

Altruism Afoot



By LAUREL KALLENBACH



Help others *and* recharge your own batteries on a getaway that gives back.

During their 10-day trip to Guatemala

in 2008, Steve and Linda Kantner hiked the lush Mayan Highlands and kayaked Lake Atitlán, a deep body of water inside a collapsed volcanic crater. They also biked to an arts co-op, where the local women demonstrated their colorful weaving, served a traditional Mayan meal and invited the cyclists to dance.

But their favorite part of the vacation was the construction work. The Kantners helped build a house for a family in need, a project coordinated by PLAY It Forward Adventures, a Minnesota travel company that combines volunteerism with active outdoor adventure.

"We've taken our share of vacations to museums and old churches," says Linda, 51, a social worker from St. Paul. "But in Guatemala, we provided a family with a home. It's not often that you get to know a country's people and culture *and* give something back."

The vacationers in the PLAY It Forward group spent two days hammering and sawing alongside a family of six. "We bandied about bits of Spanish and English, and we 'talked' through hand signals," says Linda. "At the end,

Clockwise from top left: PLAY It Forward travelers canoe the Amazon River in Peru; a PLAY It Forward guest helps build a chicken coop in Rhotia Valley, Tanzania; a Summit for Someone climber celebrates reaching the top of Mount Shasta in northern California; an inner-city teen shows off his catch during a Big City Mountaineers backpacking trip in Colorado.

the family made a teary thank-you speech. We knew this house would make a real difference in their lives."

Humanitarian Holidays

The Kantners' vacation is just one kind of outdoor adventure that adds an altruistic twist. This nascent trend toward "voluntourism" reflects a desire for more meaningful travel, especially at a time when super-indulgent vacations are on the wane. "People feel a responsibility to make the world a better place, so they're reaching out to others, even on vacation," says Jodi Nelson, founder of PLAY It Forward, which offers trips to Africa, as well as Central and South America. "They've discovered how good it feels to help those in need." (See "The Healthy Do-Gooder," next page.)

There are many ways to incorporate an altruistic emphasis on your next vacation, and you can make it as central or peripheral a component as you like. For example,

you might augment the family Gulf Coast beach vacation with two days of work on a Habitat for Humanity house. Or you could dedicate the majority of a trip to painting a local school or clearing land for a community garden. You might opt for a one-on-one experience, such as taking a visually impaired person horseback riding. Or sign up for a large-scale fundraising event (such as a charity walk-a-thon) that's being held near your vacation destination.

Chicago-based For a Cause organizes European biking and walking trips whose participants raise money for juvenile AIDS and breast cancer organizations. "For people who love to bike or walk through picturesque countryside, this is the perfect destination vacation with a purpose," says For a Cause president Robert Webber.

It also comes with a built-in tax incentive. Last August, riders and walkers who joined For a Cause's seven-day trip in Ireland had two choices: pay a \$1,650 registration fee and raise a minimum of \$1,000 in donations, or pay a \$2,650 registration fee, do no fundraising, and receive a tax deduction of \$1,000. Either option covered meals, lodging, guides, bikes and support vehicles. (Before you sign up for a charitable trip, check with the outfitter or organizer and your tax accountant to find out whether a portion of the volunteer vacation you're considering is tax deductible.)

In return, participants got a cultural-immersion trip to rural Ireland's villages and stayed in a luxurious 16th-century castle. "Unlike other walk-a-thons or cycling events, there's a holiday feel to our trip," says Webber. "No sleeping in tents, no port-a-johns."

Service and a Smile

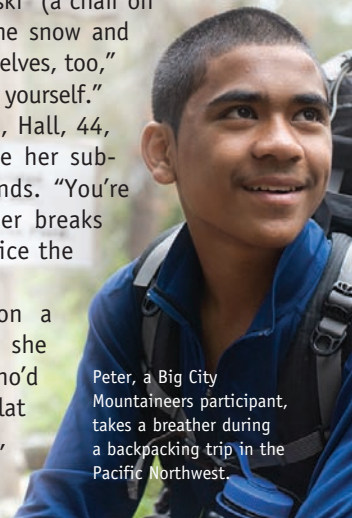
Not all philanthropic forays put a dent in your wallet. Some volunteers, like Lisa Hall, of Kearns, Utah, donate their time and service close to home, yet reap rich personal rewards. A decade ago, Hall completed volunteer training sessions with Splore, a Salt Lake City nonprofit that provides adventure programs — snow sports, river rafting, canoeing, rock-climbing — to people with disabilities.

Hall, a restaurant dishwasher, wanted a meaningful but inexpensive outdoor activity

she could share with her children, so they signed on for Splore's cross-country skiing day-trips in the nearby Wasatch Mountains. They helped adults and kids with mobility challenges use a walker on skis or the "sit-ski" (a chair on skis). "We helped others experience the snow and fresh mountain air, but we enjoyed ourselves, too," she says. "It's actually a kind of gift to yourself."

Now that her children are grown, Hall, 44, loves how Splore trips let her escape her suburban landscape and make new friends. "You're strangers at first, but skiing together breaks the ice, and soon we don't really notice the differences between us," she says.

Last winter, Hall volunteered on a trip for incarcerated youth in which she partnered with a 17-year-old boy who'd never been on skis. He managed the flat terrain, but as the trail became hilly, he fell behind the group and got →



Peter, a Big City Mountaineers participant, takes a breather during a backpacking trip in the Pacific Northwest.

The Healthy Do-Gooder

Volunteerism, altruism, humanitarianism, philanthropy: All refer to the act of promoting human welfare with unselfish motivations.

Helping others, however, has a secret pay-back: It contributes to your personal well-being.

"When people volunteer, they feel happier and calmer, and they report less depression and a greater sense of meaning," says Stephen G. Post, PhD, coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (Broadway, 2007).

Studies also show that volunteering can strengthen the immune system, alleviate pain and insomnia, and increase longevity.

As director of Stony Brook University's Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics, Post evaluates the scientific evidence behind humanitarian acts. Among the new findings:

- Volunteering in high school predicts good physical and mental health for life.
- Individuals over 65 who volunteer are significantly less likely to die within the next eight years than those who don't volunteer.
- People under economic stress who offer social support to others experience less anxiety over their own situation.
- A phenomenon called "helper's high" produces euphoric feelings similar to the "endorphin high" that follows vigorous exercise. Helper's high can last for weeks and often returns when volunteers remember helping others.

For more information on altruism and health, visit www.whygoodthingshappen.com and www.actsofkindness.org, or read "For a Good Cause" in the January/February 2002 archives at experiencelifemag.com.



Adventurers with PLAY It Forward have some fun at their eco-lodge in Guatemala.

frustrated. "I told him I knew he could do it, but every time he stood up he fell back down," Hall remembers.

The boy kept trying, but finally, exhausted, he decided to remove his skis, and Hall joined him. "He told me he'd had fun that day even though it got rough at the end," says Hall. "It's hard to try something new, but he was patient. And I was happy to stick with him and give him some encouragement."

Peak Giving

No matter how much time, energy or money you're prepared to donate, there's a volunteer vacation that will fit your lifestyle. Organizations like Splore are happy to train those with little or no experience in an activity, while others demand rigorous preparation and a significant financial commitment.

Scott Wareham, 38, spent six months raising money and three months building his cardio capacity and strengthening his core before climbing Mt. Rainier with Summit

“You raise money for a great cause, your guided climb is free except for travel costs, and you receive all the equipment you need.”



Climbers with Summit for Someone at the peak of Mount Shasta in California.

LEND-A-HAND Adventures

These outdoor outfitters and organizers offer do-good, feel-good adventures.

BIG CITY MOUNTAINEERS: Volunteers for this nonprofit take inner-city teens on wilderness backpacking trips in seven states. 303-271-9200; www.bigcitymountaineers.org

FOR A CAUSE: Hike or bike in Europe to raise money for juvenile AIDS and breast cancer groups. 773-960-4365; www.rfac.org

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY: Help build affordable homes, locally or internationally, for those in need. 800-422-4828; www.habitat.org

PLANETERRA: "Voluntours" offer hands-on opportunities to contribute to communities worldwide during active international travel. 416-260-0999; www.planeterra.org

Hearing-impaired participants with Splore climb up Storm Mountain in Big Cottonwood Canyon just outside Salt Lake City.

for Someone, a program that benefits Big City Mountaineers (BCM), a Denver nonprofit that takes inner-city kids backpacking.

After two days of training and acclimatization, his Rainier expedition departed from 10,000-foot Camp Muir at midnight. "Our climbing team roped together, and we wore crampons and headlamps," recalls Wareham, a sales rep for an adventure-gear agency in Ft. Worth, Texas. "In the dark, all we could see was a little bit of trail ahead."

After 12 hours of grueling snow climbing, Wareham stood on Mt. Rainier's 14,410-foot summit and surveyed, through tear-filled eyes, peaks hundreds of miles away. Ecstatic over his personal accomplishment, he also was proud he was helping at-risk youth.

BCM equips Summit for Someone participants with state-of-the-art climbing gear donated by manufacturers and engages professional guides who also volunteer their services. "It's win-win," says Wareham, who has made two more Summit for Someone climbs since his 2006 Rainier experience (he's also a mentor on BCM's teen backpack trips). "You raise money for a great cause, your guided climb is free except for travel costs, and you receive all the equipment you need," he says.

To help volunteers with fundraising, BCM offers tools and suggestions for soliciting money. "It's surprisingly easy to find donors willing to help a meaningful cause like BCM," says Wareham, who raised \$3,600 for his Rainier efforts.

Climbing an iconic peak offers plenty of personal benefits, but Wareham feels the experience is even more meaningful because he's passing on the legacy of outdoor adventure to the next generation. "Climbing mountains is phenomenal," he says, "but doing it to fundraise for city kids is life changing." ●

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PLAY IT FORWARD ADVENTURES: International trips combine outdoor activities with people-helping projects. 651-493-8817; www.pifadventures.com

SPLORE: This nonprofit pairs volunteers with disabled individuals for rafting, canoeing, skiing, snowshoeing and rock-climbing in Utah. 801-484-4128; www.splore.org

SUMMIT FOR SOMEONE: Raise money for Big City Mountaineers by summiting North American peaks. 303-271-9200; www.summitforsomeone.org

VERMONT ADAPTIVE SKI AND SPORTS: Volunteers help disabled people ski, snowboard, dog sled, sail, canoe, tandem cycle and horseback ride. 802-786-4991; www.vermontadaptive.org