

Going Places

Travel Destinations in Asia and beyond



Help care for children in orphanages, such as this one in Cambodia



Soul-enriching sojourns

Tired of group tours and the usual sun, sea and surf chill-outs? **Nithia Devan** reveals how to banish boredom and enjoy a life-enriching experience, by volunteering your skills to those in need.

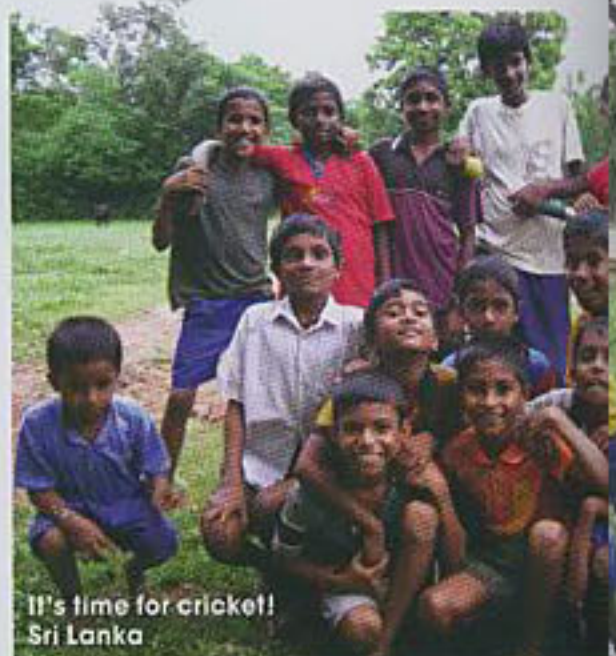
It's the end-of-year festive season, when many of us look forward to some well-deserved rest and start planning our vacations for the coming year. If competing for pool or beach space with families and screaming kids at crowded resorts is far from your idea of heaven, consider becoming a "voluntourist". Volunteer travel is a relatively new concept, but it's becoming increasingly popular – especially among those who traverse the globe on a regular basis. Typically, the organisations who host such programmes are non-commercial and include charities run by volunteers and social workers, or NGOs. Unfortunately South East Asia has many needy, underprivileged communities in countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam – but this need presents a myriad of opportunities for would-be voluntourists.

Who benefits

Firstly – and most importantly – the needy get the support and assistance they need to change their lives and revitalise their community. Regardless of whether volunteers help build houses or teach skills such as English and computer literacy, or help the disabled, they touch and help uplift a community. Secondly, the charities or NGOs have access to skilled resources and get

much-needed help – which may otherwise be outside of their means. This enables them to serve their communities more efficiently. And lastly, the volunteers are given an opportunity to do something worthwhile and meaningful. Leaving a positive mark on a community is something that many leisure travel options don't offer. Critics may argue voluntourism goes against accepted wisdom. That by giving communities fish instead of teaching them to fish, you're in fact hindering the development of indigenous skills. And others may have concerns the money they pay to take part in such volunteer projects may go to line the pockets of "middlemen", not reaching those who need it most. Some may even surmise volunteers are misguided "do-gooders" – doing more harm than good for these communities. But whichever side of the fence you sit on, there's no doubt volunteer travel is gaining popularity on a global scale with conscientious travellers.

The following programmes offer choices for individual travellers, families, school groups and corporations. All promise a holiday out of the ordinary and the opportunity for you to really make a difference.



It's time for cricket! Sri Lanka

HUMANITARIAN

Siem Reap, Cambodia

TakeMeToVolunteerTravel is operated by TakeMeToAsia Pte Ltd – an Asian-based travel company with headquarters in Singapore. Managed by a team that believes travel is more than leisure, fun and pleasure, the company offers volunteer travel opportunities in China, Cambodia and Thailand. Enjoy a life-changing experience assisting in an orphanage in Siem Reap – which houses 80 children from the age of two weeks to 18 years. Volunteers can teach English, computer skills, arts and crafts, dance and music, as well as give a general helping hand around the orphanage. Learning English is a priority in developing Cambodia, as a reasonable command of the language is sure to open doors of opportunity. Many of these children know very little English and have few opportunities to practise their language skills. The minimum stay is for three nights and programmes start from US\$450.

Siem Reap is also home to the Angkor temples, the most famous being Angkor Wat. The Angkor area was the capital city of the Khmer Kings, until Thai invaders forced the capital to shift southwards to Phnom Penh. These outstanding examples of Khmer architecture were built from the ninth to 15th century and were acknowledged as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992.

CONTACT www.takemetovolunteertravel.com



Teaching English to children is both fun and rewarding

Chiang Rai, Thailand

Baan Kru Mookda or "Teacher Mookda's House" is the residence for 29 children aged eight to 17 years. Located in the Kod Kham Tai district of Phayao province in northern Thailand, it can be found 45 kilometres outside of the town of Phayao – two hours south of Chiang Rai and three hours east of Chiang Mai. This project was established in 1989 by Mrs Mookda, to provide accommodation, education and a better quality of life for local children and those from nearby mountain tribes.

Children attend the school and then return to Baan Kru Mookda to finish their homework and take part in activities such as soccer, games or fishing. Volunteers teach conversational English to students at the school, as well as at Baan Kru Mookda. You're entrusted to look after the children, while acting as a suitable role model, counsellor and cultural ambassador. Volunteers also help arrange camp and related recreational activities. Aside from the personal rewards of teaching English to underprivileged Thai children, you'll also experience a different culture up close and personal and will be able to observe and learn about life in a rural Northern Thai community. The programme costs US\$1,230 for four weeks and volunteers can opt to stay for five to eight weeks, or nine to 12 weeks.

Local attractions include the beach at Koh Samet, mountain hiking or rafting in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, or visiting Bangkok for shopping and nightlife.

CONTACT www.volunteerbroad.com

Find more volunteer opportunities on page 52

WILDLIFE

Help conserve nature with these eco-tourism options.



Elephant Conservation Sri Lanka

Global Vision International offers the chance to be involved in hands-on conservation work while experiencing life on the beautiful island of Sri Lanka. Volunteers work alongside field scientists to conduct surveys of the endangered Sri Lankan elephants in the forests, grass plains and waterholes. The project is located in the Central Province of Matale and Mahaweli districts and is not for the faint-hearted or those who love creature comforts. The locations are extremely remote and the living conditions very basic. The closest internet café is two hours away, there's little to no electricity and mobile/telephone signals are patchy at best. Each project involves a group of six volunteers plus staff and the duration is two to 12 weeks.

CONTACT www.gviaustralia.com

Orang-utan Conservation Sumatra, Indonesia

Primate lovers can join a unique and fascinating project which investigates the way orang-utans in the Sumatran jungle self-medicate in order to treat illness and combat parasites. Volunteers spend their days entering data, weighing samples, pressing plant specimens and performing other varied research tasks. You'll also go on a jungle trek to observe and record the behaviour of wild orang-utans. Be prepared for basic living conditions and long days.

But this is also a unique opportunity to experience camping in a tropical rainforest. You'll be situated on the Indonesian island of Sumatra – a fascinating mix of rainforest, mangroves, Amazon-like rivers and flamboyant flora and fauna. The project itself is based near the Gunung Leuser National Park – one of Indonesia's largest national parks. Be enthralled by the wide range of ecosystems, ranging from vast mountains to lowland rainforest, home to species such as giant flying squirrel, the Sumatran elephant and dancing lemur, as well as the orang-utan. This is an ideal experience for groups of two to six people, over 14 days.

CONTACT www.gviaustralia.com



Bond with these gentle giants