

THE TRAVELLING KIND

Brett Atkinson, on holidays with heart



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FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: A cheeky toddler in Chiang Rai; a new-born turtle receives a helping hand in Northern Queensland; living conditions in a Chiang Rai village; pupils in Chiang Rai keen to practise their English

THE EXPANDING ARMY OF tourists combining travel and community work is creating one of the travel industry's fastest growing sectors. A poll conducted by online travel specialists Travelocity revealed that 11% of respondents planned to incorporate volunteering in their 2007 travels, up from 6% in 2006.

Travellers of all ages are signing up to 'give something back'. Options include arranging your own travel and booking through a volunteer placement company, or joining one of the new breed of travel operators combining sightseeing and volunteering. Even adventure travel companies like Intrepid Travel and World Expeditions have climbed aboard, partnering with aid agencies to give their itineraries a tinge of volunteering. But are the well-meaning efforts of volunteers always making a difference, and if you're planning to combine travel

and volunteering, what questions should you ask before you leave?

As the volunteer travel market grows, so does the backlash. In Britain, *The Guardian* described volunteering as 'New Colonialism', as well-intentioned tourists infiltrate and influence developing communities across the globe. The head of VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) in Britain suggested that some short-term volunteers may actually do more harm than good. Critics maintain that some poorly planned projects can maximise the profits of volunteer companies, rather than produce beneficial outcomes for the host communities.

Two New Zealand-based companies are ensuring there is a tangible and measurable impact on the communities they work with. Through an alliance with Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA), Gecko Trails runs Addventures in Cambodia, Laos and Papua New Guinea. All Addventure trips work on projects where the local community has sought assistance

from VSA or Gecko Trails, and are focused on delivering achievable and sustainable results. Trips usually last 14 days, with the first week focusing on seeing the country followed by a village stay working on a community project. Part of the trip costs also fund longer-term VSA volunteers during their two-year assignments.

Hands Up Holidays is another Kiwi company making an impact in the growing area of volunteer travel. Founded in 2006 by Christopher Hill, a refugee from the fast moving world of corporate finance in London, the company now offers volunteer tourism trips across Africa, Europe, South America, Asia and the Pacific. Designed to fill a gap in the market between purely volunteer organisations and companies which only provide travel, Hands Up Holiday's growing roster of almost 30 destinations includes established favourites like Thailand and Fiji, and travel frontiers such as Serbia and Rwanda.

Hill is a pragmatist, and partners either with international charities, or increasingly, with local organisations that are most aware of the needs of the communities they serve.

"It depends on the situation. We are partnered with Tear Fund and Rotary in some countries, but mostly it's local NGOs, schools or charities with no parent organisation that we've developed relationships with."

Hill also recognises that successful volunteering needs ongoing local input.

"The communities tell us what they'd like to achieve and then it's up to us to market and promote it. After a trip, feedback is sought from the communities to find out if the goals were achieved, and if they're happy to have more guests come and volunteer."

www.geckotrails.co.nz
www.handsupholidays.com
www.responsibletravel.com
 - a searchable database of volunteer travel opportunities

BEFORE SIGNING UP

- Can the company provide you with a detailed job description? What you sign up for may not be what you end up doing. A recent volunteer to Tanzania went armed with building skills, but spent six months teaching rudimentary English instead.
- What training and support will you receive? Some volunteers have reported being immersed in unfamiliar activities with training and minimal support.
- Can you make contact with previous volunteers?
- How was their experience? Did they receive adequate training and support?
- Does the local community receive any income from the company? If so, what percentage of the cost of the trip? Some volunteer organisations can be glorified travel companies where the profit is more important than the needs of the communities they work with.
- How has the volunteer project been developed?
- Has the company developed the programme in conjunction with the local community? What are the medium and long-term aims of the project?
- How long has the company been working with the community? Long-term relationships are a good indicator of mutual trust and support. Avoid short-term or one-off projects.