

Volunteer Travel Insights 2009



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Introduction

Welcome to Volunteer Travel Insights 2009, a volunteer travel study conducted by GeckoGo in conjunction with Bradt Travel Guides and Lasso Communications. Given the rise of volunteer travel, the goal of this survey was to obtain a snapshot of consumer attitudes globally towards volunteer travel, the motivations behind taking a volunteer vacation, the expectations, as well as the reason for choosing not to volunteer abroad. The survey was conducted in April 2009 and the report was produced in the same month. It is the collaborative work of Aaron Chow, Pokin Yeung, Indra Heckenbach, Eric MacKinnon, Alexia Nestora and Helen Calderon.

Many thanks to Earthwatch for use of the image used on this report cover. The photograph is copyrighted by Anne Ogilvie.

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<http://www.geckogo.com/volunteer/report2009>

Overview

International volunteering has existed for years, but it was not until after September 11th and the Tsunami that travelers realized they could volunteer on their vacation. This new sort of traveler wants to have a cultural experience while traveling. They no longer want to sit on the beach and be served by locals – they want to get involved in the community and help in any way they can.

The increased media interest in voluntourism over the past few years combined with an altruistic need to have a more meaningful vacation, has led to the recent boom in volunteer travel.

According to a survey completed by Lasso Communications, 2009 will prove to be yet another year of growth in the voluntourism market. Sixty two percent of volunteer operators expect to send more volunteers abroad in 2009 versus 2008, 16% will send the same amount and 20% expect to send less this year.

The volunteer traveler has long been a challenge to define. It often appears that there are more psychographic similarities than demographic. This study shows that a large number of people who volunteer abroad have also volunteered in their home country (60%), with another 33% interested in volunteering who haven't yet found the right opportunity. When it comes to their motivations, travelers looking to volunteer abroad want to be useful (38%) and have a personal learning experience (21%) with convenience surprisingly not being important to 48% of the respondents. In terms of activities, 62% of respondents cited they wanted to do humanitarian work and 56% conservation and teaching, followed by community development at 53% and building at 28%.

For those who are interested in volunteering abroad (or have already volunteered), there appears to be significant interest in volunteering abroad, with 24% of respondents having already volunteered abroad and an additional 46% expressing interest in volunteering abroad. Interestingly, volunteering with an organization was by far the preferred option: 89% of respondents would like to volunteer with an operator, versus 11% who would like to organize the trip themselves.

Most respondents were interested in mid- to long-term volunteering opportunities. 44% prefer a volunteer opportunity of longer than one month, and 42% prefer an opportunity that was between 2 weeks and one month in length. Not surprisingly, married respondent preferred shorter volunteer stints, with only 29% preferring an opportunity that was over one month in length.

Price continues to be a substantial barrier to travelers volunteering when abroad, with only 30% of respondents spending more than \$1000 on their last volunteer trip (excluding airfare). This is reflected in the factors for choosing where to volunteer. Sixty four percent of American respondents listed price in their top three criteria for selecting a trip and the fact that 43% of respondents cited lack of money as the reason they have not yet volunteered abroad. What is interesting is the lack of information going out to potential volunteers about grants they can receive to volunteer abroad. Travelocity's Travel for Good offers voluntourism grants and the recent Serve America Act will provide millions of dollars in grants each year.

This concern over price is reflected in the top countries of interest for volunteer travelers: Peru (23%) and Brazil (14%). Travelers are picking countries where their currency will go further and the airfare will be reasonable.

On the subject of commercialization, 29% of respondents found that voluntourism has become too commercialized, 23% thought that it should be more commercialized, and 48% thought the level of commercialization was just enough. The reasons volunteers cited for more commercialization was related to the recruiting more volunteers to go abroad and potentially reducing costs.

For those that have volunteered abroad, the duration of their trip tended to be longer than expected, with 51% of respondents going on a trip for more than one month and 76% traveling for at least 2 weeks. The majority of travelers went on their trip alone (57%), 31% traveled with friends (or church groups), and only 9% traveled with a relationship partner. 77% of respondents believed that their trip was very meaningful, 22% finding it was meaningful, and less than 1% feeling that their trip was not meaningful in any way. A constant battle in the voluntourism field is to effectively manage expectations of the volunteer – the fact that almost 100% of respondents found their experience meaningful in some way shows a major victory for the field.

With an increase in grants for volunteering abroad combined with a recession that makes travelers think about getting the most value out of their vacation dollars, voluntourism will continue to grow. As the generations of teens who volunteered abroad with their schools and college students who volunteered during the summer continue to grow up, the number of travelers actively considering voluntourism as an option for future vacations will only increase. The challenge then for companies is to provide clear, effective communication to make sure that travelers are choosing the right project for their expectations and to ensure that the volunteer work is genuinely benefitting communities.

Profile of Respondents

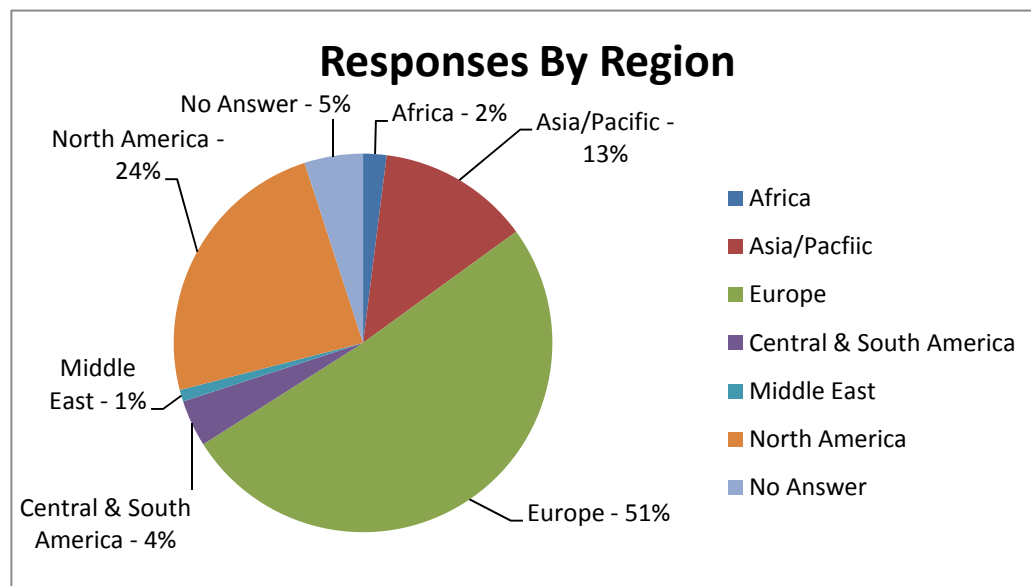
METHODOLOGY

GeckoGo, with the help of Bradt Travel Guides and Lasso Communications, conducted an online survey during April 2009. Survey participants came primarily through GeckoGo's Facebook application, Travel Brain as well as through Bradt's online web site and Twitter. In total, 2,481 responses were collected with representation from Europe, North America, and Asia. Where applicable, response choices were randomized to prevent order bias.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

The majority of respondents came from Europe, followed by North America and then the Asia-Pacific Region. The top countries represented are the United States, Poland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Australia.

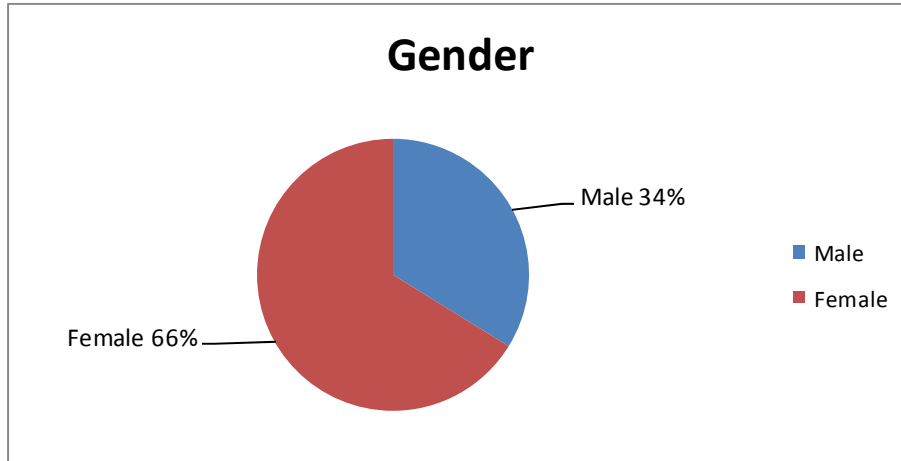
Figure 1: Distribution of survey responses by world region



GENDER

Females were more likely to respond to the survey, comprising 66% of the survey respondents versus 34% male. This is consistent with other travel surveys where females are more likely to respond to surveys. It may also indicate that the volunteer travel market is of higher importance to females.

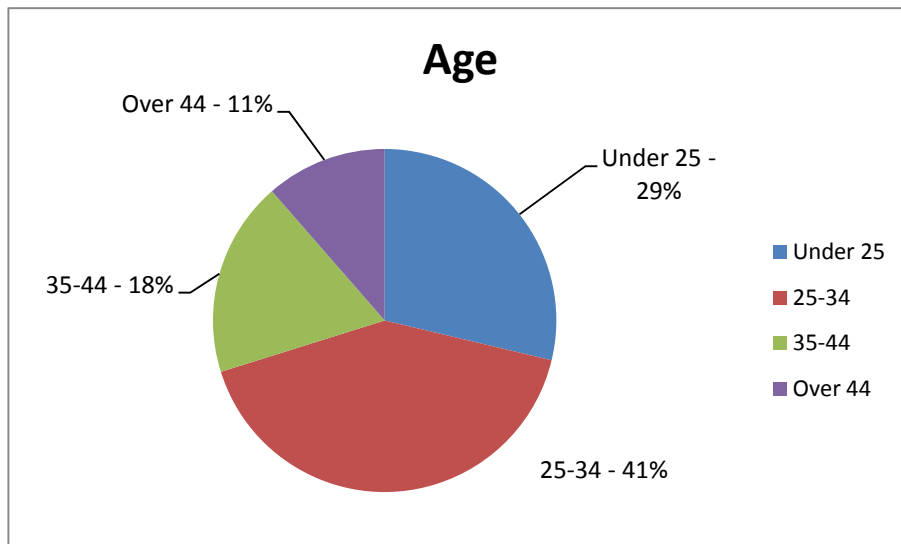
Figure 2: Distribution of survey responses by gender



AGE

The largest group of respondents were in the 25-34 range, followed by the under 25 age range. This is consistent with the typical ages found in volunteer travel programs and could also be influenced by Facebook’s demographics.

Figure 3: Distribution of survey responses by age



RELATIONSHIP STATUS

The majority of respondents (53%) were single. Another 24% were in a relationship, while 18% were married, and 5% said that their relationship status was complicated.

Volunteer Experience in Home Country

The vast majority of respondents have either volunteered before in their home country or are interested in volunteering. Twenty percent (20%) of respondents are actively volunteering, while another 40% have volunteered before. 33% of respondents have not volunteered, but are interested, leaving only 7% who have not volunteered and are not interested in volunteering.

There is likely some self selection in this study, as people who have participated in volunteering may be more likely to answer a survey on volunteer travel.

Females are more likely to have volunteered or be interested in volunteering compared to males. Twenty-one percent (21%) of female respondents are actively volunteering, and another 43% have volunteered before. This compares to 16% of males who are actively volunteering, with another 35% that have volunteered before.

The desire to volunteer also differs between genders, with 10% of males and 6% of females expressing no desire to volunteer.

These gender differences match the findings of other studies such as the U.S. Department of Labour's study on Volunteering in the United States, 2008. That survey found that ``women volunteered at a higher rate than men across all age groups, educational levels, and other major demographic characteristics``. The overall rate of volunteering during the previous 12 months was 29% for women vs. 23% for men in that study.

Volunteer Experience Abroad

For those that are interested in volunteering (or have already volunteered), there appears to be significant interest in volunteering abroad, with 24% of respondents having already volunteered abroad, and an additional 46% expressing interest in volunteering abroad.

TYPES OF VOLUNTEER TRAVEL

The majority of respondents have used an organization or operator for their volunteer trip (48%) followed by independently organized (34%) and then faith based. Females were more likely to volunteer with an organization (50%) compared to males (44%).

Table 1: Breakdown of volunteer trips by category

What type of volunteering group did you go with?	Total	%
Faith Based (e.g., Habitat for Humanity)	118	29%
Science / Medical Based (e.g., Doctors without Borders)	29	7%
Military Based (e.g. Peace Corps)	11	3%
With an organization / operator	196	48%
I organized my trip independently	138	34%

REASONS FOR NOT VOLUNTEERING ABROAD

For those that haven't volunteered abroad, the top reasons why they haven't done so are: lack of money (43%), lack of time (36%), lack of information (31%) and that they already have enough to do locally (25%). Too much commercialism wasn't a factor for many people and it was cited as a reason by 2% of respondents. Lack of information is an interesting reason as it speaks of a potential gap in terms of resources available for researching volunteer travel abroad.

WHERE DO PEOPLE WANT TO VOLUNTEER ABROAD?

Of the 866 respondents who indicated their top three countries of interest for volunteer travel, South America was a popular choice, with Peru (23%) and Brazil (14%) coming in first and second place, and Argentina (8%) coming in at number six. The Asia Pacific region was also popular, with Australia and India (both 11%), and Thailand (7%) all making the top ten list.

Table 2: Top 10 Countries where travellers want to volunteer abroad (worldwide)

Country	Total	%
Peru	195	23%
Brazil	122	14%
Australia	94	11%
India	94	11%
South Africa	72	8%
Argentina	70	8%
Thailand	58	7%
United States	55	6%
Cambodia	54	6%
Kenya	50	6%

For Americans, the top ten countries to volunteer in were fairly similar, with the two lists sharing six of the same countries. Peru was the top choice of Americans (16%), followed by Costa Rica (15%) and Australia (13%).

Table 3: Top 10 Countries where Americans want to Volunteer Abroad

Country	%
Peru	16%
Costa Rica	15%
Australia	13%
South Africa	12%
United Kingdom	9%
India	9%
Brazil	9%
Philippines	8%
China	8%
Kenya	7%

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT TO DO WHEN VOLUNTEERING?

The interest levels were pretty close between different types of volunteering activities, with humanitarian work (62%) cited by the most respondents. Conservation and teaching were both cited by 56% of respondents, followed by community development with 53%. Building is a more niche oriented volunteering activity that was cited by 28% of respondents. Other types of volunteer activities cited include legal work and translations.

When looking at gender difference, females were most interested in Humanitarian work (64%) while males were more interested in Conservation work (63%).

DECISION-MAKING CRITERIA FOR VOLUNTEERING

Altruism is a key criterion for deciding on where to volunteer. Respondents are concerned with maximizing the good they can do through volunteering and are willing to make personal sacrifices in the form of convenience (and to a lesser extent money). In return, they expect to get some personal growth and learning experiences out of the volunteering experience.

The top criteria for deciding where to volunteer was the usefulness of the project. This was cited as the most important factor by 38% of respondents and was only deemed not important by 3% of respondents. The second most important factor was personal learning experience, cited as the most important factor by 21% of respondents, and the second most important factor by an additional 22%. Only 3% said that personal learning experience was not important as a factor.

On the other hand, convenience was not important to 48% of respondents, and price was not a top three factor for 52% of respondents.

Perhaps due to feelings about the economy, price is more of a factor for Americans, with 62% of American respondents listing price in their top three criteria.

Table 4: The most important factors for choosing where to go

	Count	Most important	2nd most important	3rd most important	4th most important	5th most important	Not important
Price	824	14.7%	16.1%	17.0%	15.0%	20.6%	16.5%
Reputation of Organization	800	12.3%	20.3%	18.8%	19.0%	20.4%	9.4%
Unique experience	812	15.9%	15.9%	19.8%	20.7%	16.5%	11.2%
Convenience	802	2.4%	4.2%	7.7%	13.5%	24.1%	48.1%
A personal learning experience	827	21.4%	22.2%	23.3%	19.8%	10.3%	2.9%
Usefulness of project	827	38.1%	23.7%	16.0%	11.7%	7.5%	3.0%

IDEAL VOLUNTEER DURATION

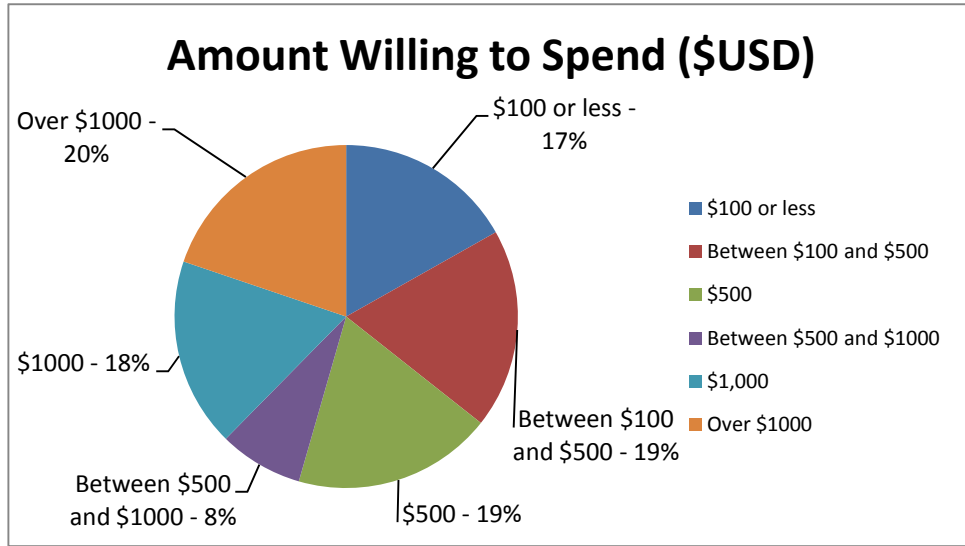
Most respondents were interested in mid to long term volunteer opportunities, with 44% preferring a volunteer opportunity of longer than one month, and another 42% preferring an opportunity that was between 2 weeks and one month in length. Not surprisingly, married respondent preferred shorter volunteer stints, with only 29% preferring an opportunity that was over one month in length.

EXPECTED BUDGET

Excluding airfare, the amount of money that respondents were willing to spend on volunteering ranged from \$0 to \$10,000 USD. The most commonly cited amounts were \$500 USD (19%) and \$1000 USD (18%), while the median amount was \$500 USD.

Most respondents were willing to spend a moderate amount to volunteer, with 17% not willing to spend more than minimal (\$100 USD or less) amounts. 20% were willing to spend over \$1000 USD.

Figure 4: Breakdown by volunteer travel budget



HOW TO VOLUNTEER?

Given the choice between volunteering with a group or organization or self-directed volunteer opportunities, volunteering with an organization or operator was by far the preferred option, chosen by 89% of respondents compared to 11% who would rather set up the volunteering themselves. Respondents cited that working with a group of people was more enjoyable and rewarding, and that organizations could help with logistical, language, and safety issues.

WHAT DO PEOPLE HOPE TO GAIN FROM VOLUNTEERING?

Some commonly cited themes for what people hope to gain out of their volunteer experience include cultural exchange and understanding, being able to give back and do something meaningful, meeting new people and developing friendships, gaining life experiences and personal growth.

Past Volunteering Experiences

For the respondent's last volunteer trip, 39% were through an organization, 36% were done independently, and 19% were through a faith-based group.

It appears that more people have organized a trip independently compared to those who would prefer to volunteer independently (34% of those who have volunteered vs. 11% of those who are interested in volunteering). This may speak to a lack of knowledge of volunteer organizations or resources.

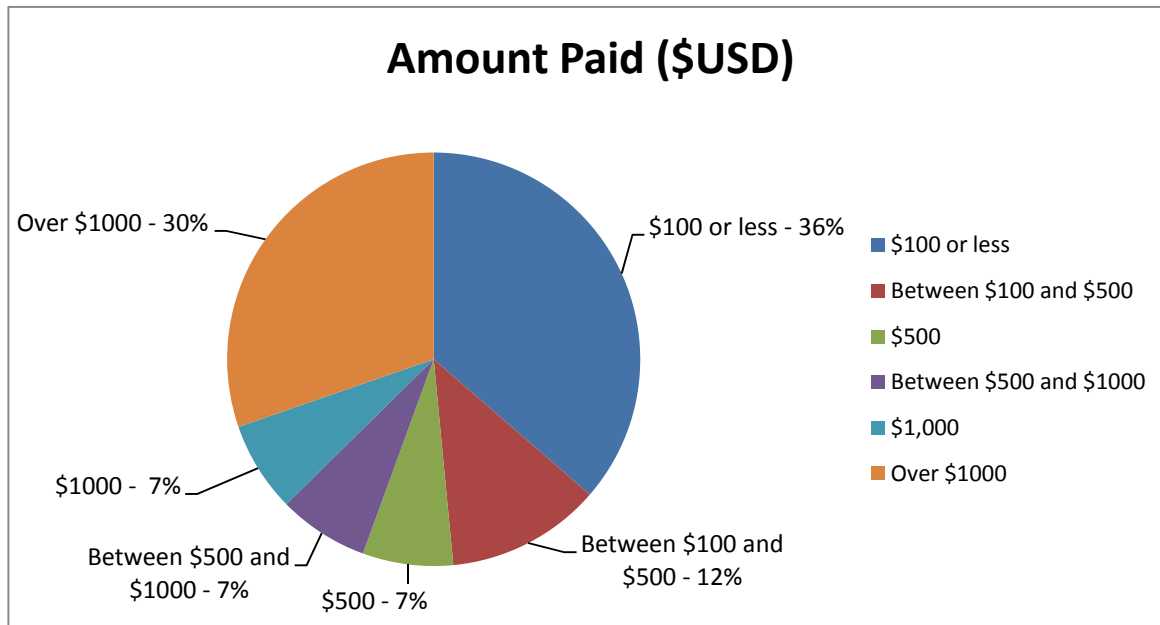
For the last volunteer trip, teaching (39%) and community development (38%) were primary areas of focus, with humanitarian work (27%) following in third place. Conservation (21%) and building (19%) took place in fewer volunteer trips.

AMOUNT PAID DURING LAST VOLUNTEER TRIP

The amount of money that respondents spent on their last volunteer trip encompassed a large range (from \$0 to \$12,000 USD). The most commonly cited amounts were \$0 USD (30%) and \$1000 USD (7%), while the median amount was \$500 USD.

The cost of the last volunteer trip was polarized, with 36% spending \$100 USD or less and 37% spending at least \$1000 USD. This differs a bit from what respondents said they were willing to spend on a trip (30% spent over \$1000 USD on their last volunteer trip vs. 20% who say they would spend over \$1000 USD for a volunteer trip).

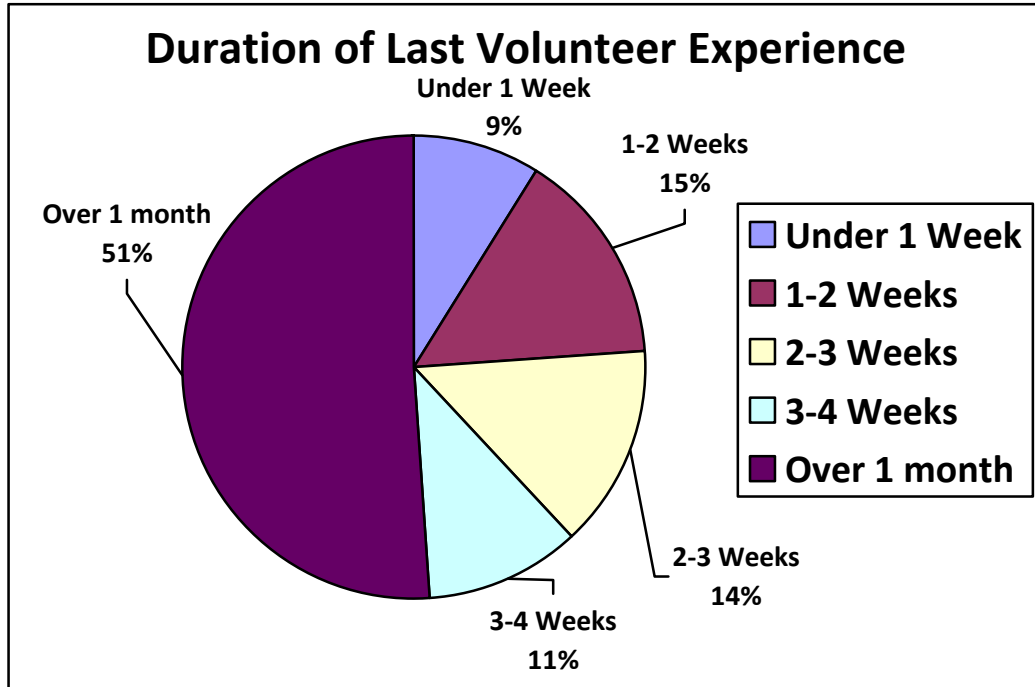
Figure 5: Breakdown by amount paid during the last volunteer trip



VOLUNTEER DURATION

The last volunteer trip tended to be of a longer duration, with 51% going on a trip for longer than one month, and 76% going for a volunteer trip that lasted at least two weeks.

Figure 6: Breakdown by duration of volunteer experience, last trip



VOLUNTEER COMPANIONS

The majority of respondents (57%) went on their last volunteer trip alone. Another 31% volunteered with friends (including church groups), and only 9% volunteered with their partner. Those that didn't know anyone else were more likely to have organized their last trip independently (40% vs. 29%) or to do it through an organization or operator (43% vs. 33%) compared to those who went on their last volunteer expedition with friends, family, or partners. On the other hand, those who went on their last volunteer trip with friends, family, or partners were more likely to have done it with a faith-based organization (31% vs. 11%).

MEANINGFULNESS OF VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Respondents felt that their volunteer experiences were very meaningful to themselves. 77% said that it was very meaningful, 22% said that it was meaningful, and less than 1% said that it was not meaningful. Some respondents said that it was the best experience of their lives.

As for how useful they felt their contributions were to the project, most felt that they were useful (53%), followed by very useful (43%). Only 4% thought that they were not useful. That the majority indicated that the experience was "useful" rather than "very useful" could speak to a number of factors -- humility, the desire to do more, or the level of need that they experienced.

Respondents who thought their contributions were very useful to the project were more likely to find their experiences very meaningful than those who thought their contributions were only useful (92% to 68%). This speaks to the need for volunteers to feel that they have really made a difference to get the most out of their experience.

SURVEY RESPONSES “WHAT ARE THE BEST PARTS OF VOLUNTEERING?”

- Meeting and befriending new people (both volunteers and from different cultures)
- Being able to help out others and make the world a better place
- Getting to learn about new cultures and exchange knowledge
- To be able to travel and see the world
- Seeing happy faces and being able to make others laugh and be happy (especially children)
- Working with others to achieve a common goal

SURVEY RESPONSES “WHAT ARE THE WORST PARTS OF VOLUNTEERING?”

- The natural environment (insects, heat, diseases, etc...)
- Homesickness
- Being alone while trying to adapt to the local culture
- Communication issues with the organization and locals
- Lacking support and clear direction from the organization.
- Not being able to do as much as they wanted
- Leaving

TIPS ON GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE

- Do research beforehand and compare the different volunteering organizations and opportunities
- Keep an open mind and be prepared to adapt
- Have a positive attitude and work hard
- Try to connect and talk to locals as much as possible, even if there are language barriers
- Learn about the local culture and try to immerse yourself into it while you are there
- Make new friends

The Impact of Volunteering Abroad

The overwhelming majority thought that volunteering abroad was a good idea, with 89% saying that it was a great way to see the world and give back at the same time. Another 6% said that they rather volunteer at home, while 4% said they were too busy, and 1% thought that local people would be better off without their help.

In terms of impact of volunteers on local people, most (64%) thought it was positive and that volunteers do a lot of good, while another 35% felt that the impact was mixed, with good intentions and positive benefits, but also some negative impacts. One percent (1%) of respondents thought that volunteers had an overall negative impact on local people. Survey respondents and their feelings towards this issue depended in large part on how much and how well volunteers interacted with locals. If they work with locals and keep their needs in mind, then it is usually a positive experience, especially if they stay for a while.

On the other hand, commercialism was a concern to a substantial minority of respondents. Twenty-nine percent (29%) found that volunteering abroad had become too commercialized. Another 23% thought that volunteering abroad should become more commercialized and mainstream, while 48% thought that the level of commercialism was just enough. Those that were in favor of volunteering abroad becoming more commercialized and mainstream cite attracting more volunteers and potentially reducing costs as some of the reasons why. Those that feel that it is already too commercialized mention that the ideals could be lost with commercialism, and that they are concerned that not enough of the money goes towards those they are trying to help.

Appendix

Volunteer Survey Questionnaire:

All respondents

1. What country are you from?
2. Are you:
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
3. Your age:
 - a. 13-17
 - b. 18-24
 - c. 25-34
 - d. 35-44
 - e. 45-54
 - f. 55+
4. Are you
 - a. Single
 - b. In a relationship
 - c. Married
 - d. It's complicated
5. Have you ever thought about volunteering?
 - a. Yes and I'm actively volunteering
 - b. Yes and I've volunteered
 - c. No but I'm interested
 - d. No
6. Have you volunteered abroad?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. No, but I'm interested

Respondents who have not volunteered:

1. If you haven't volunteered abroad, what are the reasons? (select all that apply)
 - a. I've got enough to do locally
 - b. Too commercial
 - c. Need more information first
 - d. Not enough time
 - e. Not enough Money
 - f. Other (specify)

Respondents who have not volunteered, but are interested in volunteering

1. Which 3 countries do you most want to volunteer in?
2. What type of volunteering activity would you be most interested in doing?
 - a. Community development
 - b. Humanitarian work
 - c. Teaching
 - d. Building
 - e. Conservation (wildlife, environment)
 - f. Other (please specify)
3. What are the most important factors for choosing where to go? (Ranked from most important to least)
 - a. Convenience
 - b. Reputation of organization
 - c. A personal learning experience
 - d. Usefulness of project
 - e. Price
 - f. Unique experience
4. How long would you be interested in volunteering for?
 - a. Less than one week
 - b. One week or more
 - c. Two weeks or more
 - d. Three weeks or more

- e. Greater than 1 month
5. Excluding airfare, how much would you pay for your volunteer experience? (in USD)
 6. Would you rather be volunteering
 - a. By yourself
 - b. With an organization
 - c. Other (specify)
 7. What would you hope to gain out of your volunteer experience?

Respondents who have volunteered

1. What type of volunteering groups did you go with? (select all that apply)
 - a. Faith based (e.g., Habitat for Humanity)
 - b. I organized my trip independently
 - c. Military based
 - d. Science/Medical based (e.g., Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières)
 - e. With an organization / operator (e.g., i-to-i)
 - f. Other (please specify)
2. On your last trip, which type of volunteer group did you go with?
 - a. Military based
 - b. Faith based (e.g., Habitat for Humanity)
 - c. With an organization / operator (e.g., i-to-i)
 - d. I organized my trip independently
 - e. Science/Medical based (e.g., Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières)
 - f. Other (please specify)
3. On your last trip, what type of volunteering activity did you do? (select all that apply)
 - a. Building
 - b. Conservation (wildlife, environment)
 - c. Teaching
 - d. Community development
 - e. Humanitarian work

- f. Other (please specify)
4. On your last trip, excluding airfare, how much did you pay for your volunteer experience (in USD)?
5. On your last trip, how long did you volunteer for?
 - a. Less than one week
 - b. One week or more
 - c. Two weeks or more
 - d. Three weeks or more
 - e. Greater than one month
6. On your last trip, did you
 - a. Volunteer alone
 - b. Volunteer with your partner (girlfriend, wife, husband, etc.)
 - c. Volunteer with friends
 - d. Volunteer with your family
7. How meaningful was your volunteer experience to you?
 - a. Not meaningful
 - b. Meaningful
 - c. Very meaningful
8. How useful was your volunteer experience to the project?
 - a. Not useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Very useful
9. What was the best part of volunteering?
10. What was the worst part of volunteering?
11. Share a tip on how to get the most out of the volunteer experience

Wrap up (all respondents)

1. Overall, what do you think of volunteering abroad?
 - a. I think local people would be better off without our help
 - b. I would rather volunteer at home
 - c. Great way to see the world and give something back at the same time
 - d. I'm too busy to do it
 - e. Other (please specify)
2. The impact of volunteers on local people is...
 - a. Positive, they do a lot of good
 - b. Neutral, they are well meaning and helpful but can also negatively impact the community
 - c. Negative, the good they do is outweighed by the impact on the environment, local culture and economy
 - d. Other (please specify)
3. How commercialized has volunteering abroad become?
 - a. Too commercialized
 - b. Just the right amount of commercialization
 - c. Should be more commercialized and mainstream
 - d. Other (please specify)