



Forget summer camp

Sending teens on a volunteer vacation can broaden their global awareness.

BY LISA EVANS

VOLUNTOURISM options FOR TEENS

Is your teen considering a volunteer vacation? Check out these organizations that provide culturally-immersive experiences.

> Canada World Youth has volunteer programs from two weeks to six months in length in over 20 countries for youth starting at age 15. Students live with host families and work on projects focused on health, environment, sustainable livelihood or community development.
canadaworldyouth.org

> Cross-Cultural Solutions offers summer service group volunteer trips for high school students ages 15-17 in six countries.
crossculturalsolutions.org

> Me to We offers teens as young as 15 the opportunity to help build schools in six countries. Programs are nine to 18 days long, involve manual labour at outdoor build sites and are heavily focused on cultural immersion.
metowe.com/volunteer-travel

> Projects Abroad have been coordinating volunteer vacations for 20 years and offer opportunities for teens as young as 16 to work on projects in 28 countries. Work focus ranges from animal conservation to coaching rugby or building community infrastructure.
projects-abroad.ca

> Volunteering Solutions provides volunteer opportunities in over 20 countries including two- to four-week summer volunteer programs for teens as young as 16.
volunteeringolutions.com

> Amigos de las Americas operates community-based volunteer high school programs for youth 16 and up in nine countries throughout the Americas ranging from four to nine weeks in July and August.
amigoslink.org

Instead of campfire s'mores and sing-alongs, volunteer holidays can be a life-changing experience for teens. Working abroad can boost self-confidence, instill independence and teach the importance of giving back. There are several travel companies now offering international voluntourism for teens. But before choosing a group and sending your teen on a plane to help fix the world, answer these questions:

WHERE IN THE WORLD? A country that has some similarities to home may be best for your teen's first experience abroad. Rachel Smith, 16, of Pickering, Ont., spent two weeks of her summer working on a conservation project in Costa Rica. Although she initially wanted to volunteer in Africa, her mom, Janet, felt more comfortable selecting a destination that was closer to home, especially since this was the first time her daughter had travelled out of the country. "Costa Rica was close enough and it was safe," says Janet.

WHAT ARE YOUR TEEN'S INTERESTS? On the other hand, Ashima Dhingra, Projects Abroad Director for Canada, recommends matching personal interests to projects first and looking at the destination second. Sending your child to Ecuador to work on an animal rehabilitation project when they're really interested in teaching children

won't be as valuable as sending them to work in an orphanage in Nepal.

IS YOUR TEEN PREPARED? Janice Souza, Executive Director of Me to We Trips, says the best indication your teen is ready to embark on a volunteer trip abroad is if they're driving the conversation. "A lot of parents might want their child to do this, but if the child is unresponsive, it's not a good fit." Consider whether your teen is adaptive to change, if they're adventurous with food, if they make friends easily, and if they've spent time away from home – such as at an overnight camp – and have enjoyed it.

HOW IS THE PROGRAM STRUCTURED? Consider how much time your teen wants to spend on a project versus exploring the country. Some are split 50/50 between volunteer work and sightseeing while others require full-time volunteer hours during the week with sightseeing only on the weekends.

IS IT SAFE? Janet's primary concerns were her daughter's safety and living conditions while away from home, but the team at Projects Abroad, who organized Rachel's trip, allayed her fears. "They sent us a bio on the family she was going to stay with, what they did, who their family members were right down to the pets, and how long

they'd been taking in Projects Abroad students. That gave me a lot of comfort," she says. Ask organizations what they do to ensure volunteer safety. Projects Abroad, for example, provides close supervision. "Volunteers go as a group from their host family home to the project, so there's someone constantly chaperoning them," says Ashima.

WHAT'S THE COMMUNICATION POLICY? What does the organization do to keep parents connected? Some programs, such as Me to We, don't allow Internet access, but instead send regular email updates and photos and have a satellite phone in case of emergency. "We really want them to be present in the activities and more logistically, if they're in rural Kenya, Facebook is not that accessible," says Janice.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT? While you hope your child will return from their volunteer holiday more appreciative of their life, it's important to remember they're still teenagers and these changes in world perspective may take longer to sink in. Rachel has decided to add a minor in international development when she heads to university this fall, an interest that was sparked by her volunteer trip. ○



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