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## Tsunami Updates



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### How to Help

by [Ethan Gelber](#), Lonely Planet author

"If you want to do something for this country, visit it," said former U.S. President Bill Clinton after his February visit to Sri Lanka. But for many travellers, a beach vacation doesn't seem to be enough. For those who would like to donate their labour and time to rebuilding efforts, there are several volunteer organisations that can place them in meaningful positions.

### Getting Started

Many visitors arrive in Sri Lanka's West and South coast, where the tourism industry is centred, and find 'walk-in' volunteering opportunities with local groups in need of day labourers. Many of these informal arrangements can be organised after arrival in the country. For those who can make longer commitments, consider making arrangements before your departure with one of the smaller volunteer agencies mentioned below. If you have worked professionally with aid organizations in the past, then you are a prime candidate for the more established international groups, which require a formal application process and proven expertise.

One of Sri Lanka's leading cost-free, volunteer-placement groups is Volunteer Sri Lanka (VSL). "We can work with short-term volunteers, typically anyone who is coming for a month or more," says Tod Bruning, founder of VSL. "We have most of our contacts on the southwest third of the island. We would suggest they [interested volunteers] contact us a few days before they are arriving or when they get here, and we can plug them into our network. I have no doubt that most anyone who comes here could find work."

Because so many people arrive in Sri Lanka hoping to help, VSL has emerged as the leading coordinator for matching people with specific skill sets with non-government organisations (NGO) in need of those talents. Currently many of the country's NGOs are looking for people with information technology backgrounds to set up computer networks in refugee camps. Training in medicine and building construction, including wiring and plumbing, are also highly sought after.

One of the groups in which VSL will place volunteers includes Project Galle 2005, which is working on basic humanitarian aid like building

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temporary housing, providing education and administering to health needs. Another outlet is the Peraliya Village project, which is "a purely volunteer effort [that] usually takes all comers," says Bruning. In the village of Peraliya, more than 3000 people were killed by the tsunami and efforts to restore infrastructure have been slow going. Skilled and unskilled volunteers are needed to do everything from health care to manual labour.

Another good place to start is the well regarded, national association Sarvodaya, which has been in operation for almost 50 years. Today it is Sri Lanka's largest and most broadly embedded people's organisation, with a network covering 15,000 villages.

Volunteer International, which is based in Sri Lanka, and Global Crossroad, based in the US, are two full-service, pay-for-placement services in Sri Lanka. These groups work full-time in the country on such diverse projects as placing English teachers or volunteers in conservation camps. Global Crossroads has developed a tsunami-specific programme in Sri Lanka where participants help rebuild destroyed fishing villages. These organisations require advance application and planning.

University students should also check study-abroad options. A variety of undergraduate and graduate programs are offering summer programs that include work and study opportunities in Sri Lanka.

Some of the neediest communities on the island nation are located in the East and the North, areas that rarely register on a foreign tourist's itinerary. In some of these areas, there are security concerns and linguistic barriers as well as a lack of organised amenities for foreign visitors. These regions are best served by long-term volunteers with previous backgrounds in international relief. "We know there is a great willingness with people who plan to visit Sri Lanka to offer their help in overcoming the post-tsunami problems," remarked Dietrich Stotz, a senior advisor with the German Development Corporation (GTZ).

"As far as GTZ's activities are concerned, it would be very difficult to fit in volunteers who want to come and help for a week or two." David Verboom, Country Director of ZOA Refugee Care Sri Lanka, said that, "We need professional development workers able to assist Sri Lankans with structural, cultural/contextual sensitive programming. People who have the experience and are able to stay for at least one year in Sri Lanka should contact us."

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### About Ethan Gelber

Born in New York City, Ethan is a devoted sojourner (six continents well covered, often by bicycle) and co-author of Lonely Planet's *Cycling in Italy*. He currently lives with his fiancée in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where he is involved in many writing projects.

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