

## Four Tips for Vacations That Cost Less and Give More

According to nonprofit consumer education organization the Myvesta Foundation, the average American planned to spend \$2,249 on his or her summer vacation last year. Taking the average family of four to the archetypical American vacation spot -- Disney World -- can cost \$3,000 to \$4,000 or more by the time you figure in the cost for flights, food, lodging, and all the goodies.

Now, I love theme parks or pure relaxation as much as the next person. But this year, I'd like you to consider doing something a little different: Take a volunteer vacation.

Mitch, a friend of mine, just returned from Pachuca, Mexico, where he worked from sunup to sundown for eight days with his wife and four children. Doesn't sound relaxing enough? Mitch said it was a truly life-changing experience for his entire family, and he's never felt more blessed or returned from a vacation more invigorated.

So read on for four tips to help you take such inspiring and rewarding vacations.

### 1. Spend Less, Live More

On a volunteer vacation, you'll likely spend far less -- and see and experience far more -- than you would on a typical camping trip, beach vacation, cruise, or resort stay. In fact, many first-time volunteer vacationers never want to go back to typical holidays again. Volunteer vacations combine travel, relaxation, and meaningful "together time" with exciting, educational experiences offered by a wide range of nonprofit organizations doing good work in the U.S. and abroad.

### 2. Know Your Interests

No matter your interests and skills (or lack thereof) and who you want to help, there's a volunteer vacation experience that's right for you. Many organizations welcome entire families, although there's often an age limit for children -- participants in family-oriented programs must typically be at least eight years old.

Here are a few of the volunteer vacation opportunities available for people with specific interests:

- **Wildlife.** Go whale watching while helping with conservation efforts, or research, rescue, and rehabilitate endangered animals with [Earthwatch Institute](#).

- **Archeology.** Even amateurs can participate in a dig, working to unearth everything from ancient Pueblo villages to ancient cultures in Utah with the [Sierra Club](#).
- **Culture and community.** Build homes for the needy, working alongside members of a host community as far away as Africa or as close to home as a small town or city near you, with [Habitat for Humanity](#). Or, help with community development projects on an American Indian reservation with [Global Volunteers](#).
- **History.** Restore an ancient village in beautiful Provence, France, with [La Sabranenque](#).
- **Nature.** Camp, hike, and work in some of the most spectacular natural settings on the planet while helping to build trails and other projects on public lands with the [American Hiking Society](#).
- **Missionary work.** If you're interested in missionary work, or just prefer working with a group that has a religious affiliation, inquire at your place of worship about volunteer vacation opportunities.

### 3. Expect the Time of Your Life

I'll let you in on a little secret: You don't have to have any of these interests to have a great time on a volunteer vacation. In addition to the specific project you're working on, there's usually a lot more to enjoy: The company and camaraderie of fellow volunteers; the travel to exotic and spectacular locales; meeting, working, and living with local folks; and spending your time off exploring the area.

The benefits of volunteer vacations go well beyond just having a good time during your trip -- you'll end up with memories, images, stories, and friendships that will last a lifetime. You'll learn new skills and discover new interests that will enrich your life for the rest of your days. And you may well have a life-changing experience that gives you a new focus or purpose.

You'll also have the satisfaction of knowing that you've given something personal -- your time, effort, care, and a little bit of your soul -- to a cause that you believe in. You can't put a price on that.

As for expenses, there's good news there, too. A few volunteer vacation opportunities actually pay a stipend. For most, however, the cost ranges from free -- although you're usually responsible for providing your own transportation to the location and, in some cases, some basic personal items, tools, or camping equipment -- to several thousand

dollars. The quality of the experience isn't measured by the cost, although some of the higher-priced experiences offer comforts and amenities that most free or low-cost experiences do not. Often, some if not all of the costs are tax-deductible, depending on the nature of the experience.

#### 4. Choose a Destination

Your biggest task won't be finding a great experience -- it'll be choosing from all the wonderful opportunities out there. Here are a couple great places to start:

- **Choose by interest:** Check out [Charity Guide](#), which has links to hundreds of volunteer vacation opportunities lasting from one to four weeks in seven different categories.
- **Choose by location:** If you've got your sights set on a particular foreign destination, [Transitions Abroad](#) lists opportunities by region and by country. It also has links to lots of articles and information about volunteer vacations.

No matter what your interest or geographical preference, you'll have an easier time choosing an opportunity -- and a more satisfying experience -- if you first decide what you most want from your vacation. For a list of questions to ask yourself before you go, get a copy of "Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others" by Bill McMillon, Doug Cutchins, and Anne Geissinger, or visit [Volunteer Abroad](#).

Once you've narrowed down your choices, find out exactly what you'll be doing on a trip you're interested in, what's provided and what you must bring, and what particular skills or qualifications you need. Whenever possible, get references from previous volunteers. If the organization is international, ask what its affiliation is with other reputable international organizations, such as the United Nations.

Now click on some links, do some research, and go out and experience all that the world of volunteer vacationing has to offer. If you've already planned this summer's vacation, consider a volunteer vacation for next year. The world will still need your help!

Credit – David Bach