

TRAVEL 101

## How to Choose a Volunteer Trip

Hoping to leave a place better than you found it? Here's what to look for when signing up for a program that combines purpose with travel.



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For travelers interested in packing purpose into their trips, volunteer vacations offer opportunities to leave a place better than they found it. But time commitments, costs and the work required

varies. The following tips explore the variables that distinguish volunteer travel experiences.

### **Understand the spectrum of work**

Volunteer trips with the most impact require a significant work contribution. They tend to be run groups like [Global Volunteers](#), a nonprofit based in St. Paul, Minn., that has operated in 37 countries for 40 years. Volunteers usually have evenings and weekends free while living in communities where they are working.

For those seeking a balance of work and travel, a category of trips known as “voluntourism” combines lighter service and more time for tourism activities.

The website [Workaway](#), for example, lists global opportunities to volunteer, including [landscaping](#) in the Gulf Islands of Canada and [harvesting tea](#) in Vietnam. Workaway volunteers are expected to work five hours a day in exchange for shelter and some meals, and the website allows users to browse opportunities by country and by service subject.

### **Commit to at least one week**

Organizations that offer travel programs that last a week or two say short-term work can be powerful if well organized.

“With a group, you can get a lot of project work done,” said Chris Braunlich, the board chair and chief executive of the California-based nonprofit [Conservation VIP](#), which runs outdoor trips from the Scottish Highlands to Patagonia, Chile, that might involve building or maintaining hiking trails with a crew of six to 18 volunteers working roughly seven to eight hours most days.

### **Assess your impact**

Vet the organization you’re considering by looking for impact reports and asking questions.

“To avoid exploitation, find someone with long-term partnerships and ask them, ‘Where does my week fit into the service vision of this community?’” said Michele Gran, the co-founder and senior vice president of [Global Volunteers](#).

## **Prepare to pay**

Though travelers volunteer their time — and some programs, like those offered by Workaway, provide meals and overnight stays — many programs charge a fee to cover travelers’ expenses, including lodging, meals and local transportation.

“We want to make sure you are safe, well-fed and well-cared for so that when you hit the ground you have enough energy and motivation to do what you’re there to do,” said Ms. Gran, noting that Global Volunteers maintains tourist-class lodging and meal standards.

Fees vary based on the destination and duration. A week with [Habitat for Humanity](#), the nonprofit that builds affordable housing and community amenities around the world, generally [costs](#) \$1,625 to \$2,500 a person.

“Volunteers who pay tend to be more serious,” said Julie Kelley, the founder of [Let’s Be S.M.A.R.T.](#), a cat shelter near Athens, Greece, that accepts free Workaway volunteers and those who pay through [Natucate](#), a Germany-based service that lists volunteer vacations. The latter receive better accommodations and more perks.

Whether there’s a fee or not, most volunteer programs do not cover travel expenses such as airfare.

Check the volunteer organization’s tax status. If you volunteer with a registered nonprofit, the I.R.S. will allow you to [deduct your trip](#), including airfare, as a charitable donation.

Targeting hikers and backpackers, the nonprofit [American Hiking Society](#) ranks from easy to very strenuous its volunteer vacations that focus on building and maintaining trails. Trips that involve

backpacking, such as a recent program in the Bitterroot National Forest of Montana and Idaho (\$425), require volunteers to bring their own camping gear.

Conservation VIP targets travelers who are concerned about their impact on the world by tackling projects in bucket-list destinations such as the Cinque Terre in Italy (to restore its stone-walled terraces) and the Galápagos Islands in Ecuador (to participate in sea turtle research and habitat protection).

Domestic trips include a week of trail maintenance in [Yosemite National Park](#) in Northern California based at a campsite not open to the public and including catered meals (\$1,090).

Gardeners will find opportunities like raising organic produce for people in need in Romania with [International Volunteer HQ](#), based in New Zealand (\$504 for one week). And those who [sew or knit](#) can join a women's cooperative in Cuba to create and teach islanders to make clothing through Global Volunteers (\$2,790 for a week).

Pet shelters often use animal lovers to help with the care and feeding of their residents. At [Best Friends Animal Sanctuary](#) in Kanab, Utah, visitors can work with cats, dogs, horses and other orphaned animals (free, though volunteers pay for local accommodations, food and transportation).

### **Apply your skills**

Most service organizations say that no special skills are required. But volunteers with experience in construction, teaching, gardening and child care will find many opportunities to contribute.

Don't underestimate your abilities. For example, many of Global Volunteer opportunities, including working with Ukrainian refugees in [Poland](#), involve practicing conversational English with foreign language speakers and don't require the volunteer to know the local language.

## **Spread the word**

Many organizations thrive on word of mouth to carry their message and generate new volunteers.

In Northern Thailand, the sanctuary [Elephant Nature Park](#) — which supports rescued elephants and has been internationally recognized for responsible tourism — relies on volunteers to spread its anti-cruelty message. Day tours help fund the operation. [Volunteers](#) who stay longer can help with their care. “When they go back home, they are really keen to educate their friends and community,” said Saengduean Chailert, the sanctuary’s founder.