

# Voluntourism travellers are reaping the rewards

Have you ever considered a holiday with a difference or wanted to help those living in poverty on a physical scale? Voluntourism has seen a spark in popularity over the past five years with more and more Australians taking advantage of sharing their compassionate attitudes with the world. Kate Dzienis finds out from the experts why the trend is now stronger than ever.

When thinking of going on a holiday and taking time out from the normal hustle-and-bustle of everyday life, most people consider buying an airfare to see a city or country they have never been to before to relax perhaps on a secluded tropical beach, see the monuments and buildings of a busy metropolis or witness natural and man-made miracles like the Eiffel Tower or pyramids.

But over the past five years a trend has been slowly creeping through the world of tourism, achieving more popularity with more and more outlets catering to the market.

Voluntourism is the heart and soul of a voluntary service where travellers combine volunteer work with the traditional elements of tourism – living amongst the natives, learning cultures, speaking traditional languages and meeting fellow volunteers who have similar passions and interests.

In today's world, war and poverty has taken a grip on everyone's life – whether you're affected personally or simply taken aback by the horrific stories of survival, struggle or challenge by others, thousands of Australians reach a point of self-realisation at some stage in their lives where they want to do something for the greater good.

Nowadays with so many voluntourism adventures available via charity groups like Habitat for Humanity, more and more travel agencies are also slowly hanging on the back of the trend, providing

opportunities for everyday Australians who want to do a couple weeks' work away.

World Expeditions responsible tourism manager Donna Lawrence says well seasoned travellers are looking for more than just a holiday these days and see voluntourism as an opportunity to combine their travels and give back to the world by participating in particular charitable projects like helping in the construction



A volunteer group in Arnhem Land clean up the shores; they dig out a net, which can kill marine life. Photograph — Steve Trudgeon.

of a Kenyan primary school or teaming up with the Yolngu Aboriginal people in north east Arnhem Land, on our own soil, to assist with conservation and clean up of the coastline.

"Travellers respond really well to building and restructuring schools in under-developed countries, they seem to hit a note with people and we haven't seen any school project not go ahead through voluntourism," she says.

"Our community project travel program was developed in response to the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 – Australians were

hit so hard by that because it was close to home and a lot of our travellers not only wanted to donate monetary funds to the rescue and recovery efforts but they wanted to fly over and help out physically."

With thousands of Australians realising the benefits of helping others and coming to terms with the notion that life is short, voluntourism can be justified as an action whereby youngsters of today are instilled with values and morals when they see family members and friends participating in it.

Curtin University associate lecturer in public relations and tourism marketing Karen Kerlin says the idea of a younger generation seeing a set of young adults or families going off and doing something more meaningful on their holidays has a deeper meaning behind it.

"When people come back from a volunteering holiday and they think to themselves that not only have they had a great trip but they've done something purposeful, it creates a stronger sense of reason in life," she says.

"There's a raw sense of humanity when you see the effect voluntourism trips have.

"Realistically you don't have to go overseas to pull yourself out of the doldrums, so to speak, to volunteer however if we look at the magnitude of people's issues, third world countries are combating much bigger problems like sanitation, general population control and starvation."

There is a possibility that the whole third world country scenario is about creating a

greater sense of change on the globe but whichever way you see it, voluntourism is not a passing fad that will disappear over time.

With population growth and political unrest, Australians have a sense of compassion to help bring peace and our relaxed attitudes to the forefront.

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