



Volunteer Abroad For Free

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Introduction

The idea of volunteering abroad for free is gaining in popularity. Especially after the sticker shock when browsing organizations online who charge thousands of dollars for just a short stay abroad. So yes, the word “free” sounds very inviting when it comes to volunteering abroad. Let’s take a look at some things involved with volunteer abroad for free.

What does “Free” mean?

First let’s define “free” in the context of volunteering abroad.

“Free” means that the volunteer does not pay a program fee to a third-party placement organization. Instead, the volunteer decides to arrange and pay for everything on their own.

As the old saying goes, there’s no such thing as a free lunch. There’s also no such thing as a free volunteer trip abroad.

The “Program Fee” model

Paying a program fee to an organization has become one of the standard options today for newbies to volunteer abroad. The “placement” organization is typically a non-profit entity that is independent, secular and unaffiliated with a school or government entity.

The program fee they charge (sometimes also called a “placement fee”) pays for a volunteer’s meals, accommodations, airport transfers, insurance, visa assistance, pre-departure advice, 24-hour emergency support, and the volunteer placement itself.

One way to volunteer abroad for free is to simply self-arrange your trip. This means that that you will not have to pay a program fee to an organization.

Show Them the Money

However, the reality is that unless you have the time, money and a strong personality (and some luck), self-arranging a volunteer trip overseas can end up costing the same or even more as with paying a program fee.

How can that be?

First, even if you avoid paying a program fee, you will still be responsible for paying for items that the program fee would have covered. As I mentioned above, these costs include things like meals, accommodations, airport transfers, and daily commutes to the volunteer job.

Second, there will likely be costs for you to find a volunteer placement on your own:

1. Time

Before you leave home for your volunteer trip overseas, there will be the “opportunity cost” of spending dozens if not hundreds of hours on the Internet and phone researching and vetting potential volunteer placements abroad.

2. Travel

Then when you finally arrive in the host country, you will have to spend money visiting those potential placements. This means paying for your ground transportation, meals, and accommodations.

3. “Optional” Donations

Most local organizations in the host countries (like orphanages and AIDS groups) “require” volunteers to make a cash donation (which can be as high as \$500) in order to volunteer at their facility. These donations are usually not published or requested directly by the facilities; Instead the managers will constantly bombard the volunteer with tales about the facility’s lack of funds, until it’s uncomfortable for the volunteer NOT to donate cash or goods.

4. Emergencies

Most volunteers abroad do not experience an emergency during their trips. However there is a chance that something catastrophic will happen to you such as a medical episode, assault, theft, or natural disaster.

Would you be able to handle a an emergency on your own? Would you understand the importance of pre-departure recommendations like buying travel insurance, registering your trip with your local embassy, carrying emergency contacts on your person, and having access to copies of important documents like passports and visas?

Who should volunteer abroad for free

Volunteering abroad for free is not for everyone. But there are certain types of people and travelers who can thrive in this situation:

1. Experienced Travelers

If your volunteer trip abroad will be the first time you're traveling overseas – especially if still a minor – strongly consider signing up with a volunteer organization and paying their program fee. Volunteering abroad for free is for those travelers who are accustomed to handling the experience of being abroad independently. This includes things like haggling with taxi drivers, finding accommodations, and staying safe.

2. Those with time on their hands

Don't expect to quickly find a volunteer placement that suits you, especially if you are looking for a skilled position like in health care or construction. You will need considerable time to research and investigate not only the volunteer placement itself but also the local community. Then when you finally arrive at the placement, do not be surprised if the reality doesn't match the "brochure" – in terms of the facility's quality and the availability and type of volunteer work.

3. Tough Cookies

As one can gather from the above, volunteering abroad for free is suited only for independent-minded self-starters. What if something goes wrong 10,000 miles from home – say with your health or the volunteer work – or if you get homesick and depressed? You must be able to handle such adversity mostly on your own. You will have to negotiate a new culture with its unique customs, work styles and health and safety concerns.

4. Unskilled Volunteers

Volunteer positions that do not require skills or experience are the easiest ones to self-arrange. The most popular ones include volunteering at orphanages, elementary schools, and with sports teams. If you are a skilled volunteer like an experienced doctor or nurse, you will likely benefit from the contacts and support of a placement agency.

How to Volunteer Abroad for Free

So, just how can you volunteer abroad for free? Here are some methods that work:

1. Former Volunteers

Seasoned travelers are often the best resource when finding a free volunteer project abroad. They are almost always willing to share their experiences -- and not just on an impersonal blog or Facebook page. Ask them to have a chat online or even try to meet for tea if feasible.

2. Social Media

Facebook and Twitter can be a good way to find free or low-cost volunteer programs abroad. But again, focus on finding former volunteers, instead of just reaching out to the volunteer placements themselves.

3. Guide Books

Travel guide books (Lonely Planet, Moon Books) are good to consult for their listings of free volunteer projects abroad. These guide books are very popular, so the listed organizations are usually flooded with requests from foreigners looking to volunteer. Contact them anyway -- they may have partner organizations who could use your help.

4. Local Organizations

Contact organizations abroad directly, like schools and drop-in centers for children, to see if they have volunteer placements available for you. Send an email or Facebook message but also call them on the phone (the effort of a voice call may make the organization more willing to entertain your request to volunteer). Ask if they have had foreign volunteers before; what are the work duties; is there free room and meals?

5. Just Show Up

Consider simply flying to the host country and arranging everything after you arrive. Have a list of local organizations in hand and literally knock on their doors and tell them you're looking to volunteer. Don't have a list? Hang around venues with foreigners like cafes, gyms and bars. Ask locals (hotel front-desk, taxi drivers, waiters) where you can volunteer. These communities abroad are very small -- you will find something quickly.