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## Richard Stupart: Voluntourism does more harm than good

*Orphan-huggers create a market for orphans; well-builders take work from locals; and other things ethical travelers should know*

By [Richard Stupart](#) (author/richard-stupart) 24 November, 2011

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Whether it's spending time at an orphanage in Cambodia, or helping build houses in Haiti, ethical tourism, or voluntourism, seems pretty morally unambiguous.

What could possibly be wrong with helping the unfortunate?

This feels even more the case when we are personally involved in making the difference, rather than throwing coins in a collection tin thousands of kilometers away.

The result has been a boom in tour companies offering voluntourism opportunities in a wide range of destinations, catering to all levels of commitment.

Want to spend weeks building houses in Port-au-prince, or stop in and paint half a wall in a local school somewhere in Southeast Asia? Somewhere out there, a voluntourism outfit has you covered.

And, like many chances to easily do good in the world, the reality is a lot more nuanced.

In the case of orphanage tours to places like Siem Reap in Cambodia, the presence of wealthy foreigners wanting to play with parentless kids has actually had the perverse effect of creating a market for orphans in the town.

A system has emerged in which parents will rent their children out for the day to play with gullible backpackers, creating fraudulent orphanages in response to visitors' demand for them.

Further, many voluntourism outfits that offer the chance to interact with children perform little to no screening of prospective applicants.

The voluntourism dollars of the pedophile are as indistinguishable as those of the legitimate well-wisher -- a poorly thought-out commercial relationship with terrible potential consequences to those being volunteered upon.

### Are you really contributing?

The difficulties of doing good abroad are not only limited to voluntourism programs that involve children. Even activities as banal as painting walls or building houses are fraught with ethical concerns.

Does the presence of volunteers really contribute to a community's wellbeing, or are outsiders simply doing work that could have helped local breadwinners earn a living?

Are building materials and technical skills sourced locally, to benefit merchants and artisans in the community, or are they simply shipped in from outside?

If your intention as a volunteer is to do good, then these questions matter.

They are also questions that, for the most part, a booming voluntourism industry happily ignores.

There are organizations who engage admirably with these issues and work to design properly reasoned volunteering engagements. Yet for the most part, the machinations of the free market have not been kind to ethical volunteering.

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It's still far too easy to hug a third world orphan unchecked, to waste hundreds of dollars delivering presents or inefficiently trying to build houses and execute development plans in which the community being "developed" has been marginally consulted at best.

The roots of much of this unethical behavior and wasteful attempts at doing good lie, in part, in the philosophies underlying many voluntourism organizations.

### Anything is better than nothing ... isn't it?

The desire of wealthy first-worlders to do good can be treated as a demand for which volunteerism products can be supplied, and that some minor good -- a painted wall or a child smiling for a day -- is better than no good at all.

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This first view -- that development needs can be packaged as a tour opportunity and sold for profit -- augurs a race to the bottom in ethical behavior.

Volunteer opportunities need to be as convenient (read: short-lived), and emotionally rewarding to the volunteers (read: customers) as possible.

It should come as no surprise then that voluntourism is rarely about the kinds of activities that professional development NGOs undertake.

Flexible service projects that allow wealthy tourists to see the locals smile in exchange for minimal hard work are catnip for traveling narcissists. They are also a product that sells predictably well. Real development be damned.

The second point of view often given in defense of a poorly conceived or exploitative voluntourism project is harder to unpick.

To claim that having volunteers engaging in inefficient and clumsy development projects is better than no such projects at all is an alluring point of view.

It also misrepresents the situation.

In the now cliché case of orphan-hugging, it's manifestly obvious that in many instances the absence of the voluntourism army would be a preferable situation.

Children can go back to their families instead of being pimped out as objects of affection, and are likely to emerge as psychologically healthier adults when not treated as an emotional plaything.

In general, given a choice between spending money to go abroad and engage in a project with a local community for a few weeks, or donating the same amount to an established development organization already present in the area, it should be obvious that staying at home and sending your money instead will almost always be more helpful.

## Awareness is raised

That said, the experience of volunteering is not a one-way street entirely focused on the experience of the recipients to the exclusion of all else.

In the process of volunteering, the privileged first-worlder is also being helped -- albeit in a less obvious way -- towards understanding in very personal terms the lives of the less privileged with whom they share the planet.

It's difficult to measure the value of this first-hand understanding against the wish to help needy communities as efficiently as possible.

Yet opening the eyes of those of us wealthy enough to afford the luxury of travel to the realities of inequality is a necessary first step if longer-term solutions to poverty, housing and food insecurity are to ever be found.

And nothing can bring home the emotional reality of these challenges quite as well as engaging with them for yourself.

There can be no easy decisions when attempting to weigh up how to voluntour, where to voluntour, or whether to voluntour at all.

Nevertheless, there is a world of difference between ill-considered decisions taken for the purpose of stroking a traveler's ego, and subjective decisions to volunteer after properly considering as much of the moral and practical detail of your engagement as possible.

Voluntourism will likely always remain a compromised industry, but that need not necessarily compromise your decisions as a traveler hoping to do good.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Richard Stupart.*



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