

**MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE USING
THEIR VACATION TIME TO WORK FOR
OTHERS. BY DIANE DANIEL**



BEFORE VICTOR BENARD LEFT ON AN eight-week bicycle tour of India with his wife, Marlene, he learned about Children Walking Tall, a British charity in Goa that helps kids living on the streets and in the slums. "I emailed them with the date we thought we would be there," says Benard, who lives in Boskoop, the Netherlands. At the time, the group was renovating a decrepit building into The Mango House, a children's center. "We arrived there on the bike and said, 'Here we are! What can we do?'" Within the hour, he says, they were sorting through piles of clothes to be handed out to the children.

For two weeks, the Benards, who were staying 20 miles outside of town, cycled in daily to work on the house and in the garden. "People from England would show up every day to bring clothes and money," he says. Although the couple traveled for another six weeks after volunteering, their two weeks with The Mango House were

the most memorable and meaningful, says Benard, who co-owns Free Spirits, a travel and clothing shop in Amsterdam, where he meets like-minded travelers. "We get a lot of customers who come in before going off to do volunteer work."

Benard and his clientele are part of a rapidly growing industry of so-called volunteer vacations, trips that combine travel and service. The work encompasses many areas—relief aid, health, education, conservation and construction—and can include anything from holding orphaned infants to teaching English or building homes. Despite the work involved, volunteer organizers say the cross-cultural exchanges are the most valuable part of any program.

Most travelers make their plans ahead of time through non-profit groups, for a fee. With established organizations, the cost runs from \$500 to \$2,000 (315 to 1,275 euros) for a week of volunteering, which

covers administrative fees, travel expenses except airfare, food and lodging and sometimes donations to the host community. Scores of those groups are outlined for Americans in *Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others*, in its 9th edition. Lonely Planet's *Volunteer: A Traveller's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World* addresses an international audience.

Doug Cutchins, co-author of *Volunteer Vacations*, credits the rise in international volunteerism to several factors. "There's the triple whammy of 9/11, the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. There are forces in the world we can't control, but we can help alleviate some of the problems. Also everybody is busy, so I think it can be a form of multitasking. Someone might think, 'I want to go to Suriname. I don't volunteer enough at home. Here's a way I can do both and feel good about it.'"

In general, Cutchins says, Americans, Australians and Brits make up the bulk of international volunteers. "The typical groups we saw for a long time have been people in college or right out [of college] and retirees. Now there are more people in the middle of their careers. The other big group we're seeing is families. In our 10th edition, we're including information for them."

GINNA PORTMAN AMIS' FAMILY FITS

Cutchins' profile. Its members had already traveled internationally and participated in service projects at home in Apple Valley, Minnesota, when Portman Amis decided to combine the two. "I thought it would be great to do some kind of community work in a different culture," she says.

After researching opportunities online, she zeroed in on Cross-Cultural Solutions and Global Volunteers, two leaders in the international volunteer field. She chose Global Volunteers, which has been in operation since 1984 and is a pioneer in short-term service projects. In 2006, along with her husband, Allan, and their three daughters—Mary, then 9, Alison, 13, and Julia, 16—she spent two weeks in Ecuador and,



ALLAN AMIS (RIGHT), HUSBAND OF GINNA PORTMAN AMIS, HELPS BUILD A DAYCARE CENTER IN ECUADOR.

the following year, a week in Romania, in groups of 12 to 18 volunteers.

"The first time, we all worked at a day-care in Calderón, outside of Quito," Portman Amis says. "Allan did construction and the four of us helped out with the children. The girls liked Ecuador so much they want to go back." In Romania, the family volunteered at a hospital clinic. There, he taught English while she and her daughters again attended to children.

"Both trips were really great. Working hands-on with kids, it doesn't matter what language you speak," she says. The volunteers stay together and have nightly talks about their experiences, Portman Amis explains. "We really get to know each other. Both trips opened the girls' minds and hearts to different cultures. It's so different from being a tourist."

That distinction from tourism is what Global Volunteers founders Michele Gran and Bud Philbrook are after. With the skyrocketing popularity of international volunteering, Gran cautions against the proliferation of disreputable organizations and groups that focus on travel more than service. She grudgingly accepts the term "volunteer vacation," but rejects the also-common "voluntourism."

"Please don't use that word," she implores. "It emphasizes tourism and diffuses our purpose. We leave time for tourism, but it's not what we do."

Cutchins understands Gran's view, but to him, if the terms raise awareness and the movement remains popular, so much the better. "If people do it because it's trendy, and five years later they're Peace Corps volunteers, that's a great thing," he says. "No one later is going to say, 'I wish I hadn't played with those kids at the orphanage instead of going to the beach.' It can't not impact you."

DIANE DANIEL wrote about electric cars in the October 2008 issue.



SANDY STABILE IN NICARAGUA AFTER ASSISTING IN CLEFT-PALATE REPAIR SURGERY.

WHY I VOLUNTEER

An American nurse on the joys of voluntourism. **By Sandy Stabile**

I'M A NURSE IN SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, and in November last year I returned from Nicaragua after working with a team of volunteer doctors and nurses from Operation Smile to provide free surgery for children with cleft lip and cleft palate deformities.

This was my eighth volunteer vacation, and so far I've helped take care of more than 1,000 children in China, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras. I'm looking forward to a trip to India. I never imagined I'd receive more than I gave by volunteering my time to help others in need. But I do. My first mission to Nicaragua was a life-changing experience. We did surgery on 177 children in five days. We worked 14 to 16 hours straight. The hospital was so poor there was no glass in the windows.

At first, the staff wasn't friendly or helpful. But when they found out we were all volunteers on our vacation time, they were shocked. They couldn't believe we would work so hard on our vacations, and take care of people we didn't know. This earned their respect and then they worked side-by-side with us to take care of the children.

I come back from these trips with powerful memories. Gustavo, a 14-year-old boy with a cleft lip we met in Guatemala, had never played with any other children except his siblings because of his deformity. He couldn't go to school. To reach us, he had to walk two hours down a mountain and ride a bus for 10 hours. We all fell in love with him.

And I'll never forget Melanie. She was born with a cleft lip and cleft palate. Her

father said she was born of the devil and abandoned the whole family. I met her on my first trip to Guatemala. She was a very active 2-year-old and we repaired her cleft lip. The next year I returned to Guatemala and saw Melanie and her mother. It was so good to see her again and find out how well her cleft lip repair had healed. Her mother had found a job, and they were doing well.

In China, we saw only boys during our first two days of surgery. We asked where the girls were, since cleft lip and palate deformities occur equally among boys and girls. We were told that "girls are not worthy" and so were not sent to us for surgery. I was shocked that this mentality still existed.

Some people don't see why we'd go on a volunteer vacation. They wonder why we'd pay to participate (from \$350 to \$500—250 to 350 euros—with the organization covering airfare, hotel, breakfast and lunch) and go to poor countries where hotels often don't have hot water to help people we don't know. But after eight missions, I still get an extreme high. It amazes me what a group of strangers can accomplish.

The cultural exchange with the patients and local volunteers is another wonderful part of a mission. You're exposed to new food, music, traditions, language and religion. The whole experience touches your soul in ways you cannot imagine or explain.

SANDY STABILE is a registered nurse working in San Jose, California, who's been going on medical missions for six years.



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