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Vacations With Vision

Skip the beach and learn to teach this summer
BY DEBORAH ABRAMS KAPLAN

Like Lewis and Clark did in the 1800s, Steve Mussack spent a summer crossing Lemhi Pass from Montana to Idaho.

"We used the same navigational tools that Lewis and Clark did — measuring by chains and using a sextant," said the 56-year-old Simi Valley man. Using copies of the explorers' journals, the modern-day group tried to re-create Lewis and Clark's historic steps.

Family vacation? Guided tour? Not quite. As part of the U.S. Forest Service's Passport in Time program, the high school math teacher was one of several volunteers preserving American history.

Pitching in with such tasks as teaching English in Tanzania, maintaining Yosemite's backpacking trails or painting rooms at a reconciliation center in Ireland, baby boomers are finding volunteer vacations a rewarding way to travel.

Organizations recruit volunteers through catalogs and websites, offering programs that last from just a few days to several months, with most averaging from one to three weeks. And it's not all work. Typically evenings are free for socializing, with downtime for sightseeing.



Photo courtesy of the American Hiking Society

Bill Sutton mends trails with the Arizona Trail Assn.in the Tortilla Mountains north of Tucson.

Far-flung philanthropy

Some trips can be surprisingly economical. For instance, a volunteer can spend a week with the American Hiking Society in San Francisco's Presidio, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), for \$ 100 and get a behind-the-scenes tour of Alcatraz. Work for the GGNRA generally involves trail maintenance and repair and the reconstruction of steps and staircases. Other responsibilities range from regrading steps, reconstructing post-and-cable fencing and cutting back vegetation to clearing the park's considerable drainage system.

International trips, like those offered through Earth-watch Institute, can cost upward of \$4,000 but take volunteers as far afield as the Arctic. Although airfare or other transportation to the site isn't usually covered in the cost, most sponsoring agencies are nonprofit so the costs (including airfare) are considered a donation and are tax-deductible.

A global gesture

Volunteers have a variety of reasons for going, but most agree it's a unique way to see a locale.

Judy Grant, the 63-year-old Irvine resident and director of the Volunteer Center of Orange County, has taken four such trips with Global Volunteers. Her penchant for volunteerism has taken her across the globe, from exotic locales such as Tanzania, Ireland and Italy, to more sedate spots such as West Virginia.

"A regular vacation is great, where you take the tour and see the museums," she said. "[A volunteer vacation] is such a different experience because you're eating their food, talking with them and living with the local people."

And for Grant, it's important that the projects are locally directed. Global Volunteers, a U.S.-based program, only goes to areas inviting the organization.

"I appreciated that the communities requested volunteers, and we go and assist and take direction from them," she said.

Most organizations don't require that volunteers have specific skills, but do expect that they come with an open mind and a good attitude.



Photo courtesy of Global Volunteers

Keith Kresge teaches English as a volunteer in Chennai, India.

Education vacations

Keith Kresge has been to Spain, Italy, India and Greece with Global Volunteers, which focuses on teaching conversational English, among other tasks. Indeed, while the company's focus is on language, it also often works with orphanages, hospitals and other places with "vulnerable children." Volunteers also help with construction and community labor projects and some reforestation and medical assistance projects.

Did Kresge have prior teaching experience? The 53-year-old attorney from Los Angeles said he had "none whatsoever."

"I'd always been reluctant to stand up in front of the classroom," he said. "After doing it for the first time, I realized it was something I should have been doing for my career."

When he returned from his first trip (to Italy), he signed up for a UCLA certificate program to teach English as a second language.

"Maybe when I retire I'll do the teaching thing in different countries on a more permanent or long-term basis," Kresge said.

Those who prefer the mountains and hiking should check with the American Hiking Society (AHS), which offers a clearinghouse of programs affiliated with the National Park System, Bureau of Land Management and state park systems. For \$ 130, volunteers can choose from trips ranging from easy to strenuous.

"Our group has done some very arduous work," said Kevin Cronin, a 67-year-old retiree from Playa del Rey.

"This is not picking weeds. We cut trees, build bridges and move a lot of rocks in trail work."



In Ireland, Judy Grant did carpentry work at the Glencree Centre for Reconciliation.

Cronin and his wife have volunteered with various park services since 1995, taking one or two volunteer trips every year.

Not only do they enjoy the physical work, but they've made a group of friends who continue to volunteer with them each year.

"You're a self-selecting group of like-minded people and so friendships develop," he said.

When the AHS catalog arrives, the group begins a flurry of e-mails to each other to choose their trips.

While backpacking, volunteers often stay in tents or cabins. At Yosemite, Cronin enjoyed backpacking in an area where he normally wouldn't be able to spend an entire week because of a shortage of supplies. But in this case, food and cooking supplies were brought in by the park service.

Some trips are less rugged. During Grant's trip to Italy, the group "stayed in a really nice hotel," she said. "We went to school every day and taught until noon. Every afternoon we had free."

Most programs offer side trips or time off, and the hosts make efforts to give something back to volunteers. For hikers, it might be a naturalist talk on birds. For global travelers, the host community might make a special meal featuring the local cuisine or a dance group might perform.

Grant noted that the hosts are always appreciative of the volunteers. While she loves being able to help others, she said, "You get way more out of it than you give."

Deborah Abrams Kaplan is a freelance writer based in Northern California. Her volunteer vacations have included researching ants in the Costa Rica rainforest, and digging up Roman ruins in Israel.

Where to Sign Up for a Volunteer Vacation

Interested in going on volunteer vacations? The following are details on organizations that offer them.

- **American Hiking Society** (www.americanhiking.org; [301] 565-6704, Ext. 206): At a cost of \$130, participants can clear or maintain trails and repair bridges or other structures. In 2006, the society has 110 trips planned at such parks as Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota, and Saguaro National Park in Arizona and Haleakala National Park in Hawaii.

- **Global Volunteers** (www.globalvolunteers.org; [800] 487-1074): Participants can spend one to three weeks in the U.S. or go abroad to Australia, Brazil, Mexico, Tanzania, Greece or India to teach conversational English, provide health care or do construction work. Domestic programs cost \$750 for one week. International programs run \$1,470 to \$2,600.

For information on other opportunities, check out "Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others" (Chicago Review Press, 2006) by Bill McMillon, Doug Cutchins and Anne Geissinger.

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