

traveling for a good cause

For San Francisco's Julie Feldstein and her son, Peter, 12, the three weeks spent tutoring children in English in the Cook Islands was an unforgettable vacation.

There were high points and not so high points during the trip, Feldstein says. "It was an adjustment for Peter. I wouldn't say he fell in love with it right off the bat. But he said to me the other day, 'It's something I will always remember.' And I think as he gets older he will really value it."

As summer vacations loom, more parents and their children are giving up days at the beach for days building homes in Mexico, teaching English in Costa Rica, saving endangered sea turtles from extinction in Greece and mentoring homeless teens right here in America.

At a time when more than 28 percent of teens aged 16 to 19 are volunteering in some capacity – the highest percentage in nearly 20 years, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service – volunteer vacations for parents and their youngsters and teens are hot.

"It's a growing opportunity," says Michele Gran, the co-founder of Global Volunteers, which offers volunteer vacations for people of all ages in 20 countries. "We've always worked with families since we first started the program 25 years ago." However, while 20 years ago volunteer vacations were seen as a fringe, slightly risky thing to do, that's not the way it is anymore, she says, adding that her group is seeing a lot of intergenerational combinations of people working together.

Gran says tweens and teens are motivated to take volunteer vacations with their parents for a variety of reasons.

"I think some kids have a more mature



Kim Thompson and her daughter Mandy, 9, of Oakland, took a family trip to Costa Rica to work with people with mental and physical disabilities. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE THOMPSON FAMILY

cultural curiosity," Gran says. "For others, it's the allure of going to some new and slightly exotic place."

The payoff for teens is usually great, she says. "They recognize that kids the world over have the same interests and desires and they realize the impact they can have on the rest of the world. They can help in ways that they didn't think were possible by going on a program," she says.

There are an estimated 2,000 non-profit and for-profit organizations and companies worldwide offering volunteer vacations, Gran says.

With the Minnesota-based Global Volunteers, travelers work under the direction of local project leaders tutoring children, teaching conversational English or business skills to children and adults, renovating and painting community buildings and assisting in health care or with natural resource projects.

Last year, more than 2,300 people – several

28%

of teens aged 16 to 19 are volunteering in some capacity



Peter Feldstein, background, says the experience in the Cook Islands is something he'll remember forever. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FELDSTEIN FAMILY

Get Away for a Good Cause

There are many organizations that plan volunteer vacations both in the U.S. and abroad. Volunteer vacations can range from \$800 to \$3,000 and usually include food and lodging, ground transportation and some after-work community or cultural activities. Trips don't usually include airfare to and from the destination, car rental or entertainment.

Following some names and Web sites of popular organizations that can help you plan your trip.

- **Global Volunteers** – globalvolunteers.org.
- **American Hiking Society** – americanhiking.org.
- **Cross-Cultural Solutions** – crossculturalsolutions.org.
- **Global Citizens** – globalcitizens.org.
- **Habitat For Humanity** – habitat.org.

For a more comprehensive list, pick up a copy of *Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others* by Bill McMillon. The book lists more than 2,000 projects worldwide that depend on volunteers. Includes project summaries, contact information, prices, dates and locations of projects, and information about how to apply. Many but not all projects listed are appropriate for families.

hundred of them youngsters and teens – spent one, two or three weeks doing volunteer projects in 20 countries, including Australia, Brazil, China, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Ecuador, India, Italy, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Romania and the United States.

For Peter Feldstein, a straight A sixth grader who enjoys football and basketball, the task of tutoring English was challenging. “It was a little frustrating, it was very repetitive,” he says. “The whole day is doing the exact same thing.”

But it was also rewarding experience that taught him a lot about the world.

“I learned that I have a lot here, and the trip put things into perspective,” he says.

Even Peter knows that not every youngster or teen can handle the daily grind of tutoring. But Gran says there's a volunteer project suited for everyone as long as parents are honest about their child's strengths and weaknesses.

“(Parents) have to be very honest about their own child's maturity level. There are going to be some work projects that aren't going to be suited for them. Teaching English takes a level of maturity,” she says.

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Gran says Global Volunteers has something for everyone. "You need not let your skills or budget get in the way because if you truly want to make a difference in another culture, it's definitely something that you can do. We have programs that can accommodate any interest."

There are also ways to volunteer in another part of the world without going through an organization.

All three of Susan Gordon's children have built homes in Mexico through a program at St. Agnes Catholic Church in Concord, she says. The teens and some of their parents usually build three basic homes for people in La Morita, a poor border town about an hour from Tijuana, over the Spring Break holiday week.

Her son Alex, 16, went down to Mexico for the first time last year and it truly changed him.

"When he came back, he was a different person," Gordon says. "He was so much more confident. He felt so good about what he was able to accomplish and appreciative of what he had here. He was using his Spanish down there. He became a leader of the group. It was a transformation. It's way better than going to Disneyland."

Alex, a sophomore at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, says it was a rewarding experience for him. "Interacting with the kids kind of gave me perspective on how the world is other than in the United States. It just made me grateful for what we have here," he says.

The work – building walls and doing some roofing – was tough and the camping and living conditions (showing only a few times during the week-long trip) was also challenging, yet worth it.

"It made me feel good about myself, and it made me realize I was helping people other than myself."

Oakland's Kim Thompson and her husband, John Bliss, last year took their two children Tom, 11, and Mandy, 9, to Costa Rica to work with local people with mental and physical disabilities. As the children head into the pre-teen and teenage years, the couple wanted to give the youngsters a better understanding of the struggles of others, Thompson says.

"I feel we've been fortunate in our lives and we need to do something good for other people," she says. "And I need my children to understand that life isn't as great for everybody as it is for them. I want them to understand that if you are fortunate you should do something to help others."

Her daughter was apprehensive about going on the trip because she imagined a rough week of work with no beach or pool time, which she loves. "When we came back, the person who had the most to say was my daughter," Thompson says. "She couldn't stop talking about it." ♦

Kristin Bender is an East Bay-based journalist.

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