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HOW MUCH DOES A VOLUNTEER VACATION COST?

For many potential volunteers, an early question when considering a volunteer vacation is – How much will my volunteer experience cost? This can be a good question and the answer is – It depends on how you find the volunteer work and plan your trip.

The next questions usually include - What does my money pay for? Where does the money go? What percentage of the money goes to the volunteer sending agency versus to the foreign non-profit or local community?

There are many avenues to find volunteer work both within your country or abroad. At one end, there is doing all the planning yourself. At the other end is using an established volunteer sending organization that offers one-stop-shopping. In between the two ends is a wide range of agencies that can offer you a similar international volunteer experience, but they may differ widely in preparation time, reliability, longevity of volunteer experience and overall cost. You may be drawn towards one end of the spectrum or the other and there are benefits and challenges of each.

Volunteer vacations within your own country will almost always be considerably less expensive than an international experience. However, when some people hear the words volunteer vacation, they assume it will be an inexpensive way to travel to a foreign country to help.

Depending on the location, airfare can be one of the largest expenses, particularly if you plan to travel part way around the world for your volunteer work. Other expenses are based on if you locate your work through a volunteer sending organization or if you plan to do all the coordination yourself.

VOLUNTEER AGENCIES AND COST

Why is there a cost at all? If the non-profit needing the volunteers had the budget, they would hire local workers. They are already in the area, know the language, and have some idea about the work. Because non-profits everywhere in the world depend on volunteers, they seek people from abroad who have the time, money and interest in the project. They are looking for people who are willing to pay their own expenses in order to have a chance to experience the local culture, be trained in the work and give of themselves and their talents to the non-profit.

To clear up a common misconception - there is almost never a cost to volunteer. Where the costs come from is for the on-the-ground expenses and infrastructure to support the volunteer project and to support the out-of-town volunteers and what it takes to bring the two parties together. These costs can include – pre-trip literature and logistics, housing, food, local transportation, insurance, locating agencies that need volunteers, work supplies and local staff to accomplish the work.

While cost can be a main concern for many volunteers, it is not always the only question of importance when considering a volunteer vacation

Some volunteer experiences can be found in almost every country around the world. (Teaching English, Habitat for Humanity, etc). Other projects are so specialized that there may be no other way to access the project without going through an agency. (Archaeology on Easter Island) This can mean a higher cost, but may also mean a higher standard of accommodation and reliability of the project.

The benefit of using an established agency is ease of planning and continuity and overall longevity of the project. They tend to offer established routines and schedule and have familiarity with the work and community. They usually have the infrastructure that can include reliability of hotels and food, airport pick up and local transportation and they generally offer insurance coverage during your trip. Finally, if the agency is a registered non-profit in your country, there is a possibility that a large portion of your fees and expenses may be eligible for a tax deduction. The challenge for this type can be up-front or total cost of the volunteer vacations.

THE “PLAN-IT-YOURSELF” VOLUNTEER VACATION

For an inexpensive volunteer vacation, the best options are usually in your own country. Obviously the airfare and the other logistics are far easier than traveling abroad and language is usually not a barrier.

But if an international experience is your desire, one way to economize is to take on all the planning responsibilities normally handled by a volunteer sending organization. The potential benefits may be a possible reduction in the overall price, greater flexibility in project and an even more in-depth cultural experience. If you have a tolerance for adventure and are already a savvy international traveler, this may be right for you. BE AWARE, planning a trip from scratch can take a lot of time on your part. You will need to be diligent to make sure you find a cause or job that will give you the type of experience you expect. Remember, self-planned trips may have no safety net (insurance or in-country support from home), and there may be only a slim chance that your expenses will be eligible for a tax deduction. It is highly recommended that you receive a definite commitment from the local non-profit before you leave home. Begin corresponding with the foreign non-profit and former volunteers well in advance of your departure.

Another way to economize is to find membership agencies, such as WWOOF (World Wide Workers on Organic Farms) or Green Volunteers. After joining either the international or the agency for the country you hope to visit, you receive a membership list of operations looking for

volunteers. You do all the contacting and arrange your own transportation to their location. At times you are housed and feed at no additional costs, other times you may pay a daily or weekly rate during your volunteer work.

Lastly, you can follow the advice from Guerilla Aid and wait to locate your volunteer work after you have arrived at your destination. In this case, you would have already made your lodging arrangements. Then you can approach your hotel or a local non-profit to find out if there are agencies that could use your assistance while you are in the area. This might be a good choice if you have limited days in a location during a longer trip.

The challenge for this type of volunteer vacation can be reliability of the work schedule, use of your time and the longevity of the program if volunteers do not continue to support their work.

COST OR PROJECT?

If you found a project through a volunteer sending organization and the price is higher than you expected, but it is exactly the type of project you want, you may need to either budget carefully, delay the trip until funds have been collected, or keep looking for a similar volunteer experience.

If you found a project that fits your budget but it is not that exciting to you, consider searching for another option. You may have to revisit your accommodation criteria or the location of your project to bring your trip within budget. Or consider raising your budget to accommodate your desired trip. If you absolutely must stay within your budget, check to see if a similar project is offered in a country closer to home or in your country.

If you are a novice international traveler or global volunteer, you may feel more comfortable using a volunteer sending organization for your first volunteer experience. They may cost a little more, but once you have located an interesting project, they handle most of the logistics for you. Generally, all you will arrange is your time away from work, flights, vacation logistics and any medical needs such as vaccinations or medications for the foreign locale. After your first international volunteer vacation, you will have a better feel for how to find your next volunteer experience.

Volunteer vacations can be life changing in so many ways. The amount of planning that you do prior to the trip is key to making your first trip a success. Take time to plan. Complete your due diligence about your personal goals and preferences. Research the type of project, agencies involved, the costs, and the communities served. Chose well, expect to have a great time, and then get out there and make a difference, not only to the world, but to you as well.

Until next month, please

Travel in Safety.

Jane