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More Vacationers Answer the Call to Help

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By **AMY GUNDERSON**

Published: February 20, 2005

FOR his winter vacation a year ago, Jude Fournier relaxed in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and his biggest activity of the day was moving between his hotel room and the beach. Recently, Mr. Fournier was getting ready for another trip, but this time his biggest concern wasn't whether to bring an extra swimsuit. Malaria pills, a first-aid kit and nonperishable snacks were on his packing list as he prepared for a day-and-a-half journey to Colombo, Sri Lanka, to assist with the tsunami clean-up.



Cross-Cultural Solutions



Helping out in Peru, with Cross-Cultural Solutions.

"I want to do more than write a check," said Mr. Fournier, a 47-year-old high school teacher in Santa Fe, N.M., who started looking for volunteer opportunities to Southeast Asia two days after the tsunami hit on Dec. 26. Mr. Fournier's two-week trip was organized through i-to-i, (800) 985-4864 and www.i-to-i.com, a profit-making British company, with an office in Denver, that sends travelers on volunteer excursions to 24 countries. In Sri Lanka, he joined other volunteers in putting up tents, passing out food and helping to rebuild a poor area in Moratuwa, a suburb of Colombo.

Volunteer vacations are not new, but the tsunami brought even more attention to this growing area of the travel industry that attracts tourists looking to forgo the usual in favor of a more intense cultural experience. Last year, i-to-i sent about 3,500 people on trips around the world and received at least 1,000 inquiries for its trip to Sri Lanka to aid in the disaster cleanup. All spaces for trips through April are filled, but i-to-i has added dates for the next 18 months.

Global Crossroad, (800) 413-2008 and www.globalcrossroad.org, a commercial enterprise in Baton Rouge, La., had a rush of phone calls for its Sri Lanka program, and quickly filled the 400 slots through the end

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of February. It is planning more trips there, mainly for building homes.

While the Indian Ocean disaster sparked more interest for trips to the affected areas, volunteer travel was already enjoying a boom, especially over the last year, as organizations expanded their lists of destinations and added shorter trips to cater more to the vacationer. Globe Aware, (214) 823-0083 and www.globeaware.org, a Dallas nonprofit group that started offering trips to Latin America and Asia in 2001, has mainly one- and some two-week excursions. In 2004, the number of trips arranged for travelers quadrupled from the year before.

Cross-Cultural Solutions, (800) 380-4777 and www.crossculturalsolutions.org, a nonprofit based in New Rochelle, N.Y., attracted 50 percent more volunteers last year than in 2003. It has expanded to 10 countries and added one-week trips to Costa Rica and Brazil to its roster of excursions that otherwise last 2 to 12 weeks.

Many organizations offering these trips are nonprofit groups and say that trip fees are tax deductible. But for the trips to qualify as tax deductible, the group must be an approved charitable organization in the United States and the trip can't include too much playtime.

Mark Luscombe, the principal federal tax analyst at CCH, a provider of tax-law information, said the trip had to be for charitable purposes and not have a significant vacation aspect. "The air fare can also be deductible," he said, "but probably not a first- or business-class ticket."

While college students and recent graduates still make up about half the travelers on volunteer trips, the Cross-Cultural Solutions spokeswoman Kam Santos said the trips are drawing more diverse groups.

"We see a lot of empty-nesters and seniors on trips," she said. "We get lot of seasoned travelers. They've done the tourist thing and this is something different."

But different doesn't necessarily mean roughing it. Travelers on Cross-Cultural Solutions' trips typically stay with other volunteers in a house or other base in middle-class neighborhoods, Ms. Santos said. Volunteers in Salvador, Brazil, for example, stay in a house that is within walking distance to shops, the beach and a salon that gives hourlong massages for \$8. Fees for two-week programs run \$2,279, and include lodging, local transportation and all meals, but not air fare.

Global Service Corps, (415) 788-3666 and www.globalservicecorps.org, a San Francisco-based nonprofit group, runs health and education trips to Tanzania and Thailand. It gives its travelers to Thailand the option of staying in a resort rather than with a local family.

But staying with a local family is often part of the appeal. Molly Last, 47, a teacher from San Francisco, spent three weeks last summer teaching English to Thai high school students and novice monks on a Global Service Corps trip. She lived with a family who worked at two high schools in Kanchanaburi, two hours



Cross-Cultural Solutions

A Cross-Cultural Solutions traveler helps a farmer in Ghana.



i-to-i

A volunteer with the group i-to-i teaches English in India.

northwest of Bangkok.

"I had a wonderful experience living with the family," she said. "That was the key piece that bought me from the outside looking in to being a real insider."

In addition to eating breakfast and dinner together, her family took her to the floating markets and to visit Cambodian ruins in the countryside. In fact, Ms. Last hit it off so well with her hosts that she is paying part of their travel expenses to visit the United States this year.

MANY groups, including Global Service Corps, are not offering placements in tsunami areas simply because they don't have programs there. Global Crossroad ran its first trips just a year and a half ago, but was able to get a clean-up program off the ground in Sri Lanka because it had an established program close to the areas affected by the tsunami.

Dana Oliver, program manager at Global Crossroad, said the organization was sending about 400 people to Trincomalee on Sri Lanka's northeast coast and to the Galle area in the south through the middle of March. "They are providing immediate relief," Ms. Oliver said, "moving rubble and passing out food."

Spots for these two-week trips are filled, but Global Crossroad is still accepting applicants for trips that will focus on rebuilding parts of the towns and working in orphanages and hospitals. The cost for two weeks is \$999, which includes food, lodging (in modest hotels for the time being), travel insurance and \$400 for construction materials, but not air fare.

Unlike relief organizations like the American Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders that send trained volunteers or those who have specific medical backgrounds to their project sites, volunteer travel companies have few trips with any prerequisites. But Ms. Oliver cautions that travelers shouldn't expect relaxation.

"They should be physically fit and mentally prepared to walk into a disaster area," she said. "It's not easy emotionally. Two weeks is an optimal amount of time. After that, people are going to be ready to go home."

Often, travelers on volunteer trips try to combine tourism and service work into one trip. Global Crossroad, for one, offers two-week "mini-escapes." One includes 10 days of work in an orphanage in Huancayo, Peru, while staying with a host family, followed by up to four days touring Inca ruins and Machu Picchu.

Some travelers augment such trips on their own. Ian and Jen Close booked 10 days on a safari in Kenya and Tanzania and a few days' relaxing on the beaches of Zanzibar, before spending two weeks in Arusha, Tanzania, teaching about AIDS. The teaching portion of the trip was arranged by Global Service Corps.

The couple, from Vancouver, stayed with a family ("My day started at 2 a.m. when the rooster started going," Mr. Close said), and after a week of training, they taught a class of 44, with the help of an interpreter, about preventing H.I.V. transmission.

But even with training there were some unexpected questions thrown at the Closes in that one-room Tanzanian schoolhouse, especially when they talked about monogamy. "The students would ask me: 'You have a wife; how do you know that she has been faithful?' " Mr. Close said.

Beyond their four hours a day of teaching, the Closes explored the local area,

played cards with their family (who didn't speak English) and braved the local buses, called dala-dala.

"A ride in a safari truck is exciting," Mr. Close said. "However, a ride in a dala-dala is truly an experience. It's basically a Mazda minivan stuffed with 16 people."

The couple quickly became comfortable roaming around a town where at first they were wary of entering even the heavily protected bank to exchange money. Plus, they said, even in just a week of teaching, they felt as if they reached their students.

"If we only did the safari, we would have only seen half of Africa," Mrs. Close said. "In that short period of time, I didn't feel like we would make those connections, but we did."

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