

VOLUNTEER HOLIDAYS IN SPAIN, PORTUGAL & HONDURAS

Responsible travel, or voluntourism, is becoming increasingly popular as people seek to give something back, submerge themselves in a different culture and, possibly, change their lives. *Words & photographs by Alice Griffin*

The principles of permaculture

per-ma-cul-ture

[pur-muh-kuhl-cher] – noun

1. an ethical framework
2. understanding how nature works
3. a design approach

Helping hands

While the late afternoon sun warms my back and the smell of pine fills my senses, I'm listening intently to the principles of permaculture.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of my daughter wandering through gardens chaotic with fruit, vegetables and flowers. Spying ruby strawberries amidst the foliage, her eyes light up. She takes one, two, three, then grins, her chin glistening with red juice, her dress stained.

We're nestled in the warm rugged mountains of Central Portugal visiting Sophie and Andy Hill, a British couple who moved here over seven years ago. Much to the delight of their

Portuguese neighbours, they have been reviving a long forgotten *quinta* (smallholding) and along the way sharing their knowledge of permaculture and sustainable living with any visitors willing to volunteer the time and energy to help them.

"I think our biggest motivation is to share our life here with others, and hopefully inspire and encourage people to live more lightly on the land, to share our dream of sustainable food security and community sufficiency while teaching by example", says Sophie.

It seems there are many visitors keen to swap skills instead of money while staying in the



guest yurt. Jo, Karl, India-Mae and Aurelia Cauldrick, a young family from Berkshire, have recently returned from a volunteer holiday on the smallholding.

"We have a passion for low impact living and wanted some hands-on experience of working with the land in a warmer climate," Jo tells me. The experience certainly seems to have captured the hearts of the Cauldricks, who now plan to travel in Europe long-term, volunteering along the way.

The rise in voluntourism or responsible travel — whichever name you choose to use — appears to be an attractive combination of holiday and volunteer work

for many people. And contrary to popular belief, it isn't reserved for gap-year students, with a wide range of fans from all walks of life.

"Career breaks are also in vogue for responsible travellers looking to escape the doom and gloom of the recession, making up a fifth of all gap-year trip enquiries on the website in the past three months," says Responsibletravel.com.

On my own travels, I've met people of all ages and from all walks of life seeking out more meaningful experiences and despite the current economic climate that has seen many lose their income, far from dwindling, the voluntourism sector appears to be growing. >>



up a world of like-minded people prepared to welcome us into their homes to feed and teach us in return for labour.

We've turned golden hay in the shadow of snow-capped mountains, celebrated a successful olive harvest in a backstreet Spanish bar, our hands and arms scratched, our faces glowing, and have risen early to feed animals underneath the heavy blanket of winter mist in the prettiest of valleys. But perhaps more than the sheer joy of being part of something, of giving back, of learning, volunteering has changed us.

Submersed in worlds different to what I had known, I have been educated and inspired; these experiences have naturally fed back into my own everyday reality. And as time goes on and my desire to do more deepens, I now look towards opportunities such as working with children whose futures will be that much brighter from learning English, or perhaps offering my time to an animal charity, as realistic options not exclusive to trained staff with masses of free time.

As James Florence, from the Worldwide Veterinary Service (WVS), points out: "The majority of our trips are one or two weeks in length, to ensure volunteers can fit

them into normal working holidays, and although non-vet volunteers are outnumbered by the veterinary trained ones, we do have plenty of trips available for people with all types of skills."

But the thing about volunteer travel is it does have the ability to capture your heart, so if you embark on a placement, be prepared that you might feel a longing to do more, stay longer or even — dare I say it — change your life forever.

Teaching time

Carla Martin, from New Jersey in the US, has been volunteering as a teacher at a bilingual school in Honduras for two years and will soon be moving on to another school in Costa Rica.

"I was thrilled to get a position at Cofradia's Bilingual School and initially planned to volunteer for a year, but as the year came to a close I couldn't imagine going back to 'real life' and leaving my students," she says. "I looked at American life with an even more critical eye and found that I had evolved from cynical to disgusted at the excess and waste."

This mirrored my experience. After giving up a life of material belongings to travel, meeting people along the way with >>

More than money

Daniel Quilter, of Ecoteer, a portal bringing together travellers and grass roots projects through volunteering, has thoughts on this aspect: "After New Year 2009, we had a 46% increase in sales over the same period the previous year and that was without any extra marketing," he tells me.

"I feel the recession caused this in two ways. High redundancies and increasing competition for university places and graduate jobs meant more people had the time to be able to travel abroad and secondly, many people realised money didn't always make them happy and they didn't need it.

"I feel this changed many people's mindsets and allowed them to explore more rewarding activities. Therefore, the recession has given many people the time and the right mindset for them to go volunteering."

My personal discovery of the vast and varied volunteer opportunities available came while travelling Europe in a camper with my young family. We'd given up our nine-to-five lifestyle and mortgage in England with dreams of finding a new, lower-impact, more sustainable way of living and led by this desire felt it essential to gain hands-on experience in such environments. Our research opened

We've turned golden hay in the shadow of snow-capped mountains, celebrated a successful olive harvest in a backstreet Spanish bar, our hands and arms scratched, our faces glowing, and have risen early to feed animals underneath the heavy blanket of winter mist in the prettiest of valleys. But perhaps more than the sheer joy of being part of something, of giving back, of learning, volunteering has changed us.



Left: Alice's daughter helping feed poultry with the owner. Opposite, from top left: The Cauldricks' daughters outside their yurt accommodation; Alice and her daughter on a volunteer placement; olive groves in Alhama de Granada, Spain; Poppy enjoying work on the Portugal smallholding; Alice and her family helping with an olive harvest in southern Spain.



Images: OIO Images/Photolibrary; imagebroker/Photolibrary

such passion for environmental issues, our return to England left us jaded by the indifference towards important subjects. For me personally, our journey has continued to develop and not least because of everything we learnt volunteering.

Charities, volunteer networks and tour companies are passionate about responsible travel and information on the web abounds. There is almost certainly something for all ages, budgets and interests, but engage with organisations that are committed to the cause.

Stuart MacPherson, of Global Vision International (GVI), advises: "Prepare yourself with some questions to ask about the project

or the organisation so you can make an informed decision and can be sure the work you're doing is going to be worthwhile for the local community or environment."

Voluntourism isn't just about the personal feel-good factor of giving something back to the communities in which we travel, it is far deeper — for me it's a reflection on our changing and fragile earth that tells us we need to live and travel more lightly, as well as giving our time to the projects and communities that value our presence.

And, of course, my personal wish is to watch my daughter flourish and learn within the many cultures and changing sceneries we are so fortunate to explore.

CASE STUDY: PORTUGAL



Jo, Karl, India-Mae and Aurelia Cauldrick are a young family from England with an interest in low-impact living. Armed with a desire to learn more, in need of some sunshine and on a budget, they drove their 15-year-old Volvo from Berkshire to the mountains of central Portugal for a smallholding volunteer holiday. "The placement was amazing," says Jo. "I'm hugely grateful for the time we spent at Quinta das Abelhas. Sophie and Andy are very generous and accepting people."

■ Where: www.portugalsmallholding.org

CASE STUDY: SPAIN



Aoife O'Sullivan (centre), a 32-year-old from Ireland, is volunteering at the Twinkle Trust cat neutering charity in Fuerteventura, Spain, and this isn't her first time. "It is a fantastic charity that strives to care for the abandoned and stray cats of the island. This is my seventh trip in six years," she says. Aoife is certainly an advocate of this way of travelling, having volunteered on veterinary projects in Romania, Ukraine, Peru and India. "I have found WVS extremely helpful and reliable in placing me with genuine projects around the world."

■ Where: www.wvs.org.uk

CASE STUDY: HONDURAS



Carla Martin, a 38-year-old ex-pharmacist from New Jersey, had tired of the daily grind and was looking to focus her time and energies into worthwhile projects. "I visited a friend who was volunteering in a Guatemalan village and experiencing the cultural differences in a poor, rural community changed my views on just about everything," she says. Carla secured a placement in a Honduran school and is looking forward to spending 2011 volunteering at a school in Costa Rica.

■ Where: www.cofradiaschool.com

Voluntourism isn't just about the personal feel-good factor of giving something back to the communities in which we travel, it is far deeper — it's a reflection on our changing and fragile earth that tells us we need to live and travel more lightly.

essentials VOLUNTOURISM

CHARITIES, NETWORKS AND PLACEMENTS TO CONTACT DIRECTLY

» Volunteer network – worldwide opportunities: £15 yearly registration fee. Food or accommodation (sometimes both) may be offered in return for time by the project. Travel not included.

www.ecoteer.com

» Cofradia Bilingual School, Honduras: If volunteering for one to three months, a donation is requested to cover housing. No donation for those volunteering over three months. Flights not included.

www.cofradiaschool.com

» Various animal charity volunteer placements: £30 yearly registration fee to Worldwide Veterinary Service, small donation to chosen charity for food/accommodation. Flights not included.

www.wvs.org.uk

» Permaculture and low-impact living in central Portugal: Time and labour in return for knowledge, good food and cosy yurt accommodation. Travel not included.

www.portugalsmallholding.org

RESPONSIBLE TOUR COMPANIES THAT ORGANISE VOLUNTEER TRIPS

» Community building projects in Honduras: Building stoves for some of Honduras' neediest families. Includes Spanish lessons and guided adventure. From £675 for one week, excluding flights.

www.gvi.co.uk

» Volunteer with rescued chimps: Take a short break in Girona, Spain at a primate rescue centre and work with the chimpanzees hands-on. From £202 – £317 (2-4 days), excluding flights and accommodation.

www.responsibletravel.com

MORE INFO

» Books to read

Lonely Planet, Volunteer: A Traveller's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World.

RRP: £12.99

Wildlife and Conservation Volunteering: The Complete Guide. RRP: £13.99

The Career Break Book: Swap your briefcase for a passport and live your dream. RRP: £12.99

» Online

www.explore.co.uk www.helpx.net

www.woof.org www.workaway.info

www.projects-abroad.co.uk □