

# Voluntourism Grows Up

Charitable travel is big with college kids. But retirees may make a bigger impact as volunteer tourists

BY JIMMY MAGAHERN

At the age of 16, Pippa Biddle was among a group of girls from a private prep school in Connecticut who embarked on a trip to the developing nation of Tanzania, designed to mix sightseeing with some well-meaning volunteer work. The itinerary called for them to spend the first week helping to build a small library at an orphanage, followed by a week-long safari adventure.

Each day the 15 young women, all woefully inexperienced in construction work, would do their best to mix cement and lay bricks for the walls. Rising early one morning, however, Biddle discovered that through the night, a crew of local men were routinely disassembling their amateurish brick laying and secretly rebuilding the structure, making sure to have the redo completed before the girls woke up. The \$3,000 their parents had each paid for the experience essentially bought the girls the well-staged illusion

that they were helping, when in reality, they were only creating more work for the community.

"It is likely that this was a daily ritual," Biddle would write five years later, in an essay she posted to the online publishing platform Medium. "Basically, we failed at the sole purpose of our being there. It would have been more cost-effective, stimulative of the local economy, and efficient for the orphanage to take our money and hire locals to do the work."

Biddle's provocatively titled essay, "The Problem with Little White Girls (and Boys): Why I Stopped Being a Voluntourist," quickly went viral, setting off a national discussion on the systemic problems with volunteer tourism, or "voluntourism," that resonated with the largely young, white and female demographic that has made the hybrid form of travel the fastest growing sector in tourism. Biddle popped a hole in the feel-good bubble surrounding international volunteering, stating the inconvenient truth that, for all

its benevolent intentions, most voluntourism only brings vulnerable communities more of the one thing they already have too much of: unskilled labor.

"Sadly, taking part in international aid where you aren't particularly helpful is not benign," Biddle's essay concluded. "It's detrimental. It slows down positive growth and perpetuates the 'white savior' complex that, for hundreds of years, has haunted both the countries we are trying to 'save' and, more recently, our own psyches."

If young, able-bodied Americans are ill-equipped to provide the kind of work needed by communities in developing countries, is the voluntourism movement doing more harm than good? In a 2015 documentary produced for Canadian TV, *Volunteers Unleashed*, young medical volunteers in Tanzania, eager for experience, are shown tackling surgeries well beyond their training, potentially




putting patients' lives at risk. Enter the old hands. While young people aged 15 to 24 represent the largest group involved in volunteer tourism, participation by older adults has been steadily rising. According to a 2014 survey by the St. Louis-based Center for Social Development, adults aged 65 years

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Maya Yazzi worked six days a week at a butterfly habitat in Costa Rica, performing duties ranging from watching the front desk to collecting eggs and caterpillars. (Photo courtesy Maya Azzi)



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or older are the second-largest age group in voluntourism – and the one showing the greatest growth over the last decade.

“One of the things that makes volunteers of retirement age or older unique is that they generally do have some sort of skill,” says Biddle, now a professional writer in New York who’s working on a book about voluntourism. “Whether they were an accountant, or an engineer, or a teacher or a doctor, they have something that, if applied correctly, can be quite powerful.”

Accordingly, volunteer programs have begun actively seeking older volunteer travelers. Global Vision International, which offers over 150 different volunteer projects in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe and Australasia, specifically targets the over-50 volunteer, pitching, “It is never too late to make a difference in the world.” Other providers like Global Volunteers, Projects Abroad, International Volunteer HQ and Lead Adventures offer programs tailored to older volunteers. The venerable Peace Corps promises more comfortable quarters for older adults along with projects that make use of their

past work experiences and expertise.

“With their experience,” Biddle adds, “they often can offer something that a 17-year-old simply can’t.”

Older adults may also be less likely to be exploited, a growing problem as the popularity of voluntourism has sparked a multibillion-dollar industry profiting on the demand for overseas volunteer experiences, offering work that often benefits the business owners more than the communities.

Like many young college students looking to do something altruistic in their gap years, ASU sustainable tourism major Maya Azzi got into voluntouring with the desire to do some good in a developing

their children to the orphanages for a better education, simply because there are so many volunteers paying placement agencies to work there.

Christine Vogt, director of ASU’s Center for Sustainable Tourism, suggests that older adults looking to get into voluntourism might actually want to start closer to home.

“I do a lot of work with the public lands here in the U.S., and they need volunteers even in places like the national parks,” she says. “Their budgets have been cut, which affords them a lot less time in the field. In Arizona, the Grand Canyon Association has trips that include volunteer opportunities, so you can actually do some field work

for the park service in the Grand Canyon. In some states, there are farms where you can go and volunteer your time and live in a communal setting, just making food or delivering food

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– voluntourist Pippa Biddle

country. Instead she wound up working six days a week at a butterfly habitat in Costa Rica, performing duties ranging from watching the front desk to collecting eggs and caterpillars, for a couple of “truly horrible” bosses.

“The Costa Ricans were wonderful people,” Azzi says. “But the people running the place were just terrible. And they weren’t Costa Rican – they were American and Canadian!”

At just 26, Azzi is already a world traveler, having been to Argentina, Chile, Lebanon, Spain and most of Europe. Nevertheless, she felt powerless against the people running the excursion, whom she says constantly berated the volunteers.

“An older person probably would have just left,” she says. “I don’t think that they would have put up with the conditions, or allowed people to speak to them the way that these people did to us. The reality is, the volunteers are just doing what they’re told, because they want to help and have that feelgood connection to the community. But they have no idea if what they’re doing is necessary or the best way to help.”

Sometimes the volunteer work is, in fact, not necessary, but the demand for placement of volunteer tourists in desired locales creates business opportunities. *Al Jazeera* correspondent Juliana Ruhfus recently reported that the growth of orphanages in Cambodia is actually driven by the number of Americans who want to volunteer in the orphanages, rather than a boom in homeless children. Ruhfus found that Cambodian parents now send

to people.” Azzi, who recently left her post as an ASU research assistant to work as the rural program coordinator for Local First Arizona, points out that sometimes traditional tourism, where the tourist simply spends their money in locally owned hotels, restaurants and businesses – without trying to help build a hut or repaint a school – can actually contribute more to the locale. In that area, too, older adults with years of earnings behind them often have an edge.

“I know people want to be hands-on to feel like they’re making a difference,” Azzi says. “But really, if they just pick a destination and only spend their money within the local establishments there, that is a great way to support their economy.”

Biddle agrees. “Previously it wasn’t possible to visit some of these developing countries without going through a volunteer company,” she says. “But now there are more opportunities to go to these places and put cash into their economy while truly empowering locals to build their own businesses. In that way, you can still have those impactful experiences which fulfill exactly what a volunteer wants to do in benefiting a community in a positive way, without ever having to pick up a hammer.” ■

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