

Serve and see the world

Volun-tourism is taking off as more Singaporeans sign up to help in community projects overseas and sightsee

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A two-week trip to China in March last year cost polytechnic student Lye Ee only \$450. Among the sights she saw was that of a young boy, half her size, climbing a hill faster than her while carrying bricks to build a water catchment for the village.

That was when the 19-year-old realised what a privileged and sheltered life she had.

She was in Zhaokeng, a village near Fujian province in China, on a subsidised overseas volunteer trip organised by Ngee Ann Polytechnic in partnership with the Youth Expedition Project. While she was there, she not only helped build the water catchment, she also taught the children English.

She says: "We taught them how to sing songs and perform before their school. And we also had to dig drains for the water catchment and take materials to the villagers doing the cementing. The trip was really an eye-opener for me."

She is among thousands of Singaporeans who go on "volun-tourism" trips or short-term overseas projects in aid of the underprivileged.

The Youth Expedition Project is a programme established by the National Youth Council nine years ago to give those aged 15 to 35 exposure to service-learning projects. It aims to nurture socially responsible citizens to identify and contribute to the needs of communities at home and overseas.

Since 2000, the project has sent more than 14,000 people to South-east Asia, India and China to interact with the local communities and tackle their needs in areas such as education, environment and health care.

Mr Kenneth Tan, 35, assistant director of youth engagement and expeditions in the youth council, says the rising trend of volun-tourism is due to an increased awareness of social responsibility.

He says: "Youths now have many different avenues presented to them through schools and the Ministry of Education. And with working adults, more companies are emphasising the importance of corporate social responsibility."

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of Singapore has also seen an increase in the number of people signing up for its International Service Programmes to do various community service work, from building houses to teaching the local children.

Since starting in 2007, the programmes have enjoyed an almost two-fold jump in volunteers, from 374 to 700 this year.

Mr Andrew Leo, manager of international programmes at YMCA, says of the larger number of volunteers: "Most of the volunteers see the value in such sustainable programmes. The exposure to serving others and to conditions outside of the comfort zone of most Singaporeans is invaluable to them."

Ms Yeo Li Yuen, an assistant sales and marketing manager in her 30s, joined a 12-day YMCA trip to Siem Reap in March, at a subsidised rate of \$1,000, including return airfare, accommodation at the Boys' Brigade Learning Centre and simple meals.

She says: "Since I love to travel, what better way is there for me to experience the local culture than to interact with the locals themselves?"

Together with 11 other volunteers, she worked with



Singapore volunteers on a trip to Siem Reap interacting with local kids at the YMCA (above) and in Zhaokeng, near Fujian province in China, on a trip organised by Ngee Ann Polytechnic in partnership with the Youth Expedition Project (right). PHOTOS: YMCA OF SINGAPORE, LYE EE



the Boys' Brigade Learning Centre in Siem Reap to paint murals at the centre and teach English to underprivileged children.

"You could see how enthusiastic the Cambodian kids were about learning," she says.

Mr Ivan Yeow, 20, Ms Amelia Hong, 19, and 16 other students from Ngee Ann Polytechnic did something rather different on a trip to Nias, Indonesia, in September 2007.

They were part of the polytechnic's Community Involvement Programme and used skills picked up in their mass communication studies to help the Farmers' Training Centre on the island.

Ms Hong says: "We did press releases, refined and organised their teaching materials and filmed training videos for the centre, which strives to teach farmers affected by the tsunami how to use their resources effectively."

Adds Mr Yeow: "I have always liked Indonesia and I wanted to get out of Singapore as well."

Each of the student volunteers paid a subsidised fee of \$500 for their 10-day trip. It covered the return airfare, accommodation at the Farmers' Training Centre and meals.

Schools and social organisations are not alone in arranging volun-tourism trips.

Online travel company TakeMeToAsia (www.takemetoasia.com) launched TakeMeToVolunteerTravel two years ago. The subsidiary service

facilitates short volunteer trips to Asian countries.

The trips typically last a few days and cost from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand, depending on the destination. An upcoming trip to Chiangmai costs \$650, excluding air tickets.

Sightseeing options cost extra.

Dr Tat Hon Chan, managing director of TakeMeToAsia, says: "Most of them are first-timers who have decided to give it (volunteer work) a try for a few days and see what it is like. Such individuals or groups have difficulty arranging these programmes themselves, especially for shorter, informal volunteering trips."

To date, 50 Singaporeans have joined its volunteer travel programmes.

Altruism brings its own rewards, say volun-tourists, even though the trips are short.

As part of his school's Project Sunshine programme, Republic Polytechnic student Satish Kumar, 19, recently went to Cambodia for two weeks in March to build greenhouses for the villagers of Siem Reap and repair the walls of the Sangkheum Centre for Children.

During that time, he made a new friend. "I met this 17-year-old orphan boy called Bota and we became very close," he says, adding that he hopes to return to Cambodia at the end of this year to visit his friend.

On her trip to Siem Reap, Ms Yeo, on the other

Where to go

Youth Expedition Project

Who: Those aged 15 to 35
When: Usually in March, May, June, September and December
Cost: The National Youth Council subsidises up to \$1,000 a participant
Info: www.yep.sg

Young Men's Christian Association

Who: Corporate teams and working adults
When: Sept 20 to 29
Cost: \$700 to \$1,000 a person
Info: The trip to Cambodia serves the beneficiaries of the Boys' Brigade Learning Centre. Call 6586-2331 or e-mail international@ymca.org.sg for details

TakeMeToVolunteerTravel

For information on upcoming trips, go to the website takemetovolunteertravel.com

hand, gained insight.

She says: "The experience of drawing water out of a well to wash our plates made me realise how much we take for granted here in Singapore."

Indeed, YMCA's Mr Leo says: "Friendships and learning gained (on volunteer trips) do impact greatly on the participants and change their lives for the better."

Some people think volun-tourism is all work and no play. But it is not so.

While in Cambodia, Ms Yeo visited the Angkor Wat and learnt about the killing fields.

She says: "We visited the high school in the Pouk village, wet market and main town area. It really gave me a glimpse into the lives of the Cambodian people."

For her and the other volunteers, such trips are also a great way to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Mr Yeow says: "I am usually very dependent on my computer, so it was relaxing to put it away, break the cycle and to just start appreciating the simple things in life."

"It was really one of the best experiences of my polytechnic life."

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