

The ethical volunteering guide

Seven Questions to help you pick an
ethical international volunteering placement

For more information visit:
www.ethicalvolunteering.org

Get the most, give the most

People who volunteer generally hope to do something that they will find interesting, something they will learn from and something that will help other people. However, choosing between all the possible projects and organisations is more complex than just signing up with the first one to show you exciting pictures and an interesting blurb.

To get the most out of international volunteering you need to put effort into choosing who you go with and what you do. For while there are some fantastic projects to take part in, there are also those that are poorly organised and exploit both hosts' and travellers expectations.

These seven questions are designed to help you learn as much about the quality and value of the projects or placements an organisation offers BEFORE you arrive in the country, with your newly packed backpack and a whole bundle of expectations.

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Q1. Exactly what work will I be doing? Can the organisation provide you with a brief job description?

An organisation with a good volunteer programme should be able to tell you *what* you will be doing, including how many hours a day, how many days a week and what sort of work it will be. For example, if an organisation offers a placement in a school, this may or may not be teaching. Likewise, a placement may involve 50 hours a week or, and this does happen, a mere 4. The greatest source of dissatisfaction for volunteers usually comes from not doing what they planned (and paid) to do.

Q2. Does the organisation work with a local partner organisation?

If a volunteer programme is to be of value to a local community it should work with, rather than be imposed on, that community. Good useful programmes will have been built in collaboration with a local partner organisation. Find out who that partner is and find out about the relationship. Key things to look for are whether someone from the local organisation is involved in the day to day management of your project, what sort of consultation went on to build that project, and why the project is of value.

Q3. Does the organisation make any financial contribution to its volunteer programs? If so exactly how much is this?

Many volunteer organisations charge a lot of money, but where does it all go? Volunteer programmes need funds as well as labour; indeed, in much of the world, unskilled labour is often one thing of which there is little shortage. The most important thing is that your organisation is up front about how your money is spent. So ask where your pennies are going, and be persistent about getting a clear figure not a percentage of profits. Also, be aware that payments for your own food and lodging often do not assist your volunteer programme.

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Q4. Does the organisation have policies on eco and ethical tourism? If so, how are they implemented?

Running volunteer programmes is an ethically complex. If you really want to make a valuable contribution to the community you work with then you have a responsibility to ensure that the organisation with which you travel has proper the eco and ethical policies. Look for organisations that have a long-term commitment to a community, employ local staff and have some mechanism for local consultation and decision-making. Otherwise, how do you know that the clinic you built is really needed? That an adult literacy programme is not more relevant than a new bridge, or that when you have left there will be the funds and commitment to maintain the project upon which you have worked?

Q5. What time frame is the volunteer programme run on?

A well-structured volunteer programme should have a clear time-frame, and organisations should know from one year to the next whether a programme will continue. Programmes, and especially placements, that just occur once can be problematic. For example, if you are acting as an English teaching assistant for a month or two what happens the rest of the school year? Are other volunteers sent or is the placement simply ended? It may be very disruptive for a class, a school or an orphanage to have a constantly changing quantity of staff. Establishing the level of commitment an organisation has to a given project or placement is vital in establishing the quality, and therefore value, of that volunteer programme.

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Q6. Can the organisation give you precise contact details for your chosen programme?

Organisations tend to work in one of two ways. The better ones build a relationship with a host organisation, identify local needs they can meet, arrange placements and projects and then fill the vacancies. A less positive approach is to wait for travellers to sign up and pay up, and then find relevant placements. A good organisation with well-run programmes should be able to let you know several months before you travel where you will be going and what exactly you will be doing. If they cannot, or will not, give you these details then be very wary of the quality of the programme. Hastily arranged programmes can be disorganised, leaving both volunteers and local hosts with unclear expectations.

Q7. What support & training will you receive?

Organisations offer vastly different levels of training and support. Look for an organisation that offers not only pre-departure training but also in-country training and support. As a volunteer you want to be as much use as possible, learn as much as possible and have as good a time as possible. Training in both the practicalities of your volunteer job and the culture of where you are travelling, will all help you get and give the most. Local support is also important. The type of programme you are on affects the amount of support required, but make sure you know what to expect before you go. If there is a local representative, how 'local' are they- just down the road, or several hours away by bus? Make sure there is somebody in the country with direct responsibility for you. All projects require some problem solving at some point and you will need someone on hand to help you with this.

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A guide to ethical volunteering

International volunteering can be a wonderful way to explore another country, meet new people, learn new things and have new adventures.

It is now possible to find organisations providing volunteer placements in almost any corner of the world. But are all these projects really worth your time or your money? Are they doing any good or more harm than good?

This is your guide to the questions to ask, and the answers to look for as you try to pick between the great opportunities and the great opportunists waiting for you out there.

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This guide is written and produced by Dr. Kate Simpson