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## **ARE YOU CONSIDERING A “VOLUNTEER VACATION” THIS YEAR? Examine Options to Ensure You Help, Rather Than Harm, While Abroad**

**By Michele Gran, Global Volunteers vice president**

The idea of combining service with international travel is taking its place as a viable mainstream choice in today’s travel scene. Recent headlines herald “volunteer vacations” as one of the top travel options for 2007.

As more and more travelers opt for this type of vacation, so too the range of opportunities expands. But not all “volunteer vacations” are created equal. Global Volunteers urges prospective international volunteers to carefully choose programs structured primarily for the benefit of the host community.

When the term “volunteer vacations” was coined by travel guide author Bill McMillan in 1993, the book "Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others" listed Global Volunteers and 79 other non-profit organizations.

Today, more than 2,000 NGOs as well as for-profit companies share the category of “volunteer vacations.” But not all of these offer genuine human and economic development assistance to the people they claim to serve. Most well-intentioned volunteers may not realize that hastily contrived projects riding the current “voluntourism” trend can in fact, leave grossly unfavorable impressions in host countries – and risk the wholesale reputation (and tax deductibility) of American volunteer efforts abroad.

Mutually beneficial international volunteer opportunities are full-time programs, and prepare volunteers to serve ethically and sensitively in the host country. They’re grounded in a long-term community development commitment, and contribute not just volunteer labor, but funds to support the volunteer work projects. Anything less potentially reinforces “Ugly American” stereotypes by simply dressing “do-gooder” programs in humanitarian clothes.

Global Volunteers pioneered short-term international service programs in 1984 to engage American volunteers in meaningful projects abroad. Foremost is a focus on sustainable development – enabled through ongoing international partnerships, and knowledgeable volunteer preparation and management. Further, we share a common commitment with long-term development NGOs: To encourage and support local self-reliance. Global Volunteers’ local host partners strive to engage volunteers fully in the day-to-day life of their communities, without exploiting local people for the volunteers’ benefit. By working together, program participants working alongside local people can be fulfilled while addressing important community needs.

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Some part-time volunteer itineraries clearly fall short. Those that feature a day or two touring orphanages or a few hours a day working in a school can give the feeling of connecting with local people, but in fact, may be unbalanced in the “volunteer’s” favor -- costing local people more effort than the volunteer contribution merits. By contrast, true international partnerships focus on ongoing local investment, and engage team members in work projects that support local leaders’ vision, commitment and contributions.

Emergent “voluntourism” offerings – with their implied emphasis on *tourism* in place of service – threaten to weaken the very foundation that gave rise to these opportunities over two decades. We encourage prospective volunteers to select options which channel their efforts through work projects for one, two or three weeks... not just a few hours. If uninformed, volunteers can find themselves part of something far different from what they expected.

To learn more about Global Volunteers’ Philosophy of Service and our development-based service programs, please visit: <http://www.globalvolunteers.org/serve/development.asp>

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