



Goodwill Hunting: Finding an Ethical Volunteer Overseas Organization

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In an impoverished barrio in Managua, a young woman from an American volunteer-sending agency throws handfuls of cheap candy off the back of a pickup truck to hungry children running behind. She turns to her friend and says, “I’m having an amazing experience here in Nicaragua!”

This true story happened years ago but it clearly shows the importance of ethical volunteering. Just what kind of organization had taken her program fees and set her up in this unsafe and counter-productive scene? This well-intentioned, but poorly primed volunteer needed three essentials: preparation, partnership, and perspective.

Ethical volunteering is characterized by an honest and shared understanding of what you are doing overseas and why; who you are doing it with (not for); and how to do it effectively. Having that clarity before hitting the ground keeps you focused on offering genuine service while learning a lot about yourself and the world in a fun and challenging way.

Ask Pointed Questions

Before stirring up dust in another country, a volunteer can do a lot to ensure they are working with an organization that does more than deliver short term gratification and power trips. Looking beyond glossy brochures, flashy websites and goodwill buzzwords, volunteers can ask pointed questions. For example: what preparation materials and resources do you provide before my departure? What would my weekly schedule look like? Does it include a healthy balance of volunteering, cross-cultural living, and recreation? How will I have an authentic opportunity to explore and reflect in the political, economic, and social culture? May I speak with some returned volunteers?

Since every reputable volunteer experience relies on in-country representatives, one of the most important questions is: who are the organization’s local support people and what are their roles and responsibilities? Where does their coordination of the placement end, and my knowledge, skill, and openness to learning begin? Can they provide orientation on topics like body language, clothing, gender roles, poverty, history, health, and safety? Are they available to assist with unforeseen issues and emergencies?

Follow the Money

Detecting where volunteer abroad agencies spend their money is revealing. Many under-confident volunteers have overpaid agencies to make straightforward accommodation, language school, and generic volunteer placement arrangements in exotic tourist towns. On the other hand, many over-confident volunteers have not paid sufficiently to access professional networks of support invisible to solo travelers. A volunteer abroad organization requires enough of a program fee to legitimately sustain its staff and overhead, but not so much that it exploits either the volunteer or their overseas counterparts.

Find out if in-country staff receive a fair wage--or does the low price of your program come at the expense of low paid coordinators and translators? Are host families remunerated at reasonable rates of profit or on a cost-recovery basis only? Are drivers and cooks paid a respectable amount that provides for their families and takes into consideration the intermittent nature of their work due to your comings and goings?

How does the organization recognize the work of training and managing volunteers? Does the volunteer organization support the host site with donations, visits, or professional development?

Support the Local Economy

If you're offering manual labour on a construction site or environmental project, does the organization use some of your program fees to employ local leaders to direct the effort? Does it use your money to purchase appropriate materials and contribute to the local economy? What amount or percentage? The degree of transparency with which organizations answers these questions demonstrates their operating principles and ethics.

The duration of a volunteer experience has ethical implications too. Many teens, young adults, professionals, and family members have short time frames to accomplish their goals. Whether it is one week or one year, a definite difference can be made. The trick is to match your timeline with modest expectations of yourself and your host site.

Be Prepared

Longer term volunteers have a better chance to understand and integrate ethical decisions into their efforts, however short term volunteers still have an equal opportunity to arrive ready. Online research, past participants, and your carefully selected volunteer organization all have best practices to share. The discipline of preparation is just as important as the excitement of travelling. Comments like "I was over-prepared" and "I regretted being so ready" are never seen on volunteer evaluation forms.

To enjoy a volunteer placement that does good for you and others, make it your priority to prepare well, to partner with ethical organizations, and to have clear, purposeful and realistic goals. These will be your vehicles to sweet success!

For more information on ethical volunteering visit www.ethicalvolunteering.org

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