

Wide range of work to help improve life

Sarah Nicholson

IT SEEMS the options are endless – working with lion cubs in South Africa or elephants in Sri Lanka; building homes for disadvantaged families in Swaziland or Costa Rica; constructing a school in Cambodia; teaching English in Nepal or Zanzibar; getting clean water to a village in Peru; doing conservation projects in Arnhem Land or the Galapagos Islands.

If you're keen to spend your next holiday volunteering on a project at home or in some far-off land, there's an organisation ready to make it happen, with companies such as World Expeditions, i-to-i, Conservation Volunteers Australia and G Adventures offering trips that mix a little work with a lot of adventure.

Donna Lawrence is the responsible travel manager at World Expeditions – she's one of the people charged with locating and managing charitable projects for intrepid travellers to work on – and says that while voluntourism has been around for a decade it's "really taken off" in the past five years.

"It started to happen around the time of the (2004) tsunami," Lawrence says. "We had a lot of travellers coming to us saying they wanted to do more than sponsor a child or donate money, they wanted to use their holidays to go and actually help, and while it wasn't practical to take groups into places where natural disasters had happened, we found there were destinations we could go to do meaningful community work."

She says that while there is always interest from the younger generations, "travellers who want to get more out of their travel experiences than just backpacking through a place", there is increasing curiosity from parents keen to take teenagers away to expose them to other ways of life.

"We also have a large portion of more mature travellers, people who have already done a bit of trekking and spent time travelling in developing nations, who have decided their time to do something has come now they've retired."

Community Project Travel is World Expeditions' not-for-profit wing that manages the voluntourism itineraries, and since

Preparations

SO, YOU'VE booked to do one of these volunteering holidays. What next?

Donna Lawrence has some tips.

- Get your general fitness levels up by doing a couple of walks every week.
- Gather the correct equipment, including walking boots, wet-weather gear, work gloves, safety shoes and overalls.
- Research the destination and learn about the cultural expectations so you don't offend anyone.
- Visit a doctor to get the necessary vaccinations and medication you might need when you're away.
- Do some fundraising for the village, or get friends to donate books and school supplies for the children.

the program was launched in 2005, the company has sent travellers to help on 37 humanitarian and conservation missions, with the bulk of work done in Nepal, Peru and remote parts of Australia.

The charitable endeavours will continue in 2012 with the World Expeditions' responsible travel manager lining up more projects in Nepal, Peru and Australia, as well as Tanzania, Kenya, Vietnam and Cambodia.

"We run as a not-for-profit so the project part of a trip is completely self-funded," Lawrence says. "While 60 per cent of the projects tend to be education based – installing water tanks at a school, painting walls in classrooms or building desks – everything is done at a grassroots level because something that seems so small and insignificant to us makes a huge impact on the locals.

"For example, we have been working on a medical clinic in

Nepal for three years, with four groups of our volunteers going in there during that time, and we're building a medical centre that serves hundreds of people from lots of surrounding villages.

"The project itself takes three or four days, and we spend another three or four days trekking into the village, and we need at least eight people to make the project viable in terms of the workforce but can take as many as 16 volunteers into that community.

"I make sure all the preparations have been done before the group arrives, I get the building materials to the location and employ locals with specific skills like electricians, and once the volunteers arrive they get a briefing then spend the next few days doing some hard yakka alongside the local people.

"There's a big celebration with the villagers at the end of the job, then the travel aspect continues with the volunteers seeing a bit more of the destination, but we find the most value aspect is getting an insight into the daily life of the Nepalese because the experience is like a cultural exchange."

Not every World Expeditions itinerary involves a long international flight, with the Arnhem Land Marine Rescue Project – one of the company's most popular voluntourism journeys – established to help clean the region's remote beaches, while the volunteers live with the Yolngu people, who are the traditional custodians of the land.

During the seven-day itinerary, which includes six nights camping in this isolated part of northern Australia, volunteers roam the beach removing fishing net, plastic bottles and other rubbish that's washed up on the sand, as well as spending time with the local Aborigines gathering food, listening to stories and learning about the culture.

With so many organisations offering voluntourism opportunities, there is something for everyone, but Lawrence says those considering a World Expeditions trip should have an open mind and want to do more than sit on the beach sipping cocktails during their next vacation.

"You need to have an adventurous spirit and not need the comforts of home," she says.

"You also need a good level of general fitness. It's not always easy work we're doing on these projects and the activities could range from lugging bricks to painting. The work does vary from one project to the next but you must be willing to put in some hard work."