," Schulze told RedEye with a laugh. "By the end, all I wanted was a tiny bite of chocolate, some pizza -- anything."

[Washington Park's](#) Robin Toewe said she "set the bar low" before heading off to Tanzania to teach basic computer skills and some kindergarten classes. Other travelers in her group didn't fare as well.

"We had people griping about having to bathe in dirty river water," Toewe, 39, said of her three-week trip. "But at least where we were staying had a flush toilet and a generator, which was more than I can say for the people we came to help."

Steve Schwartz, a teacher who lives in [River Forest](#), said during recent volunteer trips to Ghana and Mexico, some of his peers complained about the slow pace in developing communities.

"You have to go with the flow," Schwartz said. "In a restaurant, it may take you an hour-and-a-half to be served. You might not get a hot shower when you want it and transportation will break down."

"Hit-and-run" volunteering is another pervasive problem among some trip-takers, according to Michele Gran, a founder of not-for-profit Global Volunteers. Despite the firm's reluctant use of the "volunteer vacation" term (because of its popularity in Internet search engines), Global Volunteers travelers can expect to have a daily schedule similar to their 9-to-5 job, Gran said.

"It is not terribly helpful to a community if you go in there with set hours you wish to work, and times you want to start, offering assistance they haven't asked for," Gran said. "It simply exports the 'Ugly American.'"

Nestora, however, thinks developing communities are much more forgiving of their volunteer visitors. Though she once believed that voluntourists needed to work hard and for long hours to make a lasting impact, Nestora now thinks that every little bit helps -- and the key is getting the travelers to come back.

"You may not get a lot of people in their 20s and 30s who will want to do a grueling amount of work while using up the two weeks of vacation they get each year," Nestora said. "But if someone comes and volunteers, even for a day, finds something they believe in and goes back to the U.S. and sends back supplies or even more volunteers, who can argue with that?"

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What I did on my volunteer vacation

Local voluntourists who talked to RedEye said their experiences abroad were rewarding, but acknowledged the trips forced them to dig deep financially, cobble together vacation days and brace for life without Western amenities. Check out their travel tales.

- Steve Schwartz 37, teacher (Center)

Hood: River Forest

Volunteer destination/mission: Spent three weeks teaching social studies in Ghana in 2006 and two weeks teaching English in a community technical college in Mexico last year.

Average working hours a day: 4 hours (both trips)

Cost: \$1600 worth of frequent flier points and \$2,500 for Global Volunteers package to Ghana; \$2,200 for trip package and \$400 for airfare to Mexico

Where'd you stay? Hotel-class lodge in Ghana and actual hotel in Mexico

Highlight: "I taught some kids in Ghana how to play Ultimate Frisbee on a horrible, bumpy field that was rocky and uneven," Schwartz said. "After all, soccer is the preferred sport there, so we were relegated to the side and an outhouse was our end zone. The kids really took to it and I held a mock ceremony before I left where I dedicated the Frisbee to the kids."

Lowlight: Other volunteers who didn't go with the flow.

- Bianca Jayanty 20, DePaul student (third from left)

Hood: [Wrigleyville](#)

Volunteer destination/mission: Spent two weeks doing support work for children with cancer in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil

Cost: \$2,200 and \$1,000 for flight

Average working hours a day: 6-8

Where'd you stay? In a bed-and-breakfast

Highlight: "We worked at a pre-school the second week and we helped the teacher set out food and give supplies to the underprivileged kids," said Jayanty, who went with her sister, Amelia. "We were just giving out things like toothbrushes and toothpaste, things their parents couldn't afford to get them, and they were just so happy and had such a sunny outlook. They taught us more than we taught them."

Lowlight: Getting attached to the children. Jayantay said she and the other volunteers were devastated by the death of one of the children in the hospital. "You go there and you love the children, and you just don't expect them to pass away even though you know they are so sick," she said.

- Robin Toewe 39, not-for-profit financial (second from right)

Hood: Washington Park

Volunteer destination/mission: Spent three weeks teaching kindergarten classes and computer programs in Tanzania

Cost: \$4,000 (she sold her car to help with costs).

Where'd you stay?: Mission house with no electricity or running water

Average working hours a day: 6

Highlight: On New Year's Eve, Toewe and some other volunteers crammed into a pick-up truck, "Dukes of Hazzard-style," and traveled to a neighboring village to observe full Catholic mass conducted in Swahili. "The whole ceremony was lit by lamp light and there was the most unbelievable choir singing and children dancing traditional dances," Toewe said. "It was magical."

Lowlight: Working with a medical clinic where the lack of running water made it necessary for patients to sleep on dirty sheets.

- Kyra Kyles

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Know before you go

Three things to know before joining the voluntourism trend.

- Find a reputable provider: "Don't just go for the glitziest Web site," warns voluntourism industry consultant Alexia Nestora. "Find out what the security protocol is, what do they do if you get sick or hurt, and ask what their on-boarding procedure is."

- Do your research: "Ask to speak with someone who has gone on the trip before," Nestora says.- Get the scoop on fitness requirements: Not all trips require you to be in shape, but make sure you ask about the physical requirements of even the most mild-mannered sounding missions.

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VOLUNTOURISM BY THE NUMBERS

A survey released in February from Conde Nast Traveler and msnbc.com shows that volunteer tourism, the idea of incorporating volunteer work into travel, is, indeed, growing in popularity. Here's a look at some of the survey results.

55%

Percentage of respondents who expressed an interest in taking a volunteer vacation.

95%

Percentage of respondents who have taken a volunteer vacation who said they'd be somewhat or very likely to take another.

62%

Percentage of respondents who had not taken a volunteer vacation who said they'd be somewhat or very likely to take one.

TOP-RANKING VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

1. Teaching (66% of respondents) 2. Working with children (62%)

3. Doing scientific or environmental work (60%)

Source: conde nast traveler and msnbc.com

KKYLES@TRIBUNE.COM

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