



ATLANTA TRAVEL 9:40 a.m. Thursday, March 18, 2010

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Take a vacation, and help save the planet

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By Libby Swope Wiersema
For the AJC

If you're looking to leave Earth a little better off for the next generation, it might be time to hit the road.



Enlarge photo

Volunteer vacations strike a balance between giving and getting, feeding a participant's sense of adventure as well as a desire to improve the planet and the lives of its inhabitants. This pairing of volunteerism and travel, which the Sierra Club first introduced in 1958 in the form of service trips, is an old concept enjoying new life. More than 3.5 million Americans traveled at least 120 miles to volunteer their services in 2007, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service.

With President Barack Obama's recent appeal for increased volunteerism, those numbers may be even higher for 2009 and 2010.

'Voluntourism'

Shirley Banks of Atlanta is proud to count herself among those who have answered the call. A participant in nine service trips thus far — four as a crew member and five as a crew leader — she is a seasoned "voluntourist" with many stories to tell. The fact that she has already scheduled three trips for this year testifies to her passion for these projects.

Banks signed up for her first service excursion after reading online information about programs offered through the American Hiking Society, a nonprofit organization that focuses on protecting hiking trails and surrounding natural areas.

"I had wanted to do something like this, and it finally occurred to me that if I wanted it to happen, I should sign up and stop waiting for someone to personally knock on my door," Banks said.

Banks has repaired and helped maintain trails in locales as varied as the Cross Vermont Trail in Vermont, Mount Baker National Forest in Washington and the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area on the border of Tennessee and Kentucky.

No matter where she goes, each setting and project offers satisfaction through service, memorable moments in nature and opportunities for new friendships.



Rebecca Dameron

A kayaker removes trash on Fontana Lake in western North Carolina.

Enlarge photo



Sarah Stout

Volunteers in New Orleans work on a wetlands restoration project. The pairing of community volunteerism and travel is growing in popularity.

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"Mount Baker was so beautiful I cried — the scenic drama of the Pacific Northwest is breathtaking," Banks said. "On that trip, our crew leader was an amazing outdoorswoman. She harvested boletes [mushrooms] for us for dinner. She was also downright inspiring with an ax!"

While there, Banks and the crew were charged with building a stone path along an alpine meadow to prevent hikers from becoming confused by the area's unkempt braided trails. Participants can select the type of project according to interest and physical ability.

"The project descriptions on the Web site give basic info about the place, the work project, lodging, transportation and climate," Banks said. "Your crew leader will be in touch before

the trip to help you get ready. You don't need to be a lumberjack or a hard-core backpacker."

The Sierra Club offers volunteer vacations for the restoration of natural areas and trails, as well as opportunities for conducting archaeological documentation and scientific research. The aim of the program is threefold, said Jason Halal, the marketing manager for Sierra Club Outings.

"Sierra Club service trips allow participants to 'give back' to the outdoors on projects that help restore or protect threatened wilderness areas and understaffed public lands," he said. "A second goal is providing outdoor enthusiasts with an exciting, low-budget vacation in a spectacular setting. A final goal is educating participants about the global threat of climate change, building an understanding of the conservation issues surrounding the areas we visit and providing them with the tools and inspiration to make a difference after returning home."

Costs

Sierra Club service trips range in cost from \$295 for a research and trail project at Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky to \$1,875 for an 11-day project in Maui, which includes condo accommodations, whale watching excursions, hiking and snorkeling.

The American Hiking Society requires a fee of \$275 for nonmembers and \$245 for members for volunteer vacations, said Libby Wile, the volunteer programs manager. This includes meals, camping fees and permits, a T-shirt and a one-year membership for new participants. Since fees contribute directly to the work of these nonprofit organizations, they could be tax-deductible.

Travel to and from volunteer vacation project sites is typically the responsibility of the participant.

Other considerations

In addition to a desire to improve the environment, potential volunteer vacationers need to be in generally good physical condition. Previous backpacking experience can be helpful, particularly on trips that involve hiking a few miles to the project base each day. Trips are rated to reflect the amount of muscle needed to perform the required tasks.

Both the Sierra Club and American Hiking Society welcome families for projects deemed suitable for a variety of age groups.

But, Wile said, "anyone younger than 18 must have a legal guardian attend the trip with them."

"Since some project tasks involve heavy lifting and manual labor, all trips do have a minimum age that is determined by the project host," she said. "The minimum age is listed in detail on each project description."

While most volunteers come alone, participants are encouraged to sign up with groups of friends or as couples.

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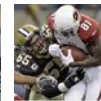
American Hiking Society. 1422 Fenwick Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20910. 301-565-6704, www.AmericanHiking.org.

Sierra Club, Outings Department. 85 Second St., Second Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105. Reservations and trip information: 415-977-5522, www.sierraclub.org/outings/national/service.asp.

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