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How to find a volunteer vacation on a budget

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Enlarge By Arlo Smith, AP Photo

Volunteers haul a "stringer" to be used on a trail structure in the Cascade mountains. The Washington Trails Association is reporting "record sign-ups" so far this season for volunteer vacations it sponsors in Washington State.

By Beth J. Harpaz, AP Travel Editor

NEW YORK — You could pay a lot of money for the privilege of donating your labor to a worthy cause somewhere around the world on a volunteer vacation. Or you could just throw your sleeping bag in the car, drive to a nearby park, and for as little as \$150, spend a week in the wilderness rebuilding trails with other nature-lovers.

Here are some tips on how to find a volunteer vacation on a budget — along with some sample trips.

TIPS: "Flight and accommodations are your two most expensive pieces of this," said Doug Cutchins, co-author of "Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others," just out in its 10th edition from Chicago Review Press. "So domestic volunteer vacations are always cheaper than international."

Robert Rosenthal, a spokesman for VolunteerMatch, a national nonprofit organization, agreed that volunteering close to home is not only cheaper, but also serves important domestic needs.

"It's hard to argue that somewhere in Costa Rica is in more need than communities like Detroit," he said.

Rosenthal noted that an important tradeoff is that when you pay more money in fees to take part in a volunteer vacation, "you get other people doing the logistics. Budget equals having to do more of the work yourself."

VolunteerMatch operates a website at <http://www.volunteermatch.org> with a database of opportunities and groups (most of them nonprofits) that have been vetted to make sure they comply with U.S. tax and charity laws. The site lists "not just the well-heeled agencies, but also small organizations that are doing really interesting, innovative stuff but that can't advertise in The New Yorker," Rosenthal said. Use the advanced search form on the site's "Organizations" tab to find groups that match your skills and desired location.

VolunteerMatch.org also recently launched a review tool so that former volunteers can leave feedback online about their experiences.

Cutchins said other ways to check out groups you're considering volunteering with include Googling for blogs and other online commentary by former volunteers, as well as simply asking organizations for references. They're unlikely to send you to someone who had a bad experience, but Cutchins says one way to sniff out problems is to ask former volunteers what aspects of the program might have been better.

PAYING FOR YOUR TRIP: Many organizations encourage participants to find "sponsors." Often this amounts to little more than a form letter you e-mail to everyone you know asking them to donate money.

Cutchins, director of service and social commitment at Grinnell College, encourages students to "think creatively" and find ways to fund their trips that do not involve handouts.

"Instead of a gift, can you earn this money? Is there someone whom you might borrow this money from and find a way to repay it?" he said.

If you can't afford a trip this year, save money to take the trip next year. Or, if you are a student, instead of asking grandma to write a check, perhaps you can work off a loan by devoting a few weekends or a week to helping her with a project — a garage sale, basement cleanup or getting her garden in shape for spring.

Another approach: Ask friends and family to forgo Christmas and birthday gifts for you and instead contribute toward the cost of your trip. "Invest in experience instead of stuff," is how Cutchins put it.

WORKING IN A PARK: This is one of the cheapest and most rewarding volunteer vacations you can find. Cutchins recommends trips organized by the Appalachian Mountain Club, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Colorado Trail Foundation and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation in Montana among others.

The American Hiking Society sponsored 500 volunteers working in parks last year and has just opened up registration for almost 80 trips this year in 30 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands. You must pay a \$30 membership fee but it is applied toward the \$275 cost of any seven-day trip. Some groups stay in cabins, some camp out. Details at <http://www.americanhiking.org/volunteerVacation.aspx>.

The Washington Trails Association is reporting "record sign-ups" so far this season for volunteer vacations it sponsors in Washington State, with some trips already full. "We're on track to have a banner year this year," said trail programs director Diane Bedell.

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One attraction is the price: \$150 a week. You drive to the trail head and provide your own camping gear (sleeping bag, tent, work clothes), and the organization provides food and equipment. Gear and tools are carried in to the work sites on horses or llamas. The group accepts beginners, so you don't need special skills, and they offer youth trips for kids as young as 14.

But the low cost is not the only appeal. "We work hard but we get great work done and people love the trips," said Bedell. "I hate the term 'staycation.' But I think there is something great about finding something exciting to do, close to home." Details at <http://www.wta.org/volunteer/vacations>.

OTHER IDEAS: Among the organizations Cutchins recommends as being known for quality experiences are Cross-Cultural Solutions, WorldTeach and of course, Habitat for Humanity, which builds affordable housing.

Habitat has affiliates in 50 states and nearly 90 countries. Some sample trip costs (excluding airfare): Mexico, \$1,200 for nine days; Romania, \$2,175 for 15 days; Biloxi, Miss., \$1,050 for seven days; Bennington, Vt., \$1,200 for seven days. A detailed list of trips and costs can be found at <http://www.habitat.org/cd/gv/schedule.aspx>. The costs cover meals, accommodations (which range from hotels to community centers); local transportation (excluding airfare to the destination); insurance and some local cultural activities. No construction skills are necessary.

STA Travel, a travel agency that specializes in discount trips for students, can book help find budget volunteer vacations for students, and book their travel too; call 800-351-3212 for help. Sample opportunities from STA's current roster include working with a sea turtle conservation group in Costa Rica, for 15 days starting at \$749 (plus airfare); and volunteering in India at a center that works to eradicate child labor, 15 days from \$1,449 (plus airfare).

STA's volunteer vacation guru, Ian Kynor, says another option to consider is "language programs where you volunteer to teach a local family English. These programs are available in a wide range of countries from Brazil and Peru to France and Spain and your host family provides room and board, which saves a lot of money."

WHY CHEAPER ISN'T NECESSARILY BETTER: Global Volunteers, a St. Paul-based organization, celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, but co-founder Michele Gran does not apologize for the fact that the group's volunteer vacations are not cheap. They cost up to \$3,000 for two or three weeks overseas (plus airfare) in places like Romania, India, Ecuador and Tanzania.

The fees cover volunteers' food, lodging and other local costs, but more importantly, they pay for equipment, facilities and staff in clinics, schools and other facilities in the host country. "There's no question you could go cheaper," said Gran. "But our only intent is to serve the needs of the local people and that is not necessarily cheap. Our focus is not to give volunteers a budget vacation."

One plus: The fees are tax-deductible. And Global Volunteers does have domestic opportunities for as little as \$1,000 a week; sites include a Blackfeet reservation in Montana. Details at <http://www.globalvolunteers.org>.

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Never PAY money to be a volunteer. Those "opportunities" do little other than enhance the income of people in the placement agencies! For a REAL volunteer experience, I suggest you go to the web page for St. Joseph International Academy in Kerala in India and read about opportunities there. You must pay your airfare to get there, then the school gives you free housing and food while you are there. I did it three years ago and have returned to the school regularly to see my friends I made to check up on their progress. You can be as creative as you want to be in designing your voluntary services to the school: <http://www.sja.org.in/>

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Travelocity offers grants worth \$5,000 each to people who apply. Details at www.travelocity.com/travelforgood. The grants include trips with Cross Cultural Solutions and the American Hiking Society mentioned above.

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