

There's been a huge increase in the number of chat rooms about responsible travel and volunteering. Even a perfunctory trawl through the mass of news and views now available shows that one of the biggest surprises to many volunteers is how little of the money they paid, to the organisation that marketed and arranged their placement, actually reaches the country they are volunteering in - never mind the community with whom they work.

Many people researching volunteer opportunities firstly question why they should pay at all. This is usually born of a genuine lack of understanding of the real costs involved in "managing" a volunteer programme – most of which cannot be done by the under resourced project or community with which the volunteer seeks to work and indeed, if such funds were available, they would often be better used to create employment for local people.

Providing volunteers with what they need costs money - a safe environment, 24-hour emergency contacts, a place to stay, food to eat, the planning, tools or equipment to complete their roles - all this has to be paid for. The very act of recruiting volunteers costs money. Responsible volunteer recruitment should involve the screening and matching of those volunteers – again a substantial cost is incurred.

The vast majority of sending organisations use eloquent language to explain the need to charge for volunteer placements.....

The big question that is rarely addressed so clearly is **where** is that money spent.

When I started **people and places** with Professor Harold Goodwin, this was one of the key issues we wanted to address. It was easy for us to decide that we wanted as much of the volunteers' hard earned cash to be spent in the host country – indeed in the host community – but how?

The obvious idea was that we would need to incur as few costs as possible here in the UK – so as much as possible would need to be done in the host country – but how?

Harold's work as an acknowledged expert in responsible and pro-poor tourism brings him into contact with extraordinary individuals and businesses around the world. Those we work with have entered his 'little black book' because of their commitment to their communities and the objectives of responsible tourism.

These are the people who we're proud to be in partnership with – local people who support projects and volunteers, understand and are part of their local cultural context, and who have a wealth of experience in business, travel and tourism.

Local teams know their communities far better than we ever could. They are also in the very best position to provide ongoing and professional liaison – thus maintaining responsible and sustainable volunteer experiences. We do not employ anyone locally in the host countries – we work in partnership with local people.

So – we had a set of criteria for selecting our local partners and a model for ensuring as many funds as possible would reach the host country. The next question was how could we demonstrate our commitment to transparency?

All too many operators sell a smoke and mirrors funding explanation – talking vaguely about money into communities, obscuring the details, and making the volunteer feel uncomfortable about asking pointed questions. Volunteers are frequently told money that goes into the community, only to find out that 75% of the money stayed with the outbound operator!

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Over 80% of every **people and places** volunteer payment for 4 weeks or more is paid directly to the relevant local partner in the host community – it doesn't even cross our desks. The actual percentage varies for each project, but how and where a volunteer's money is spent is always clearly spelled out, with details of how much is spent on accommodation, transportation and other direct volunteer costs, how much on project liaison and development, and exactly how much is spent in the UK.

Our local partners have also committed to this financial transparency and accountability.

people and places was recognised by the Virgin Responsible Travel Awards for “**a high degree of transparency in terms of where volunteer money is going.**” Since then, it's certainly true that more companies are adopting some degree of explanation as to HOW volunteers' funds are used, but my bug bear is that many are still misleading through marketing hyperbole as to WHERE it is spent.

So, as with any travel transaction, there needs to be greater education of the consumer to raise awareness. Volunteers, as with any other travellers, need to be encouraged to ask questions. There must be clarity.

Whether commercial or charitable, there are good, not-so-good and downright irresponsible organisations, but their initial marketing makes it difficult if not impossible to differentiate. They invariably use the latest buzz words (ethical, meaningful, community, responsible, etc.) and therefore appear to be saying the right thing – which, as consumers, we naturally want to believe.

Start the search for a volunteer placement by doing your research – take a look at the following independent sites;

www.ethicalvolunteering.org

www.gapadvice.org

www.voluntourism.org

and take a look at the questions we suggest you ask and to which you should expect honest answers;

<http://www.travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk/About.aspx?category=20>

This research will help you develop your own critical list. We suggest that you then ask exactly the same questions of each organisation that you contact.

But, as you assess their responses, if the following questions come to mind ...

““Why can't they tell me how much of what I'm spending reaches my hosts? How do I know that my hosts are being fairly recompensed for their hospitality?”

..... maybe you want to think again about choosing to travel with them.

We started **people and places** to campaign for integrity in the volunteer travel market and to promote responsible volunteering – maybe now we need to start work on responsible marketing!