THE VIRTUOUS VACATION

BY MATTHEW LINK

Looking for something a little deeper than a tan on your next trip? Volunteer vacations may be the answer. From studying monarch butterflies in Mexico to teaching English in Tanzania, these working vacations give you a chance to visit and improve your destination.

Experts say the number of travelers signing up for volunteer vacations has surged in the two years since 9/11, as idealism and global awareness make a comeback. New York-based Cross-Cultural Solutions, which has centers in 10 countries, expects to send at least 1,500 volunteers to destinations around the globe this year—nearly double the 854 participants of a year ago, says executive director Steve Rosenthal. Minnesota-based Global Volunteers plans to send out nearly 1,700 travelers next year, says spokeswoman Barb DeGroat. To keep up with demand, it recently added programs that help Australia’s indigenous population as well as Ecuador’s disabled children. Even smaller nonprofit groups like Global Citizens Network have seen increased interest. It had about 100 people sign up for its volunteer programs in 2002, a 30 percent increase from the year before.

Volunteer vacations are also attracting a broader range of people than in the past. Long the domain of students and retirees, more families and working singles looking for soul-stirring opportunities are signing up. Nancy Reid, a 53-year-old school teacher from Vermont, volunteered for two weeks renovating a school in Guatemala. Her goal, she says, was to “get lifted out of my personal and professional rut.”

There are so many types of volunteer vacations out there now that it’s easy to find one tailor-made for your interests and skills, from digging up archeological artifacts in France to maintaining trails in Yellowstone National Park to helping out at Russian orphanages (search the gamut at volunteerinternational.org). Most programs charge for food and lodging, but they are generally cheaper ($200 to $1,000 per week) than a typical trip to Disney World, though be aware that some volunteer vacations can get pricey when international airfare is factored in. The length of the trips range from a week’s getaway to a commitment of several months, depending on the needs of the volunteer organization and your time constraints. Regardless of the length of the trip, though, volunteers are always given ample time to explore the area and meet the locals, so it’s not all backbreaking work.

Then again, it’s not the sort of getaway for your typical Ritz-Carlton crowd: accommodations may consist of a mat on a dirt floor or a canvas tent on a remote beach. But that’s the whole point. You get an opportunity to delve into another country on a deeper level than most tourists will ever experience, and in the process.

WAYS TO GET INVOLVED
- crossculturalsolutions.org: 14 programs run by local citizens in different host countries
- www.vfp.org: Volunteers for Peace hosts work camps in more than 100 nations
- globalvolunteers.org: Responds to volunteer requests by local communities worldwide
- wildernessvolunteers.org: Runs volunteer U.S. camping programs to repair national parks and other wilderness areas in the 50 states