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Volunteering



Taking a volunteer placement overseas can give an 'insider's view' of how a certain community lives and the experience is an attractive asset on anyone's CV. These programmes could, therefore, fit well into a language travel agent's portfolio of products. Gillian Evans reports.

The desire for a different type of travel experience - one that can have an impact on a person's employability and that allows the traveller to truly experience another country and its culture - has been one of the driving forces behind growth in the youth travel market in recent years. This desire can see a student learning a language overseas or volunteering to work as part of a foreign community in another country.

'Fast backpacking trips through a country are no longer enough,' asserts Kirsten Lillelund at Intersprog in Denmark. 'Youngsters wish to stay in one country long enough to really get a picture of how this culture lives.'

'There is a growing trend away from standard travel and tourism,' confirms Sven Mauleon at Open Mind Projects in Thailand. 'Backpacking and adventure travels were early signs and ecotourism, too. Language programmes have long been popular as have exchange programmes, homestays and au pair options. Today, volunteering is an increasingly attractive way to learn about the world.'

Although there is a growing number of language schools, particularly in Latin America, that offer language plus volunteer programme combinations, there are also organisations that concentrate solely on volunteer programmes, and although only a small minority of language travel agents offer such programmes, it is a growth sector that should not be ignored.

Specialist companies

The volunteer sector was pioneered by VSO in 1958. VSO sends experienced skilled professionals to developing countries to work. The volunteers work alongside the communities in which they live to help build an infrastructure to tackle poverty, and the minimum length of each placement



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is two years. Since the late 1980s, a new type of volunteer organisation has developed worldwide. These companies specialise in shorter volunteer programmes for anything from a few weeks to six months or more. They also place volunteers without any previous employment experience.

Global Services Corps (GSC) in the USA, as an example, offers volunteer and internship programmes in Thailand and Tanzania. This, says Amy Warren, Manager of Operations at GSC, enables volunteers to 'see a country from an insider's perspective'.

The variety of programmes available today is vast - environmental and conservation work, teaching, working with children, social care work, civil engineering, and business and media to name but a few.

Some volunteer placements are designed specifically for each individual. 'Each volunteer has their own programme created to enable them to travel and participate in suitable volunteer placements in selected countries of their choice,' explains Tim Cox, Managing Director of Involvement Volunteers Association, a not-for-profit government-registered organisation that operates from Australia.

Cox continues, 'An individual volunteer programme can be as short as two weeks - some countries [such as Japan] only get two weeks holiday for employees - and as long as 12 months for gap [year] students with one or more countries in the programme.' He notes a shift in demand towards a different type of volunteer programme. Previously, climatic and environmental placements were most popular, while today, more volunteers opt for people care and education.

Helen Tirebuck from Challenges Worldwide in the UK, which was set up four years ago, says they have experienced a similar trend. 'Community-based projects are always the most popular,' she says. 'This seems to be where volunteers feel their skills will be more useful - where they are able to live and work alongside local people.'

There are many reasons why people choose to take a volunteer programme. UK-based SPW offers four- to nine-month health education and environmental programmes in rural communities in Africa and Asia. 'All our volunteers come back more self-confident, resourceful, resilient and better communicators, with life skills that are invaluable in any field,' says Claudia Codsi at SPW.

As well as providing valuable life-enriching experiences and a complete immersion in another culture, Dorioara Pinku at Amerispan says that volunteer programmes are also valuable in helping build a network of international contacts and friends, and allowing people to spend time abroad for more than a few weeks without 'the gap looking bad on their CV - which is more of an issue in the USA than in Europe', she says.

Life advantage

Generally, employers view the volunteering experience as an asset to their job candidate's CV, and the experience can provide students with hands-on practical experience that is job-related too. 'Because we can offer such skill-specific opportunities, the experience a volunteer gets whilst on a Challenges Worldwide placement undoubtedly enhances their CV,' confirms Tirebuck. 'We also use a corporate-style appraisal system which is then processed into a reference for

volunteers.'

Placements are available for people of all ages and of varying skills levels, but organisations are keen to stress that the most essential qualities for a volunteer are enthusiasm and commitment. 'In the past, we found ourselves sometimes jeopardising great volunteer placements when organisations became tired of dealing with participants who came there looking at it more as a vacation or dropped out after a couple of weeks to travel with a newfound friend,' recounts Pinku. 'This problem came up particularly with the younger crowds where parents paid for their volunteer experience.'

As a consequence, Amerispan tightened up its screening process. All applicants must provide written responses to essay type questions, two letters of reference, and a CV in English and in the language of the country where they are applying to volunteer. US-based students also have a telephone interview. Other organisations insist on face-to-face interviews with the volunteer candidate.

Getting involved

For agents keen to become involved in the voluntary sector, there are two main ways to enter the market: working with voluntary placement organisations or establishing placements themselves independently.

The latter option does entail having good contacts overseas, but it is possible, as Lillelund testifies. 'We started the concept of adventure programmes in Venezuela with a six-month adventure, travel, Spanish and volunteer work [package],' she says. Volunteer work, organised by a Dane in situ, 'allowed participants to experience 'real' culture and to follow a normal workday in the country'.

Some organisations involved in volunteer placements are not-for-profit companies or charities and therefore they do not work with agents. However, as the market increases and demand for volunteer placements spreads to other countries, this is likely to change.

Debbie Jacobs, who deals with international volunteer placements at Explorations in Travel in the USA, says they have used agents in the past and 'would consider doing so again', while Mauleon states he would consider working with agencies 'if they would help us find the right volunteers'. Meanwhile, i-to-i in the UK, which has been offering volunteer programmes since 1995, has agents in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to whom it pays a commission.

Popularity trends

Volunteer programmes are most popular with northern European and North American students, and there is a concentration of volunteer organisations in the UK and the USA, although there is also some demand from Australia, other European countries and Japan. In the UK, taking a gap year between high school and tertiary studies is common and more and more students are using this time to undertake a volunteer programme.

'The student market [in the UK] remains strong,' says Simon Worsfold at i-to-i. 'This is partly due to the strength of gap year culture in UK society now and also because gap year and student travel is now seen very much in terms of an investment for the future.'

Intersprog in Denmark has been offering volunteer programmes for around six years. 'We decided to expand into this field because of the growing interest from [students] aged 18 to 25 years who want a gap year after high school exams,' relates Lillelund.

However, the appeal of volunteer programmes is not only restricted to the student age group. According to Worsfold, i-to-i is experiencing the fastest growth in volunteers over the age of 25 who are 'disillusioned with their jobs and are looking to broaden their horizons', while the second fastest growing sector is the over-50s. 'There are more people over the age of 50 now than ever before and by the same token, these people are much 'younger' than ever before, and are looking for more exciting, more meaningful ways to travel and spend their time,' he says. Jacobs adds that they are receiving requests from whole families that are interested in taking a volunteer programme together.

Cost factor

One limiting factor to the growth of volunteer programmes is often their high price tag, although placements vary in cost. Michele Gran, at Global Volunteers in the USA, says their placements - available in 18 countries - range from US\$650 to US\$2,395. Jacobs says that the cost factor means these programmes are popular with more affluent nationalities. 'Travelling and volunteering is not an inexpensive way to travel necessarily so most volunteers come from developed countries.'

Even among developed countries, some may be more used to the concept of volunteering than others. Most volunteers at i-to-i are from the UK, USA, Australia and Ireland, although Worsfold also mentions 'a significant number of volunteers from Europe - the Netherlands and France mainly'.

Recent trends in the volunteer sector are bringing it closer to the travel and tourism market, with a rise in the development of volunteer placement and travel packages. Intersprog programmes all include a period of travel and a volunteer placement.

Pinku at Amerispan believes this is an area that is ripe for development. 'More and more short-term programmes will be available, many promoted as volunteer vacations,' she asserts. 'Also basic volunteer work with low skill requirements [will be] included in travel programmes geared towards special interest groups such as teenagers and seniors. Many of them [will be] where you volunteer for a few days and travel for a few days.'

But Codsi at SPW points out that these programmes hit a different target group. 'Many more organisations are offering short volunteering placements, combining 'doing good' with travelling,' she says. 'We are a more serious development charity and are looking for a different calibre of people.'

Pinku adds that more 'agents, schools and travel/tour companies' are offering volunteer programmes already and she believes this is another trend that will continue. But she warns, 'As more companies start to offer volunteer options, they will [need to] learn about the substantial amount of work involved in running a successful volunteer programme.'

Most volunteer placement organisations require candidates to have at least a basic knowledge of English, and it varies from one organisation to another whether volunteers receive any language training. 'There is no requirement to know the local language,' says Lisa Rashkovich, Communications Manager at Cross-Cultural Solutions in the USA. 'A basic knowledge of English is needed in order to communicate with the staff.' However, she adds. 'We offer language classes in country for the volunteers who are interested.'

Amy Warren of Global Services Corps in the USA says that formal language training is only provided to volunteers in Tanzania, while 'language skills are picked up in both Thailand and Tanzania by living with local families, working with locals and having local counterparts to assist with language [learning]'.

Whether volunteer candidates need to be proficient in the language prior to leaving can also depend on their destination and the type of placement they have chosen to undertake. 'Only in Latin America is [language] a specific requirement and all volunteers there receive free Spanish training in-country to meet this need,' says Simon Worsfold from i-to-i in the UK. 'For care work, health, media and business placements we stipulate that the volunteers must leave the UK with at least a conversational level of Spanish. In Thailand and Kenya, language lessons are given but this is more for the volunteers' cultural interest,' he explains.

Language training is an integral part of some volunteer programmes. 'Language training is provided by the language schools we work with in the different locations,' says Dorioara Pinku at AmeriSpan. 'Normally we require that they study for two-to-four weeks to reach the needed language level for the volunteer position they applied for, and to get comfortable and learn about the culture a bit.' Pinku believes this is vital to a successful volunteer placement. 'We learnt through the years that more of a 'sink or swim' situation is not handled well by all participants.'