

Why should I believe you? Prove it!

This is the question award winning volunteer recruitment organisation **people and places** wants potential volunteers to ask.

The **people and places** team are an odd lot. They actively encourage their volunteers to comment, question and criticise – and then share that criticism with future volunteers! They keep as little of the volunteers' money as possible, also telling volunteers upfront how much that will be!

And now they've done something else that's pretty radical – they've invited an independent auditor to come and check out their claims.

"The main reason we started **people and places** was that we knew volunteering should be a win-win situation, for communities and volunteers alike – and we wanted to prove that it could be. We've been surprised, and were somewhat naive perhaps, to see how some organisations have adopted the current buzz words of 'responsible' 'sustainable' and 'community-driven' to create a smoke and mirrors effect, confusing potential volunteers. And the sleight of hand used by many organisations when explaining where funds are used often takes our breath away. So now we want potential volunteers to say 'PROVE IT'," says Sallie Grayson, programme director.

people and places has undergone an independent audit of the claims they make in their responsible travel policy – here are just a few examples:

- 80% or more of volunteers' monies reaching host countries – confirmed
- volunteers know where and how their money is spent - confirmed
- all volunteers are screened - confirmed
- matching skills to need - confirmed
- comprehensive preparation - confirmed
- local projects run by local people - confirmed

Undertaken by The Responsible Tourism Partnership – www.theresponsibletourismpartnership.org – this audit is a good workable alternative to a code of practice. The biggest problem with a code of practice is policing – who polices it and how? And where's the encouragement for organisations to continue to improve?

Only claims the organisation makes for itself are audited – so: You say you conserve thousands of litres of water a month - prove it. You say you only employ local people - prove it. You say 30% of monies are used on project development - prove it.

people and places, the first organisation to undergo this audit, hopes there will be many other organisations following it's example.

"We will most assuredly be using the audit to strengthen our work in the next twelve months. We know that other organisations are already undergoing the same process. This is not about proving you are perfect in every way – it's about proving that you're doing what you say you'll do. These are your promises – no one else's," says Grayson.

The campaigning work of people and places was recently recognised by The Virgin Holdidays responsible Tourism Awards, when they won Best Volunteering Organisation for 2009.

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“**people and places** has exercised leadership in a sector bedeviled by poor practice and established a replicable business model. Committed to reporting transparently on the money that volunteers pay, they ensure that the volunteers meet their full costs and are not a burden on the community; and carefully match the skills of volunteers to the needs of that community without replacing local labour. They have taken the ground breaking step of having their work externally audited and publishing it online. These four principles set not only a practicable standard for operators to aspire to, but offer valuable guidelines for tourists seeking legitimate and socially beneficial volunteering experiences.” The Judges Citation

For a full copy of the audit go to <http://www.travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk/PressView.aspx?id=29>

For more details of **people and places** go to <http://www.travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk/press.aspx>

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