



By Sheila Sobell and Richard N. Every

Vacations that **PAY IT FORWARD**

GUIDED BY AN ALASKA NATURE TOURS RANGER, we are training a telescope through the treetops to determine which eagle nests are active, and how many young they contain. As part of the Eagle Nest Survey, our mission in Haines, Alaska is to collect data concerning the number and health of the year-round population for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For the rest of the day in our role as citizen scientists, we will try to locate infestations of invasive plants so local scientists can plan an eradication program, and monitor streams to determine if fish now are able to pass through previously blocked culverts to reach their rearing habitat.

This hands-on experience is part of Holland America's Cruise with Purpose program that lets passengers explore the science behind the scenery and sites in both the United States and abroad.

"Introduced in Juneau in 2009, Cruise with Purpose shore excursions turn vacation time into an exciting give-and-

VOLUNTEER SCENES

(1) Evaluating if unblocking Sawmill Creek allows more fish to spawn upstream. (2) Mardiana B. Naras locates her home in Jakarta. (3) Checking how many eagle nests contain young on a HAL excursion. (4) Keiko Matsubara of the Gifu, Japan FFI with Elza dos Santos of the Sao Paulo-ABC, Brazil FFI in Japan. (5) A park volunteer assists visitors. (6) Lisa Huff with family in Romania.

take opportunity – combining traditional tour content with the chance to provide meaningful volunteer efforts," says Holland America Line Erik Elvejord, director of public relations.

HAL offers a couple of dozen tours from sea turtle releases to flora research collections and whale documentation. For example, one tour in Alaska takes guests on an exploration vessel

out of Auke Bay to look for and help document individual, humpback and orca whales by their tail "fingerprints" and record their songs using an underwater microphone. Participants also collect water samples and record ocean temperature readings. All collected data and water samples are contributed to the body of research maintained by Alaska Sea Grant's Marine Advisory Program.

What we love about being a scientist for a day is learning about Alaska's ecology. We count eagles, toads, fish and invasive plants, and feel that we can be counted on to help save the planet one minnow at a time.

Giving back to the global village is becoming a small but significant trend among cruise lines. Some charge excursion fees, others don't. Whatever the dollar value, the chance to give back is priceless.

CHANGING CHILDREN'S LIVES

When Lisa Huff, an Arizona physician, was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 50, she spent a year in treatment, pondering the legacy she wanted to leave her children.

"I always wanted them to realize that volunteering was fun, something to continue throughout their lives," she says. "I started looking for options we could do as a family and came up with Global Volunteers, which worked with UNICEF on community projects to help children."

When Huff was well, she and her husband took their daughters, ages 11 through 21, to Peru as part of Global Volunteers. They spent a week volunteering at their own expense at a medical clinic and a children's home for orphans and underprivileged youngsters.

Each year, tens of thousands of families like Huff's swap traditional vacation options for innovative volunteer programs. Many find the experience so life changing that they return for more. The Huffs have been Global Volunteers in Ghana, Poland, Romania, Ecuador and St. Lucia.

"Our girls aren't as superficial about the young adult experience now," she says. "They care more about people's feelings. It's also changed how we travel. Instead of looking at the standard tourist sites, we talk to the people who live there, learn new things about them and develop relationships."

Her eldest daughter, now a Duke University senior, switched her major to cultural anthropology and global health.

"Global Volunteers taught her that before you can say 'This is what you need,' you have to first understand their values and culture," Huff says.

A private, nonprofit, non-sectarian and international human and economic development organization founded in 1984, Global Volunteers delivers essential services like construction, child care and educational campaigns in 19 countries on five continents.

The program costs between \$995 and \$3,000, and has attracted more than 28,000 volunteers from 27 countries. Like the Huffs, 37 percent of volunteers are repeats.

EXPLORE, UNDERSTAND, SERVE

Since 2000, Minden, resident Bruce Mitchner, a retired electronics engineer, and his wife, Linda Sekiguchi, a former elementary school teacher, have been breaking down barriers that separate people through Friendship Force International, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Atlanta. Since its inception in 1977, visiting ambassadors from 58 countries have spent a week in a host family's home "becoming temporary citizens, learning about a culture and a country from the inside."

FFI was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 because of its efforts to create deeper understanding between American and Russian citizens through home exchange programs.

So far Mitchner and Sekiguchi have visited eight countries and hosted 10 families. The most meaningful part of the experience to Mitchner was gaining cultural insights and

breaking down stereotypes.

"When Linda lived in Germany in the '70s, she experienced a lot of anti-American feeling," says Mitchner. "Because we had been told that Germans aren't very friendly, when we went to stay with a couple in Wolfsburg in 2004, we just expected them to take us on tours, not to dinner with their neighbors and to introduce us as their American friends! We were really impressed with how the Germans had changed."

FFI also offers themed humanitarian, teacher and student exchanges.

SAVING THE PLANET

Growing up, Penny Wilmington's parents instilled the message that "nature is ours to protect." The family spent summers camping in national parks, a passion that eventually led Wilmington to an academic career in plant research.

When she retired, volunteering at Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park in the Volunteers in Parks program as a Jill-of-all trades was the perfect fit. She spends about four months, volunteering 32 hours a week in activities like teaching Boy Scouts about exotic plants eradicating non-native plant species, and answering telephone questions about VIP. Considered an intern because of her extensive time commitment, Wilmington gets a perk of free accommodations in a park efficiency apartment.

"This is my opportunity to protect our national parks," she says. "I also enjoy meeting visitors and volunteers from other states and other countries."

More than 2.5 million people have volunteered in the VIP's 400 parks. **RM**

Reno residents Sheila Sobell and Richard N. Every are professional worldwide travel writers who contribute frequently to RENO Magazine.

PHOTOS (1) AND (2) BY SHEILA SOBELL; OTHERS COURTESY OF THE FRIENDSHIP FORCE INTERNATIONAL, THE U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, AND GLOBAL VOLUNTEERS.