

SHORT TERM VOLUNTEERING – CAN IT BE RESPONSIBLE AND MEANINGFUL?



There has been much debate recently in the media about “voluntourism” or “volunteerism” – both words equally unwieldy and unattractive! While many travellers are undoubtedly attracted to the concept of ‘putting something back’ while enjoying their travel experiences, there is also a genuine concern that volunteer travel may become little more than the latest form of well-intentioned, but ill-informed, colonialism or - particularly in the case of GAP volunteering – the 21st century equivalent of the ‘grand tour’ taken by earlier well-heeled travellers.

people and places believes that ill conceived and badly managed volunteer travel often does more harm than good – are young labourers replacing local workers? is the particular project what the community needs? where did that decision originate? do the community and the volunteer know anything about each other? where does the volunteer’s money go?

However, the team at **people and places** does not accept the sweeping generalisations that have appeared in much of the press recently, where a majority view seems to imply that short-term volunteer placements cannot be valid.

Harold Goodwin, non executive Chairman of **people and places**, is well-known for his work in responsible, sustainable and pro-poor tourism, and expresses this succinctly – “*Responsible volunteers do it with respect.*” He goes on to say “*Respect, together with clarity of purpose should be taken as read in the rapidly growing area of volunteer tourism. I know that travellers could make a real difference in economically poor communities – if and when the opportunities are right.*”

people and places has now welcomed home many returning volunteers from projects in Africa and Asia – volunteers who have fulfilled placements in schools, community health and welfare projects, and wealth creation initiatives. All of these projects are benefiting from self-funding volunteers who gave of their own skills and experience towards empowering local staff as they

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struggle with severely limited resources. **BUT** – and it’s a big but – ALL of these volunteers have been placed with the informed consent of community and volunteer. The goal is to assist local communities achieve the future they want for themselves. ALL of these volunteers have been briefed by previous volunteers as well as **people and places** and their local partners. ALL of the volunteers know that their contribution can only work if it is part of a sustainable whole.

Educators brief educators – accountants brief accountants – health care workers brief health care workers: they are ‘passing the baton’ and achieving continuity in community projects. Unless skills are appropriately matched to need, and the baton is passed from one volunteer to the next, the **people and places** team believes that short-term placements cannot be meaningful.

people and places’ Sallie Grayson says that “For host communities, there are a number of issues that need to be considered in order to minimise negative impacts. A common occurrence is that communities, who are often eager for assistance, and vulnerable, are bullied or exploited by volunteer service providers. All too often a project has volunteers foisted upon them, with little say in the numbers of volunteer arrivals or any knowledge of their skills or potential. The result can be a school with half a dozen ‘volunteers’ hanging around with little to do other than get in the way of hard pressed local people! I have witnessed this in the townships of Port Elizabeth – where some of the young volunteers were not only idle but were also only clad in bikini tops and shorts!”

She adds:

“I am however, very concerned at the suggestion – by many who are disillusioned with some of the ‘voluntourism’ suppliers – that travellers should simply turn up at a project and offer their help.

“As our local partner in South Africa, Paul Miedema, points out,

“Please do not just “drop in”. Communities are busy, often just busy surviving. And our culture demands we are always to welcome the visitor. So we will welcome you, and put you to work, even if it does not suit us at all; even if you are using our resources and our time. So we may welcome you, but we cannot tell you how we really feel about you.”

Grayson adds *“The thought of unscreened, unprepared travellers arriving in some of the most vulnerable communities fills me with horror, and quite frankly anyone who suggests this is – at the very least – irresponsible!”*

One of the strengths of the **people and places** model lies in working with the right people.

people and places finds entrepreneurial and professional project management teams, from and of their communities, who provide the key link. They are the people who liaise with individual projects and the team at **people and places**, year round. This liaison results in genuine knowledge of what is needed, by whom, for whom and where.

Personal skills, experience, abilities and needs are all taken into account as **people and places** works towards the best match. Kate Stefanko, placement director, says

“Matching is a complex process but is very rewarding – I’ve talked to all kinds of people with all kinds of experience – nurses, teacher-trainers, bricklayers, students, accountants, doctors, electricians, mothers – and also ranging in age from 15 to 89, although most of our volunteers are between 30 and 70. Without exception, these people are happy to use their hard-earned cash to share their skills – providing their input won’t be wasted and adds to the project’s sustainability.”

people and places currently offers projects in South Africa, Swaziland, The Gambia, Nepal, India, Peru and Indonesia. Projects range from 4 weeks to 3 months’ duration (with a few opportunities to volunteer for as little as 2 weeks), and every one is designed to meet the ‘triple bottom line’ of responsible travel – social, economic and environmental responsibility.

Matching people and places in this innovative way sets a benchmark for truly responsible volunteering opportunities!