

“Voluntourism”

Tourists out to Change the World

By Lynn Vincent

Twenty years ago, a seven-year-old boy transformed life for thousands of children in a Kenyan slum—and he never even knew it.

Lorna MacLeod, then a New York marketing consultant, had traveled to Kenya with a tour company called Micato Safaris. MacLeod was traveling through a slum called Mukuru when her driver pulled over in a parking lot to wait for another passenger. MacLeod didn't know much about Mukuru then. She didn't know that the sprawling ghetto was really a patchwork of 20 villages and 600,000 people just a few minutes away from the gleaming high rises of Nairobi's business district. Or that the average family of five lived jammed into a ten-by-ten corrugated metal shack, lucky to eat one meal a day. Or that hundreds of orphaned children lived in Mukuru's filthy streets, begging, stealing, and selling drugs—or themselves—to survive.

But that day MacLeod saw a living symptom: The small boy moving among the waiting autos.

“He was like a little bee, bouncing from car to car,” MacLeod remembers. “I asked the driver what he was doing.”

“Looking for school fees,” the driver answered.

Clad in shorts, flip-flops and a t-shirt, the boy eventually

stopped at MacLeod's car, carrying a piece of paper, which he handed to the driver to examine.

“It's legitimate,” the driver told MacLeod. “He is collecting money to pay for a school uniform.”

MacLeod learned that the boy had collected only a few shillings, equaling less than a dime in American money. “How much do you need?” she asked him.

“Fifteen dollars, American,” the boy said.

MacLeod was stunned: She could send a child to school for only fifteen dollars? Rummaging in her bag, she extracted the entire sum and placed it in the boy's hand.

“He looked at the money then he looked at me, and his eyes filled with tears,” MacLeod remembers. “You know those moments when someone's eyes touch your soul? That's what happened.”

“God bless you, lady,” the boy said and ran off.

MacLeod never saw him again, but the moment lit a passion in her heart, a passion that bloomed into AmericaShare, a nonprofit arm of Micato Safaris that links tourism with philanthropy with the aim of giving back to the people of Africa. The group rescues orphaned and vulnerable children from Nairobi's Mukuru slum and places them in reputable boarding schools. Since Micato pays all administrative costs, 100 percent of all donations reach the children directly. Micato promotes traveler interest—and donations—through its Lend A Helping Hand program, an optional extension offered at the close of most East African safaris.

While Micato and AmericaShare have linked vacations and volunteerism for the better part of two decades, such arrangements today have a trendy name: “Voluntourism.” On trips organized by both nonprofit groups and for-profit firms, many “voluntourists” combine sightseeing with humanitarian and disaster relief efforts. For example, Globe Aware, a nonprofit, offers volunteer vacations in Peru, Costa Rica, Thailand, Cuba, Nepal, Brazil, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Jamaica, and Romania, Ghana and China. These one-week expeditions include cultural immersion and in-country excursions, but also an enormous range of opportunities to volunteer—from AIDS education, reforestation, and solar/hydro projects to

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teaching villagers English or working with street kids.

Much voluntourism is focused on humanitarian aid, but a significant portion also involves conservation. For example, “Roots and Shoots” hosts volunteers for six months who work to save endangered chimpanzees in Uganda for six months at a cost of around \$2,000. The pricier Discovery Initiatives, a U.K.-based company that funds wildlife conservation through tourism, lets travelers choose from expeditions focused on 20 different animal species, including gorillas, tigers, pandas, jaguars, and wild dogs.

Statistics vary on the number of travelers opting for volunteer vacations. But companies involved in travel, tourism, and volunteering abroad say interest is rising. In a 2006 survey by the Travel Industry Association of America, 24 percent of travelers said they were currently interested in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation, an increase over five years ago. Interest was strongest among baby boomers, with the largest share (47 percent) of those interested in taking a volunteer vacation falling into the 35- to 54-year-old age range.

A 2007 survey by Travelocity, an online discount travel service, found that 11 percent of respondents planned to volunteer during their vacations, up from six percent in 2006. Discovery Initiatives, a United Kingdom-based firm that specializes in using “wildlife tourism” to fund conservation, has seen increased consumer interest in “green holidays” and socially responsible travel “products.”

Even groups that have long been in the volunteer business have begun marketing service opportunities as “vacations.” For example, the Sierra Club has logged up to 90 service trips annually, contributing 27,000 volunteer work-hours to U.S. state and federal land agencies through its National Outings program. Since the advent of “voluntourism,” though,

its website advertises: “Give something back—with a volunteer vacation.”

But despite voluntourism’s growing popularity debate simmers among volunteer sending agencies. Established groups like the Peace Corps and International Red Cross ask: Is voluntourism effective? Can such touch-and-go philanthropy create lasting and positive change? Can giving (the volunteering) and receiving (the vacationing) be productively combined?

AmericaShare’s Lorna MacLeod says yes. “I haven’t seen any examples of voluntourism I would call ineffective,” she said. “Even if you did a little, even for a day, it’s still giving. It’s still participating.”

In MacLeod’s view, even small acts of kindness can trigger a ripple effect, like a pebble tossed into a pond. Since MacLeod’s initial contact with the Mukuru boy seeking school fees, Micato Safaris and AmericaShare have helped thousands of children attend boarding school; established a feeding program for women suffering from HIV/AIDS; and built a community center. Today, Micato clients are sending 22 kids to college and five to vocational school.

But MacLeod is quick to admit that she has learned tough lessons along the way. In Mukuru, malaria, typhoid, dysentery and tuberculosis are common. Malnutrition is visible among the children. Medical care and basic education is beyond the reach of most families. Even after working in the community all these years, some programs are still evolving—the HIV/AIDS feeding program, for example. “We’re still figuring out how to wean people off that program so that they don’t become dependent.”

At times, local corruption has also been a problem. For

example, AmericaShare had been donating supplies such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, and clothing to one Mukuru orphanage. MacLeod’s would visit three times a year to touch base with partner organizations and visit with the children. On one such visit, she was eating lunch with some AmericaShare-sponsored



The road into the Mukuru slum area

boys at a high school called Gateway, when a boy named Mohammed approached her.

“I need to tell you something,” Mohammed said. “All of those things you are giving at the orphanage aren’t really benefiting us.”

“Why not?” MacLeod asked, surprised.

“Because after you give the donations to the children, the orphanage director is taking it away from us and selling it.”

MacLeod said she marched down to the orphanage and “almost physically choked the guy. I looked like a madwoman, I’m sure.”

AmericaShare then worked with local officials to remove all 90 children from the care of the corrupt orphanage director, who was under the control of the local slum mafia, and place them under reputable care.

Rise in Giving

Although a rise in interest in the volunteer vacations is undeniable, some sending agencies don’t like to call such efforts “voluntourism.”

“Some of the larger, more established volunteer sending agencies such as Habitat for Humanity International, EarthWatch and Global Volunteers frown on the use of this term,” wrote the editors of *WorldView*, the journal of the Peace Corps, in the Spring 2008 issue. “They do not want the audience that term might attract.”

Translation: “Voluntourism” emphasizes being a tourist rather than traveling to a foreign country expressly to lend a hand.

“The organizations receiving you need to be able to see you as being there for the work,” said Kam Santos, director of communications for Cross Cultural Solutions, a sending agency that does not consider itself a vacation vendor. “When you say you’re a ‘voluntourist,’ it can be perceived as minimizing the entire experience.”

Still, Santos said, though the term is not necessarily preferred, it is an access point for people who may not have considered volunteering abroad in the purist sense, but who have become exposed to the idea in the context of a vacation. The International Volunteer Programs Association publishes a guide to best principles and practices. One critical element: The sending organization, wherever possible, should place volunteers with local and ongoing agencies and projects rather than creating its own.

In 2006, Travelocity launched its Travel for Good program, partnering with four volunteer travel organizations—Cross Cultural Solutions, EarthWatch, Globe Aware and Take Pride

in America, a federally sponsored domestic program.

“We’ve really tried to partner with the gold-standard programs,” said Travel for Good manager Tasha Carvel. “We try to make sure everything they’re doing is very integrated into the communities they’re serving.”

The volunteer organizations, in turn, have provided Travelocity with input on what makes an effective volunteer effort. For example, one Travelocity-sponsored group traveling to

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Guatemala with Cross Cultural Solutions wanted to bring down a load of t-shirts and school supplies.

“It was all with good intentions,” Carvel said. But CCS managers advised Carvel that it’s not a good idea to “swoop in with supplies and swoop out again.” It’s better to attach to an ongoing program or carefully planned project, rather than creating a flow of in-kind goods on which receiving communities might become dependent.

In 2007, Travelocity launched a Travel for Good grant program. “We were looking at all the [sending agencies’] trips and realized how cost prohibitive it can be—two to three thousand dollars just to be on an expedition,” said Carvel.

According to *CharityGuide.com*, a few longer term volunteer vacation programs pay volunteers a stipend, but most cost from \$50 to \$3,000 and often do not include travel expenses such as airfare. For example, *Globe Aware* charges \$1,000 U.S. for its one-week adventures. The program fee covers the cost of meals, accommodation, in-country travel (but not airfare), emergency medical evacuation, medical insurance, donations to the various community projects, and administrative expenses for putting the trip together.

In general, volunteer vacation program fees are smaller when accommodations are basic, such as a pitched tent, and when volunteers prepare their own meals. But some programs, such as *Global Volunteers*, charge more and in return provide volunteers with extensive pre-trip reading materials, personal escorts and security, hotel accommodations, prepared meals, and a volunteer coordinator who is on-site at all times.

With its Travel for Good grants, Travelocity wanted to help willing volunteer-travelers who didn’t have the financial

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means to make the trip. The company evaluates applicants on two factors: financial need and, Carvel said, “what the grant committee believes the applicant brings to the table.”

Amanda Anderson-Green, one of Travelocity’s first grant winners, brought professional experience as a research technician in the field of parasitology. Anderson-Green won a \$5,000 grant which she used last year to travel to Ghana’s Volta Region, where she worked to educate villagers on HIV/AIDS.

Anderson-Green, 24, chose the CCS program because she is preparing for medical school and is particularly interested in the field of infectious disease. “I wanted to get a better

“I finally convinced my husband to come along to see first hand the value of volunteering. He now has no interest in possibly repeating an experience like this.”

idea of what international health care was like, especially in underserved communities,” she said. “It was kind of a test: Can I really go and work in one these kinds of communities where there aren’t as many resources and where things move more slowly?”

So did she pass? Anderson-Green isn’t sure. “It’s one thing to hear people say things move slowly. It’s another to see it.”

The Volta region receives electrical power only every other day. That means two days to make copies, two days to print out test results, two days to even access a working computer. “At times, it was really frustrating,” she said. “Here in America, we order things and they come to us very quickly and in high quality. I definitely learned I had been taking things for granted.”

Anderson-Green was surprised at how little volunteer time Cross Cultural Solutions actually required: Only from about nine to noon each day. That’s why she and many of her fellow volunteers . . . well, volunteered to do more. Anderson-Green worked in HIV/AIDS education each morning. Each afternoon, she visited an orphanage on her own.

Home to around 100 children, the orphanage employs only four fulltime staff. “We would arrive each day and crowds of children would just hang on to us, saying ‘Thank you for coming! Thank you for coming!’ We couldn’t even move until they calmed down.”

The orphanage staff would then assign the volunteers to

groups of children, saying “Teach them something.”

“What should I teach them?” Anderson-Green asked.

The answer: “Teach them whatever you know.”

And so Anderson-Green made up songs about shapes and colors and the English alphabet. “It was a stretch, not ever having done any teaching before,” she said. “I had to get over feeling like I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Meanwhile, the children were perfectly happy with what she was doing—especially Grace, a tiny girl with big brown eyes and a purple jumper who took to Anderson-Green immediately. And though she had come for the healthcare experience, Grace and the orphanage became the most meaningful part of Anderson-Green’s trip.

A Bad Trip

But not every voluntourist comes away glowing. The Voluntourism.org website recently published a letter from Jessica Green.

Green, her husband, and several other “unhappy young volunteers,” as Green put it, had traveled to Costa Rica with a group called Volunteer Visions. All had paid significant program fees; a few had quit jobs or taken a semester off

from college.

“Unfortunately, we found that Volunteer Visions’ glitzy, professional-looking website is in no way representative of their operation in Samara,” Green wrote. “I am particularly upset because after spending years volunteering on my own, I finally convinced my husband to come along to see first hand the value of volunteering. He now has no interest in possibly repeating an experience like this.”

The Greens filed complaints with PayPal (the internet company through which Volunteer Visions accepted payment for program fees) and the Costa Rican tourism board, charging that none of the volunteers felt they were doing the work Volunteer Visions had advertised, such as building homes, painting and renovating community buildings, and contributing to civil improvement projects such as roads and water systems. An investigation by Voluntourism.org raised questions about Volunteer Visions tax status (it uses the “.org” suffix on its website, but is not a registered non-profit), and the integrity of the group’s U.S. business address and telephone number.

Voluntourism.org editor David Clemmons recommends that travelers interested in voluntourism ask themselves the following questions before signing on with a particular group:

- What is the level of interaction with local residents?

•How much guidance from the tour/organization staff will I receive?

- What type of physical labor is involved?
- What contingency plans are in place in case I need to take a break from volunteering? If I need to leave the trip, what's the exit strategy?
- What activities and tours are included in the price?
- How much downtime is built into the trip?
- What percentage of program and travel costs is tax deductible?

Among international volunteerism experts, Habitat for Humanity International's Global Village Program (GVP) is recognized as a solid experience for travelers, both from the perspective of givers and receivers. The GVP consists of short-term home-building trips abroad in which volunteers work alongside local homeowners, contributing to Habitat's work

firsthand. Habitat has affiliates in more than 100 countries, many of whom host volunteer short-term teams. Most teams also spend time touring local historic sites or attractions or participating in outdoor recreational activities. Depending on the destination, that could include treks as diverse as safaris and visits to ancient ruins to whitewater rafting or hikes through a rainforest.

To celebrate her 35th birthday, Erin Lumley will travel with Habitat to Portugal this spring. "I wanted to do something more meaningful than going out and grabbing drinks with my friends," said Lumley, director of technology practice for Allison and Partners Public Relations in San Francisco. "This way I'm able to see a new country, meet new friends, and build someone a new home for my birthday."

While the possibility of combining foreign travel with a meaningful volunteer experience drew Lumley to Habitat, the

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Voluntarism Opportunities

Relief Riders International
(reliefridersinternational.com)

This for-profit adventure travel company operates in Rajasthan, India, delivering relief supplies, books, medicine, goats for milk and food, and other aid to villagers along a 15-day route traveled on horseback. After consultation with the Indian Red Cross, executive director Alexander Souri decided to focus on three areas: education, health care, and hunger. A typical relief ride includes a maximum of 12 riders who journey to five remote villages in rural Rajasthan. The caravan includes pack camels, a herd of goats, and supplies. Accommodations range from a night's stay at The Imperial Hotel in Delhi to nights spent in historic forts to luxury tented encampments set up along the journey route. Riders average 20-25 miles a day. Cost: \$5,400 per person, plus airfare.

Global Volunteers
(www.globalvolunteers.org)

Offers overseas service programs for one, two or three weeks, with extended-stay options of up to 24 weeks. A nonprofit, Global Volunteers supports 100 host communities in 21 countries including Romania, Vietnam, and Jamaica. Short-term volunteer teams work year-around in such projects as construction and building repair, teaching English, caring for orphans, working with the elderly, and child sponsorships.

Airline Ambassadors International
(www.airlineamb.org)

A 501(c)3 non-profit organization affiliated with the United Nations and recognized by the US Congress. Begun by airline employees using their pass privileges to help others and has expanded into a network of students, medical professionals, families and retirees who volunteer as "Ambassadors of Goodwill" in their home communities and abroad. AAI escorts children requiring life-altering/life-saving medical treatment; hand-delivers humanitarian aid to orphanages, clinics, remote communities, and refugee camps; and provides opportunities for architects, construction engineers and building code officials to work in developing countries. Since its founding, AAI has hand-delivered \$41M in aid to children and families in 51 countries.

Ambassadors for Children
(www.ambassadorsforchildren.org)

A not-for-profit organization serving children in 20 locations through short-term humanitarian service trips, such as developing small businesses to aid poor families in Belize and El Salvador; building a school in Uganda; and supporting orphanages and street kids in Mexico. An upcoming 12-day trip to Malawi in June costs about \$1,700, and includes four full days of volunteer work in Lilongwe city hospitals and a two-night safari in Liwonde National Park.

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group's Christian roots did give her pause. "I did hesitate, to be honest," said Lumley, who identifies herself as an atheist. "I didn't want to be preached at for two weeks. I just really wanted to build a house, to help a family."

During a telephone interview with a Habitat team leader that was part of the application process, Lumley learned that building and helping are Habitat's primary goals, too. She opted to go forward with the trip.

Lumley said she was motivated in part by cultural trends toward altruism. "In my circle of friends, charity is becoming more of a focus," she said. She's been seeing a lot more of her friends asking for donations to their favorite charities instead of birthday presents. Meanwhile, her mom just completed a Nike race for lymphoma and another friend will go on an AIDS ride in June.

"It's an interesting twist, because it used to be like, 'gimme, gimme, gimme,'" Lumley said.

Beyond objecting to the term "voluntourism" itself, some volunteer sending agencies object to the "gimme" aspect of voluntourism—the idea that volunteers would take a trip that was not entirely altruistic. But Claremont Graduate University social psychologist Allen Omoto says the 'gimme' motive in voluntourism—or indeed in any charitable work—isn't all bad. During 20 years of research into why people volunteer, Omoto has found that "other-focused" motivations—such as humanitarian or religious values—are often what get people volunteering in the first place. But more "self-focused" motivations—such as the quest for knowledge, personal development, or esteem enhancement—are better predictors of long-term volunteerism.

"There's this societal construction of volunteerism that says you have to have these Mother Teresa tendencies as motivations for charitable work, otherwise it cheapens the work that you've done," Omoto said. "Our studies have shown that people who don't necessarily have those kinds of motivations nevertheless are still able to make positive changes in other people's lives."

When Bernard Wharton took a vacation with his family in 2006, his motivation was to see Africa: the animals, the

landscape, and the people—in that order. But Micato Safari's Lend a Helping Hand extension reversed those priorities forever.

"Lend a Helping Hand was an optional part of the itinerary," said Wharton, 54, an architect. "We could either chill out for the day or go to Mukuru to see the orphanage. My wife and I felt it was important for our kids to go and experience Mukuru."

The Whartons, dragging a brood of reluctant young adults and teenagers, rode with a Micato guide into the slum. "When you turn into this place, you know you're in a different world," Wharton said. "Such poverty, people hustling and bustling, just trying to make ends meet. It profoundly affects you because you just can't believe the adversity these people face every day."

The family visited the AmericaShare-sponsored HIV women's group and the orphanage, where the Wharton kids quickly warmed to the Mukuru kids and began playing ball. Meanwhile, an AmericaShare worker named Benedict showed Wharton and his wife around, all the while holding in his hand a piece of paper showing a sketch of Harambee Home, three simple buildings AmericaShare planned to build. The structures, Benedict explained, would house a community center, a home for the women's group, and a dormitory where orphans could live when boarding school was not in session.

"By the time we got on the plane to fly home, Jennifer and I knew we were going to underwrite the buildings," Wharton said.

Once back in the U.S., the Whartons contributed \$100,000—the entire cost of the project. Harambee Home opened in June 2007 and was built for about one-fifth of what it would cost in the United States. This June, the Whartons will return to Mukuru to look at the possibility of opening a clinic.

For Bernard Wharton, the experience has been "like a love story between us and the people of Kenya. We love the fact that we can contribute and help. At the same time, the people enrich us so much."

Meanwhile, he said, vacations will never be the same. "I wish everyone would think about a vacation as an experience that is multi-faceted, where you can have a great time and still learn that there are bigger things in life."

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