

Why Not Make Your Next Trip a Volunteer Vacation?



One option for finding volunteer vacation opportunities in the United States or overseas is the nonprofit organization Just Give. To view a list of resources for potential volunteers, visit the organization's website, www.justgive.org.



Is your idea of a perfect vacation spending time alone on a beach with a good book? Or would you prefer a more active vacation where you are part of a group, constantly challenging yourself, and using your talents and skills to help others? If the latter sounds more appealing, then a volunteer vacation might be right for you.

Why take a volunteer vacation?

Having the chance to give back, meet new people, form friendships, and immerse yourself in a different culture are some of the top reasons to take a volunteer vacation. And no matter why and where you choose to travel, you'll have experiences that are not available to the average tourist.

A volunteer vacation also allows you to work with others who share your interests. For example, if you love the outdoors, you can work with park rangers on a national parks project in the United States or travel with a conservation group to Peru. Or if you've always wanted to work with children, you can find a service project at an orphanage in Haiti, or volunteer at a camp for children with special needs in Hawaii.

Who can serve as a volunteer?

Whether you're a solo traveler, a retiree, a student, a family with younger children, or a grandparent with teenage grandchildren, you can find a suitable volunteer opportunity. Many vacations don't require any experience—just a willingness to help and enjoy the camaraderie of working with individuals from your host community and members of your volunteer group. However, you'll get more out of your trip if you find one that matches your interests, skill set, and stamina level. Though you can choose to travel to a remote location or an underdeveloped country, you can also make a difference in a less adventurous setting. For example, you can help teach English at a school in a major city, work on an art conservation project in a museum, or care for injured animals at a zoo. The choice is yours.

What can you expect from your trip?

Trip length varies, but many last from one to four weeks. During that time, you'll be expected to devote a substantial number of hours to project work.

Yet volunteer vacations aren't all work and no play. Trips generally incorporate rest days or leisure periods where you're free to explore on your own or participate in a group tour, giving you unique insight into the area and a chance to unwind.

How much will your trip cost?

Some people are surprised to learn that there's a cost associated with volunteering, but you'll generally need to pay for your own travel expenses. Your trip may cost hundreds or thousands of dollars, depending on your destination, itinerary, and accommodations.

You may be able to offset part of the cost of your trip by deducting certain trip-related expenses when you file your federal income tax return. To get any tax benefits, your trip must be sponsored by a qualified organization (check with the charity or the IRS); the personal element of your trip must be insignificant (i.e., the time spent on pleasure, recreation, or vacation); and you must itemize your income tax deductions. You can generally deduct actual unreimbursed costs related to your volunteer service (such as airfare, lodging, and meals) but you can't deduct the value of your time or services. These are just general guidelines—for more information, ask your tax advisor and review IRS publication 526, Charitable Contributions.

What questions should you ask?

Before you sign up for a volunteer vacation, it's very important to make sure that you're traveling with an organization you trust. Trips may be sponsored by churches, national or global nonprofit volunteer organizations, or for-profit companies. Here are some of the questions you should ask before signing up. Some of this information may be found in literature provided by the sponsoring organization:

- How long has the group or organization been conducting volunteer vacations?
- How large is the volunteer group?
- How experienced are the team leaders? How well do they know the culture and the area?
- Will training be necessary, and if so, when and where will it be provided?
- What does the trip fee cover? Airfare? Meals? Transportation to the work site?
- Are costs or fees refundable? Make sure you read all policies and understand what will happen if you're unable to travel.
- What about insurance? You may be asked to provide proof of health insurance, or if traveling overseas, purchase medical and emergency evacuation coverage.
- How do you prepare, and what will you need to bring? You should be given a checklist of tasks to complete before your trip, and packing guidelines.