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Volunteer Tourism - an Experience with a Difference by William Davis

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As people increasingly began to explore other nations and their cultures, opportunists struck gold by satisfying the urge of tourists looking to experience the world. It was a win-win for both tourists and tourism organizations; while one made money, the other felt happy that S/He added to the economy of the country that they visited. Little did they know that theirs was a negative influence on the local people, their culture and of course their environment!

Tourism companies trying to get rid of this negative publicity then cultivated a niche market by way of volunteer tourism. Tourists from developed countries who were looking to add value to their host nations were introduced to the local people who needed help to rise above the situations that they were unfortunately placed. They build schools, dug trenches, laid water pipes and even tutored children in the countries that they visited. Volunteer tourists were also engaged to help the cause of the environment that theyâ€™re exploring. Thus, you could travel to New Zealand and help locals preserve the kiwis, or track iguanas in the Grand Caymans, even as you engage in some whale watching or scuba diving. You can even customize the package, choosing as much or as little as you want to volunteer even as your stay in luxury resorts!

But this form of tourism eventually came under criticism because contrary to what volunteer tourists believed, they didnâ€™t really add value to the place they were visiting. In fact, they were taking away jobs that would have otherwise been given to the locals. Rather than focusing on the wellbeing of the local community, tourist companies were driven by profitability, thereby taking advantage of well intentioned volunteers.

But not all volunteer companies can be classified under the same category. Gap Year Programs, for example, are fashioned on the lines of the Peace Corps volunteer programs. The projects are conducted in coordination with the local community, where the local members are made to own the projects, thereby ensuring a two way commitment. Locals are taken into confidence when a project is undertaken to ensure that nothing is detrimental to their culture, environment, or the economy. Typical features included in Gap Year Programs include:

â€¢ Project during ranges from 3 weeks to up to 3 months. This is done to ensure that the volunteers get to spend some time with the locals to understand them and empathize with them.

â€¢ Volunteers arenâ€™t made to stay at luxury resorts. They are typically made to live with the locals in their homes, so that the money stays within the local community. Such an arrangement is contrary to the luxury voluntarism propagated by a few tourist companies.

â€¢ Project coordinators undertaking the Gap Year Programs help volunteers choose the right kind of program-one that is best suited for their skills and interests.

Besides Gap Year, there are several other companies that have truly understood the essence of volunteer tourism and are striving to work for the people from whom theyâ€™ve made progress.

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William Davis - About Author:
The author of this article has years of experience in the field of volunteer tourism and has been writing reviews on these companies including a Gap Year Programs. For those who are yet to be initiated, a gap year programs are volunteer tour programs arranged in and around South Africa.

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