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# 7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip To Haiti Doesn't Matter: Calling Bull on "Service Trips" and Voluntourism

Posted by [Michelle L Staton](#) on Dec 15, 2015 in [Global](#)



Feature Image: Screenshot from the hilarious satire [YouTube video](#) by SAIH Norway

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I'd like to add that this is not a new idea. The problems associated with voluntourism are well known among the professionals who work in international development. I have added many links at the end of this post to inspire further reading on the subject.

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There have been [many](#) different [articles](#) written about the ineffectiveness of short-term voluntourism trips to developing nations, including [here](#) and [here](#) by our friends at [in-Training](#). You know the kind of trips I'm talking about: a spring break spent painting an orphanage in Haiti as opposed to drinking all day in Panama City Beach; a 10-day excursion in exotic Peru, with the pics of Machu Picchu to prove it; or, for the overachieving do-gooders, a couple weeks spent parading around Nairobi, Kenya.

However, these types of trips often exploit the people and communities they pretend to help. Worse, these short-term ~~service~~ self-fulfillment trips can end up doing more harm than good.

I'm guilty of this myself. I spent a couple of weeks in a remote Ukrainian village in 2006, where I basically just hung out with a few orphans and occupied space. The following summer, immediately after graduating high school, I spent a few months in Uganda where I did slightly more work until I realized the true uselessness of my unskilled presence there. But the only people less helpful than me were the groups of voluntourists I'd see trickle in and out, wrongfully believing they made a lifelong difference in a child's life.

**Medical students are often reminded of the importance of using evidence-based medicine. Similarly, it is imperative to focus on evidence-based best practices within the field of international service rather than relying on anecdotal experiences.** Many people have the best intentions, but lack the necessary tools to be effective. Here's why trips like that are a problem.

### 1. They are entirely too focused on how the volunteers benefit.



Me on the right with two kids who look incredibly uncomfortable.

Do you want to feel fulfilled? Do you want to “Be the change you wish to see in the world?” How about adding some international healthcare experience to your residency applications? The common theme in those sentences is “you”. **But it shouldn't be about you, it should be about the people you're there to help.**

My least favorite but most common response when asking someone about their micro-trip abroad goes something like this: *“I was heartbroken to see how life is there. It really makes me realize just how good we have it. My life will never be the same.”* (\*Rolls eyes\*)

If you truly want this experience — to change your world perspective, etc. — then at least **call it like it is and admit you're going on a self-fulfillment trip.** Don't call it humanitarian work when the only human benefiting from this experience is you.

As [Al Jazeera America](#) points out, “As admirably altruistic as it sounds, the problem with voluntourism is its singular focus on the volunteer's quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community's actual needs.”

Ask yourself this: **Do you want to go help, or do you want the people to be helped?** If you honestly care more about the latter, then understand that the best way to help a community may not involve you personally traveling to it. **Unskilled, short-term voluntourists often do very little to actually help a community develop in a sustainable manner.**

#### **Instead**

First, don't go on these type of exploitative trips. But **if you must travel, make sure the organization you're going with is well-respected on the ground and is truly invested in the people or community that it is there to help**, not just in the volunteers' experience. Many organizations have a mission statement, check to see if its focus is on the community or the voluntourists. **Not all of the short-term efforts are a lost cause if the organization's focus is on the right things.** Then continue to invest in the cause when you return and use that newfound understanding of world to help improve it. **Good things can come from these trips if people use them as a catalyst for good in the future, as long as it isn't at the expense of the local population.** Don't forget about it once your Facebook pictures get old.

## **2. The lasting impact of short-term voluntourism trips is often negligible.**



He needed medical care for his ankle. The colorful bracelets distributed by the voluntourists who had just left couldn't fix this.

People on such short trips usually **don't stick around long enough to realize how ineffective they are being.** In Uganda, I became used to seeing groups of young people come for week-long visits at the orphanage where I taught English. They would play with the kids, give them a bracelet or something, and then leave all-smiles, thinking they just saved Africa. I was surprised when the day after the first group left, exactly zero of the kids were wearing the bracelet they received the day prior. The voluntourists left thinking they gave the kids something they didn't have before (and with bragging rights for life). But the kids didn't care, because what they really wanted was school uniforms, their school fees to be paid, guaranteed meals, access to healthcare, etc. — the basics.

I recognize there are some short-term trips that do produce value, but if you went on a voluntourist trip and had to question if you really "made a difference" or not, the answer is probably not. **Good intentions are not good enough.** To use a medical analogy, an aortic dissection cannot be fixed by giving the patient an aspirin, wishing them well, and then walking away whilst patting yourself on the back for helping. Similarly, **temporary measures do not solve the chronic and multifaceted societal problems many developing nations face.**

Worse, they can even be [harmful](#) to children who struggle with abandonment issues. This should not be understated; have you ever considered the negative impact it routinely has on kids after they bond with someone for a week, and then that person disappears from their life? If your justification for going on these trips is "seeing the smiles on the kids' faces", then you're part of the problem.

### Instead

If you must go on one of these short-term trips, then **leave behind more than you take away**. Don't just give out bracelets, help provide for their real needs. **Do something that actually matters that wouldn't otherwise be done if you weren't there, just make sure it isn't taking jobs away from the local community**. This may not be fun; it will be work. Many well-respected organizations publish impact reports. I suggest reading through those and **assessing the effect the organization is having on a community/cause before giving it your time and money**. Also, consider your options helping from your own country. Research how much foreign aid is going to that area or for that cause and write your representatives about it, inform your peers about the situation, hold a fundraiser and donate the money to a (legit) organization that knows the situation well and is there for the long haul, etc.

### 3. "Voluntourism" is offensive and can even contribute to further problems.

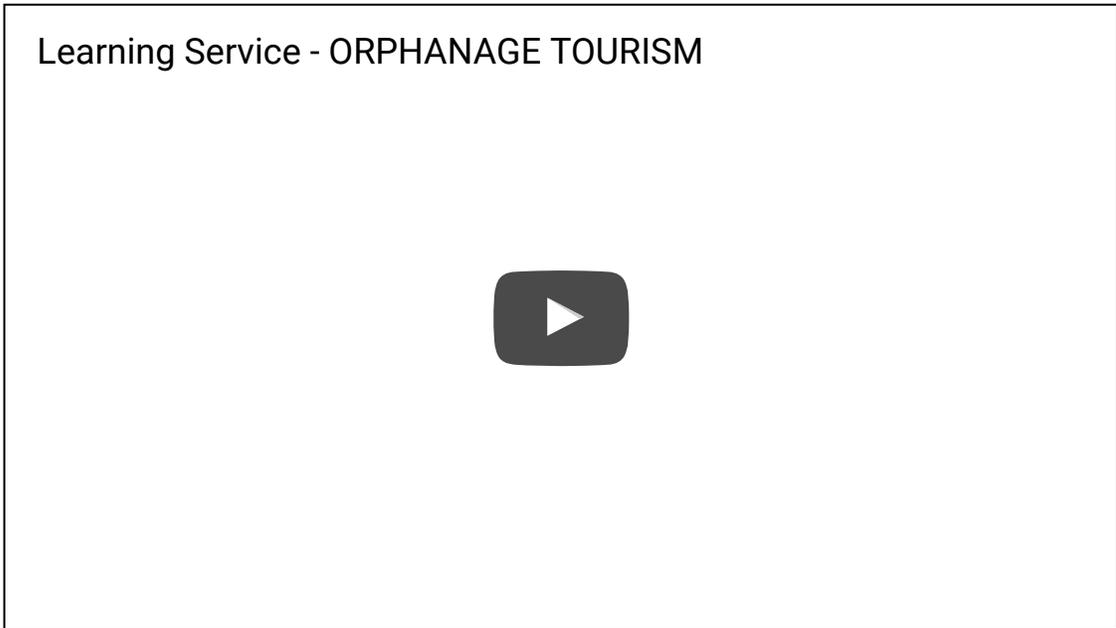


A [UNICEF](#)-sponsored ChildSafe campaign, in collaboration with Friends International.

The term "orphan tourism" comes to mind here, which is [exploitative](#). United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) [agrees](#), orphanages and slums aren't a tourist attraction, so they should not be treated like one. They are not a destination to be checked off one's do-good/feel-good bucket list. They house real people with often devastating backgrounds who are in need of **care longer than you can provide, more food and medical treatment than you're equipped to give, and a more sustainable community that is less susceptible to things like war and disease**. They do not need your pity, temporary attention, or to be featured in your Facebook profile photo for a month, as The Onion [mockingly points out](#).

The growth of voluntourism has even made things worse in certain places, where "orphanages" are run by traffickers who take in non-orphans for profit, as [The Guardian](#) shares:

"[I]n Cambodia, as in other parts of the globe, orphanages are a booming business trading on guilt. Some are even said to be kept deliberately squalid. Westerners take pity on the children and end up creating a grotesque market that capitalizes on their concerns. This is the dark side of our desire to help the developing world."



Here's a video about the negative impact orphanage tourism has had in some areas, and why it can be harmful to children.

**Instead**

Invest long-term into helping a population or region. This can include volunteering with or financially supporting legitimate organizations who are committed to a situation. Also, considering studying international development and then working in that sector professionally. You could become a human rights attorney, work at the United Nations, work for a non-profit or NGO, etc. Although fair warning, trying to solve complicated, chronic problems is not as fun as #InstagrammingAfrica makes it appear. It takes dedicated work, little by little, and I highly respect and admire those who devote their careers to this type of work.

**4. They're an egregious waste of money.**



The tens of thousands of dollars a group spends on a short-term trip to an orphanage could instead pay that orphanage's food budget for a long time.

Two weeks on a medical trip to Tanzania can cost you [\\$3,040](#), not including airfare, which is roughly \$2,000. If six people go on this two week trip, that's [more](#) than enough money to pay for a local doctor's annual salary. Let that sink in.

Voluntourism is a [multi-billion dollar industry](#). If people truly cared about helping a community or a cause, then they could re-purpose the money that would have been spent on a tour of the area and instead invest it directly into the community itself.

It's problematic when the only time someone is willing to spend big money on an impoverished region is when they get to go have a cool experience there. There are many legitimate organizations worldwide who — through skill and dedication — produce tangible results and have a great impact on a community/cause. Most of these organizations do not need to entertain western tourists for a week, but do need financial support to continue to do great work. Sadly, sometimes they cannot get one without the other.

#### **Instead**

Take the money that would have been spent on a self-fulfillment trip and donate it to legit organizations. This could include [Doctors Without Borders](#), [Watsi](#), [Possible](#), [UNICEF](#), and many more that are already on

the ground full-time, doing effective work. Of course, throwing money at a problem in no way means it will be solved (see the disaster that is Haiti post 2010 earthquake). That's why it's crucial to do your homework on non-profits/NGOs before donating money into a black hole. This is a messy, complicated field of work with lots of room for improvement, but many well-respected organizations are at least transparent about their finances, where donation dollars are going, and the impact it is having. I suggest reading through an organization's financial publications if you're worried about where your money will go.

## 5. They promote a cycle of dependence.



Just what Americans need, more jewelry to buy.

## International development is too often impeded by international dependence.

There are times when a community is forced to be fully dependent, like during the aftermath of a natural disaster or when violence forces people out of their homes and into resettlement camps. Another example of this is the current refugee crisis, where people need all the help they can get right now. Barring exceptions such as those, when a community learns to rely on donations it is less inclined to become self-sustainable, which stifles growth.

Preventative medicine and long-term care are both more effective treatments than applying a bandaid. **Do several bandaids worn in succession fix a gaping wound? No.** The wound will become infected or heal improperly because it was never treated correctly. Similarly, to truly be effective, one should focus on working to prevent future problems from occurring (through development), and on long-term solutions (through dedicated work by legit organizations).

Even one-for-one programs contribute to the cycle of dependence, or at the very least, don't solve long term problems. For more on this, I recommend Vox's article on why "[Buying TOMS Shoes is a Terrible Way to Help Poor People.](#)"

### Instead

It's the whole teach a man to fish principle. **Sustainable development is key.** This takes research, dedicated investment, patience, collaboration across multiple parties, and a ton of work (think years, decades). Many organizations are committed to this type of real work. (Shout out to [the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs](#), an organization I used to work for that helps strengthen democracies in developing nations.) Also, if an organization employs few to no locals, find a different organization, otherwise there is no real sustainability.

## 6. There's a difference between skilled and unskilled help.



(Mostly) legit

Here's an example of skilled help: A surgeon joining Doctors Without Borders.

Here's an example of unskilled help: A group of American teenagers—who have never built anything bigger than a derby car—attempting to construct a wall at a school, working under equally unskilled leadership. There are (at least) two problems with this.

- A) They are shoddy construction workers. Good intentions don't build sound walls.
- B) They are taking jobs away from local construction workers who need the work.

Medical service trips are much more respectable than fruitless voluntourist trips, though are still not immune to the issues of this article. Vaccinating a few hundred people in Haiti for Cholera is a wonderful thing. It has a lasting positive effect on society. Training local medical staff and bringing medical supplies to a clinic is also valuable. Providing relief to an overburdened, under-resourced clinic is great. Those are examples of skilled help producing real value.

However, there are different organizations, like the one in [this advertisement](#), who completely miss the mark. Notice how the rhetoric in almost every single sentence is focused on the volunteer's experience rather than the patient population's benefit, other than when being exploitative. Here are some highlights, "*You can rely on us to deliver the experience of a lifetime.*" How good for you. Also, "*Once your plane has landed in your country of choice, our ground team will meet you and take you straight back to our private, fully catered and security-guarded accommodation.*" So you can have the most bubble'd and unrealistic experience possible.

At the time of this writing, nowhere on the site did I find impact reports about the influence they have in each community. But the site is littered with westerners' blurbs recounting what an awesome experience they had seeing such *gnarly things!*

For a scholarly read on medical missions, I suggest [this article](#) in the American Journal of Public Health highlighting the need for more evidence within medical service trips. There are also [these different journal articles](#) about the importance of good ethics when practicing medicine abroad. They touch on issues such as this: Should under-qualified individuals really practice medicine on people in developing nations when they wouldn't be allowed to in the West? The answer may not be black and white (limited access can make for extenuating circumstances), and there are definitely many useful roles fit for medical students, but it's a topic worth exploring.

#### Instead

Medical missions (when done right) is definitely more valuable than building a wall in an orphanage that will just be torn down when the group leaves, only to be rebuilt by the next group. But don't just go exploit a community for your own cool experience. **Do some research on the organization before joining and find out how they're helping the community.** Have they been effective? How is the patient population or local medical staff benefiting from this organization? **Are travelers being put in ethically questionable positions by practicing medicine far beyond their level?** (If so, find an

organization that delegates responsibilities according to appropriate skill level.) Is the organization more focused on providing medical tourists with a good experience, or is their primary focus helping the patient population? If it seems like the former, then find another organization, because there are many like the latter who could definitely use assistance or resources, even if they don't have a colorful brochure or sweet Instagram feed.

[Possible](#), an organization focused on improving healthcare in Nepal, publishes [impact and financial reports](#) describing what they've accomplished each quarter. Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) also publishes annual [reports](#) detailing the work they've accomplished. This data is used as evidence that the work they do is worthwhile and impactful on the population, not just the volunteers. This is the type of skilled assistance that is beneficial.

## 7. They promote the western savior complex.



Me definitely not helping this woman in any substantial way, but definitely adding this photo to my MySpace page when I returned (these were the days before iPhones and Facebook took over).

Much ink has been spilled about the [white-savior industrial complex](#). It boils down to narcissistic westerners asserting their perceived superiority by "rescuing" a developing nation, and it is highly criticized by many.

Further, when people visit only the worst of a country, they don't get to experience anything beyond its helpless stereotype. Can you imagine the take-away of a group of foreigners who came the the U.S. visiting only Skid Row? It would be incredibly inaccurate to assume the rest of America was like that. Yet, far too often, people associate the worst region of a developing nation with that nation as a whole.

For a hilarious take on this, I highly recommend the following video, "Radi-aid," which is about Kenyans donating radiators to the poor Norwegians who freeze during winter. It was done in response to 2014's cringeworthy and offensive (yet star-studded) music video, "Do They Know it's Christmas?" by Band Aid 30 following the Ebola epidemic.

Africa For Norway - New charity single out now!



**Instead**

Gain some cultural understanding before embarking on a new land, and realize the many good parts of the place you'll be traveling. Try to learn something from them; many cultures are less greedy, more forgiving, etc. than those in the west, so go in with a sense of humility and appreciation of the local population.

Finally, for those who are still unconvinced, [this post](#) on WhyDev debunks some common myths for voluntourism, such as "it can't be *that* bad" and "something is better than nothing." Here's a preview:

"For people who don't spend their studies or professional lives thinking about humanitarianism, the notion that spending two weeks cuddling [Cambodian orphans](#) could result in anything other than smiles and happiness might seem far-fetched. Even when possible negative outcomes are explained (child safety concerns, attachment issues, separation of children from family, etc.), it's hard for individuals to see their own relatively insignificant involvement as leading to these horrific outcomes.

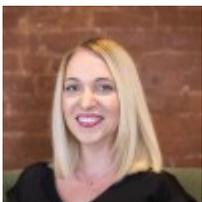
However, volunteers should recognize that they're one drop in a far bigger, far more damaging ocean, and that their short placement should not be held in isolation. Volunteers may not be around to see the negative effects of their activity, or may be so ethnocentrically blinkered they cannot recognize what's happening right in front them. But this doesn't mean these effects aren't absolutely real and long-lasting. International volunteering – when done badly – can and does result in serious harm.”

And if you're *still* not convinced about the problems associated with short-term voluntourism trips — if you still think the smiles on the kids' faces makes everything worth it — then please read the following articles (written with more eloquence and less snark than mine, for the easily-offended). Also, for those who suggest I am missing the point about “sharing Jesus” or “doing God's will,” note that this was intentional, as my article is not at all a religious one.

- [CNN – Does ‘voluntourism’ do more harm than good?](#)
  - [Newsweek – The Exploitative Selfishness of Volunteering Abroad](#)
  - [The Guardian – Before You Volunteer Abroad, Think of All the Harm You Might Do](#)
  - [Reuters – Boom in ‘Voluntourism’ Sparks Concerns Over Whether the Industry is Doing Good](#)
  - [Forbes – Cambodia’s Booming New Industry: Orphanage Tourism](#)
  - [Al Jazeera America – The White Tourist’s Burden](#)
  - [Telegraph – Orphanage Volunteering ‘Part of the Problem’](#)
  - [NPR – As ‘Voluntourism’ Explodes In Popularity, Who’s It Helping Most?](#)
  - [The Guardian – Beware of the “Voluntourists” Doing Good](#)
  - [in-Training – Medical Tourism and the Definition of Helping](#)
  - [in-Training – Do You Really Have Global Health Experience? The Problems with Assigning Social and Professional Capital to Part-Time Global Health Practitioners](#)
  - [WhyDev – Debunking Four Common Arguments in Favor of Voluntourism](#)
  - [Global SL – Why UNICEF and Save the Children are Against Your Short-Term Service in Orphanages](#)
  - [Matador Network – Why You Shouldn’t Participate in Voluntourism](#) – I found this one long after I wrote this article but we share overlapping ideas
- Lastly, [here’s a lengthy, scholarly paper](#) describing the need for ethical reforms in volunteering. I’m including this because while few people will read it, it goes to show that **this is an entire field of work filled with professionals who have relevant degrees in the subject matter and decades of experience in the non-profit/NGO/international development sector who have known for years the problems associated with short-term voluntourism.** This is not a new idea, and it’s widely accepted among professionals that ethical reforms are needed — even at the expense of your own personal offense.

Happy reading!

*(Updated)*



## Michelle L Staton

Moving from DC to NYC, Michelle's background is in policy at the U.S. Senate and in African affairs — from working on West African democracy strengthening programs to East African peace initiatives beginning in 2006. Now an iOS developer, her focus is on ways to utilize tech for global good. You can find her at any given Chipotle in NYC, or you can follow her on Twitter @MichelleLStaton

## 103 Comments



1. Dec15  
Rachael Balcanoff

Michelle!

Dude! Your drive and detail-oriented insight in improving the lives of others is inspiring.

Teach me to be more like you!

Much warmth-  
-rach



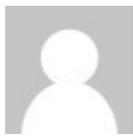
2. Dec17  
Clara

WONDERFUL post. Thanks for sharing!



3. Dec18  
Alex

Tto s definitely gives good perspective on the variety of trips. Thank you for pointing out that 1-2 week trips in the right cases can be helpful. In 9th grade spent 3 Weeks in Vietnam. The first week was traveling the area of my adopted brothers home area and meeting his birth mother for the first time. The second week was on an aid expedition where we facilitated dental services, brought over lots of supplies from the US in crates,took a group of 200 kids to a Waterpark to have a great day and and finished the rebuilding of a school for girls who had been sold off by they're families. This was a step in the completion of a 10 year project to helping this village combat against abduction and prostitution rings in that area of Vietnam. That trip impacted my life for sure and my family still supports this foundation year after year.To anyone reading this, please investigate your foundation before going on a trip with them. Be willing to eat the food they eat and stay where they stay. Live a little and give alot.



4. Dec19  
Doot

so, which did you do? build a wall that will get torn down or pass long bracelets?



o Dec20

Michelle Lynn Stayton

Thanks for the question. I actually didn't do either because I was there independently. The main area I wanted to go to had very recently been a conflict zone, so almost all of the charities who took people to the country weren't going where I wanted to be. Also, I was only 17 at the time, so too young to be there on an official basis with the ones who were, like the United Nations. But I had been researching and publicly speaking about the region/conflict for over a year at that point, so I planned my own trip and taught English at an orphanage for war-affected children, where I was there long enough to see these voluntourist groups trickle in and out, leaving no impression on the kids.

Then when the kids went on summer break, I traveled up to the war-torn region where I volunteered in rehabilitation centers for former child soldiers and tagged along with the UN's World Food Programme staff to distribute food at internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. This is where I realized the need is much greater than temporary measures can provide. They needed relief from war.

So I came back to the U.S. and lobbied Congress with non-profit organizations to get relief money (\$25 million's worth) designated to the region, which it was. Then the following year, I lobbied Congress with the same people to get a bill passed that required the Obama Administration to strategize a plan to help end the war. It passed and became law, and now non-combat special forces have been there ever since trying to solve things (albeit, it's been a much more slow process than anyone would have liked, hence my getting out of the field professionally).

I'm now working on an app that helps people in IDP/refugee camps reconnect with their family members, in the hopes that a tech approach may be a bit quicker than a bureaucratic approach.



■ Dec22

John Jenkins

Wow, impressive. So Doot, maybe next time you won't ask such a question of someone who so clearly outclasses you...



■ Dec26

[Nathan Buth](#)

Pretty awesome seeing what you have done. Also love that you are approaching the problem now with a technical approach.

Do you already have some developers working on the project or is it in the conceptual stages?



- Dec26  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

It's still in the development phase, I'm developing it (in Swift), but would love to collaborate with someone who codes in Java because I don't write Android apps, just iOS.



- Dec26  
[Nathan Buth](#)

Glad to hear you are building it in Swift instead of Obj-c. Do you have a site/post where I can learn more about it?

I do Android development and know others who do it as well. If you want to contact me my email is [withheld].

Best of luck with it! 😊



- Jan03  
Carl

I popped this on twitter, too, but I use it so rarely, I have no idea what the likelihood of randoms like me tweeting at you getting actually seen is. I just came here to say, besides that I loved the article, that if you have any web design skills, you might consider the Ionic Framework. I used it on my last project. Basically you design apps in HTML/CSS/JS and then the framework generates the necessary project files for XCode to submit the app, plus it makes the .apk for Google as well. No need to have two developers with two separate technologies. The only caveat is the app size has to include the browser, so it's about 40MB. But that's becoming more standard lately, anyway. See [ionicframework.com](http://ionicframework.com) for example apps and screenshots if that appeals to you.



- Jan05  
Steph

Hey, I write Android apps in Java. I'd love to help! Email me if you still need a fellow programmer.

Incredible stuff you've done. I hadn't gone on any of the "service trips" my school offered. Knew it was bullshit all along...



5. Dec20

Hanan

Thank you, thank you for writing this article! I went on a "mission" trip to Haiti this past summer. The goals of the trip prior to departure were extremely unclear, which should have been a big red flag. However, I thought I would tag along and help in anyway I could. Of course, my gut feeling was right. We did NOTHING, absolutely NOTHING to help the Haitian people. Maybe we donated some money, I don't know where it went. The entire week, I was absolutely embarrassed. I posted few to little photos afterwards. I was so ashamed.



6. Dec20

[Ty](#)

I really enjoyed reading about the topic of this article, and I feel it was well written!

I disagree with this article; all volunteering is helpful in some way. In some form, it fosters a human desire to recognize their impact toward others. Volunteering helps recognize humanity. I don't think that continuing our recognition of who we are and how what we do impacts others should be run under such strict scrutiny of intentionality. While I acknowledge intentionality is important, it is still a human serving another human in some form, and maybe we should feel happiness in our hearts for that.



o Dec24

Li

...I don't think that word means what you think it means...

Also, I don't even know if you read the article, because if you did then you'd see that your points, or at least the points I think you're making, have been rebutted against very well already. When volunteering cause more harm than good, does it matter that it leaves a little bit of "happiness in our hearts"? In fact, since it's actually bad for communities, should the volunteers even have the right to feel self-pride at contributing to a greater problem?



7. Dec20

Liz Blake

Michelle

Thanks for your comments and courage to outline some of the reality around some short term mission trips. It is always good to investigate and the book When Helping Hurts is a good guide for those involved in setting local mission efforts.



8. Dec20

Helene

This was really hilarious although painful because I'm one of those local people who have to work with the "voluntourists". And I completely agree with everything you said. Though I must say, some do appear sincere enough in their willingness to help, misguided as they are. That ad, oh my. I've met their clients. It was unbelievable how much they spent to come to our country. Guess it would help their applications.



9. Dec20

[John Donaghy](#)

Thank you so much. The video on Radi-Aid for Norway made my day. As a Catholic missionary working (in my 9th year) in Honduras I appreciate your approach. What I see (and am promoting with a Catholic parish in the US) is long-term building of relationships – with visits and aid.



10. Dec20

Cayla Rodney

I agree that some of these volunteer trips are exploitations and wastes of money. There is definitely a sense of "feel-good" activism that is sweeping the american culture, but did you ever think of how these trips lead to future benefits. I used my first two week mission trip to South Africa as a stepping stone. Maybe I didn't make a huge difference but I learned about a different culture and realized this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I am now working on my Peace Corp application and plan on making this type of work my life. Maybe instead of condemning others for their short term help, we can collectively discover how to make these trips more effective.



11. Dec20

Sonia

I absolutely hear and agree with a lot of your points. Taking a vacation (really that's what it is) and handing out unsustainable resources is merely a useless bandaid. However coming from a background of nearly 10 building trips I do have some quips. Firstly the people we build for would never be able to pay construction workers in their country for their time, materials, and accommodations during construction. What can do (and with my group this is what we do) is buy the materials from the local vendors, pay around \$400 for the materials and a bus to drive us, build a concrete foundation, and provide a roof that keeps out debris and harsh weather. I think the main difference is providing goods and/or services that have make a profoundly lasting effect rather than something that makes volunteers feel like they did something.



o Dec22

Michelle Lynn Stayton

That last sentence is the whole point of this article, I totally agree. Keep up the good work!



- o Jan01  
Dawn

Unless you're an unskilled worker and the foundation you built is weak and won't last. It would then be better and cheaper to send the money to hire local professionals. It would be so much cheaper that you could still send people over to supervise the work.

If you were going over there to make a house for yourself, would you trust yourself and your group to build it yourself? If no, then why did you pay extra to "help" people in that manner?



- 12. Dec20  
Ellen Franklin

"When Helping Hurts" and "Toxic Charity" should be required reading before considering a short-term service trip.



- o Dec22  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

Excellent suggestion!



- 13. Dec20  
Rebecca

Thank you for writing this. As a physician and admission committee member at a large medical school in CA, I find these applicants offensive and arrogant and think that 2 weeks in Haiti is going to help your application.



- o Dec22  
Casey

As someone who has been trying for years to get into medical school, should I just leave them out, then? I'm sincerely asking. I would donate to physicians overseas, but it doesn't count as volunteer work on an application. I try to volunteer at clinics in the United States, but most of the time volunteers for triage are booked up by other med school applicants. I spent a solid two years just trying to make it into various volunteer organizations. I spend most of my time doing research in a laboratory, but I did volunteer for a few months taking vitals at and cleaning up at a pediatric AIDS clinic where they truly had no other volunteers. I didn't come out with the bromidic "aww look how much they don't have," mindset, they were just the only ones who needed volunteers who weren't booked up. Should I leave it off of an application completely because it was Mozambique and not the US and that would make me look bad?



14. Dec21

[John McEnroe](#)

It takes time to learn how to give effectively. Service Trips awaken the mind and hearts of the Volunteer. The trip will always stay with them and they will learn to how to give. The Large NGO's are too arrogant for any lessons. The Red Cross displaced more Haitians for their employees then they housed by the thousands.



o Jan01

andy

i agree. im a garbage man, who was sent to help a town near us with severe tornado damage. Clean up was going great, we were able to work with the people there, everyone was doing what was necessary, and letting those who were there for a certain purpose do what they were there for. Until the red cross and governor quinn showed up. Then not only were my streets blocked so i couldn't get to my piles of garbage. I had three red cross volunteers blocking the back of my truck throwing in one piece of construction debris, then stopping to do an interview about why they're helping, i could do twice the amount of work myself as those three combined. Quinn and his people blocked everything while he was speaking on all the great things he was going to do help them. Red cross was handing out blankets. Thats it, thats all i saw them do, block up streets with there parked cars, prevent the skilled labor from doing their work, bring in cameras and hand out blankets and water with their red cross logo all over it. (many of the people there had already started helping by providing water/food/snacks to both workers and neighbors. It was truly awesome to see, one guy just had a table out in front of his house with coffee and donuts always there, another had brown bag lunches, and walked around the subdivision every hour or two handing them out to anyone who needed something. THATS helping! not cute, not fun, but real help) There was not a person there who if they needed a blanket could not get their hands on a one from a family member, or neighbor whose house had little/no damage. These giant aid organizations like red cross, unicef, etc. are an absolute joke. Not only are they ineffective as described above, look at their financials, they have huge overheads and have top leadership paid like CEO's of companies. This article is spot on about alot of things, but this i think is the most important. Your time, and money should go towards something you know about, and have passion about, and should continue with. So find an organization that you know has that passion, and support them. both with your money and time, thats how impact is made. (these are usually small, started by someone with a huge passion for whatever cause) Simply writing a quick check to the latest commercial with sad puppies or starving kids without knowing anything about the place, or the organization leads to more harm than good.



■ Jan01

andy

sorry, one more thing. What i spoke about with the red cross. Think of that cost. What it cost them to transport all those people, several supervisors, cameras, supplies that were not needed at the time. All of that cost goes into their Program percentage. so not only does \$25 of every \$100 they bring in go to fundraising, that \$75 is being spent so poorly and the programs efficiency is so low that the real impact of the charity is so much lower than the financials

advertise. I can tell you one thing, What i saw was a lot of donated money spent, with virtually no return on investment.



15. Dec21

Joshua Lam

In 2007 I went to Kenya with a group of 24 other people. Prior to the trip we raised about \$100,000 through our collective efforts. The trip expenses—travel, room, and board—were roughly \$3000 per person. I suspect most of the overhead costs just came out of pocket for the participants. The remaining money was used for ongoing funding of the project we participated in. The project itself, funding and effort included, resulted in the construction of a village clinic that continues operating to this day. It has had a long term positive impact on the community there.

The orphanage clinic was the idea of the local people. We asked them what we could do for them, and delivered what they requested help with. Currently it is relied upon mainly by a local orphanage for children who have lost their parents, often because of AIDS.

However, it was a community effort: our efforts involved men from the community, as well as a local businessman, and ourselves. But the largest impact, I think, was psychological. We spoiled Western kids were exposed to what it is like for a rural Kenyan, who has no running water or electricity. We lived among them and we lived like them. And we paid for our expenses while there so we wouldn't be a burden on the community. We even went to the market and bought food in bulk for the whole orphanage. We also got to see just how different a pace of life and superior sense of community these people had compared to us, which at least in my case gave me a new perspective, and humility, on my own life that has continued into the present. And it was explained to us by the group leader, herself a Kenyan with personal ties to the orphanage leaders, that the impact was even bigger on the children there. She tells us that it had an enormously positive impact on their self-esteem, that someone from America would actually care about them enough to fly out and do something for their community that they had requested. Remembering that these children are society's castaways, with no parents and no one who cares for them other than a handful of adults at the orphanage.

I similarly went on a trip with a dozen other people to Bay St Louis in the aftermath of Katrina to help with reconstruction. The people there were profoundly moved by the outpouring of outsiders into their community who just wanted to help. We had people doing roof work on houses that had damage, and clearing out rubble and wreckage from ones that were completely demolished by the storm. They didn't have much before, and they had even less after, but the fact that someone cared about them outside their community and wanted to come help was enough to move some of them to tears. The work done there made a real difference in people's lives, too. Rather than a family having to deal with the cost of cleaning their property up by themselves, they had people coming in that could do for them in a few days what would take them weeks to do on their own.

Overall I am skeptical about the whole "voluntourism" thing. But I don't think it's all a waste.



16. Dec21

Tom

Next, write an article about the professionals who know better but still continue to run programs that are a colossal waste of money because their jobs are on the line. As you say, development is slow and, I might

add, it is all about people and not technology. In many years of working in Africa I don't know how many times I took staff from well respected NGOs to visit the abandoned wells their organizations installed.



17. Dec21

Gus

All of your argument has plenty of reasoning behind it, except for one part. You keep saying how "voluntourism" can do harm to the people that are being helped. Yet you failed to explain how it harms the people receiving aid.

Also, you made a point how teenagers building school walls takes away jobs from construction workers. I see two problems with this: 1)if it is a truly poverish area, who is going to be able to pay construction workers to build it? 2) It session to me that schoolchildren should not have to wait on finding to hire someone construction workers to build a wall. Having worked for Appalachian Service Project in the past, I have helped rebuild homes myself. If we were not there helping out, no one would be and those families would be unable to have homes with livable conditions. Also, under strong leadership and organized planning, our work was as good as a construction worker's, albeit slower.

I do not wish to say you are right or wrong, but if you could clear up for me how these trips make a harmful impact it would be greatly appreciated.



o Dec22

Michelle Staton

Thank you for pointing that out, I'll elaborate. But first, it sounds like the work you did was with an organization whose focus was on the local community, which is good. I mean, it sounds like a tough sell; I don't know many people pining to go to Appalachia to do construction work. I could be wrong, but to me it sounds a lot less fun than visiting an orphanage in Haiti.

There is of course real work that needs to be done in the world, and like I say in the article, that type of work may not be fun. The problem lies within the voluntourist organizations whose primary focus is on providing the volunteers with a cool experience rather than focusing on truly solving the needs of the community. If the organization you went with was more like the latter than the former, then great.

Onto what damage is done with voluntourist groups.

In the case of orphan tourism:

- Like I mention in the article, temporary caregivers constantly rotating in and out of an orphan's life can leave a severe emotional impact, contributing to abandonment issues and emotional trauma. You can read more about this point, and other reasons why orphanage tourism is harmful [here](#). Also, here's an excerpt from [a different article](#) I recommend reading that also describes all of these issues. Here's an excerpt from it.

"For children in even the most legitimate institutions, interaction with a revolving door of short-term volunteers can be psychologically very damaging. Volunteers are largely untrained, do not possess the complex skills necessary to work with traumatised children and would not be allowed to do so in the UK. Most volunteers also seek to form an emotional attachment to the children in their care, to feel they have made a

difference through their work. Instead they are often simply reinforcing a never-ending cycle of abandonment.”

- Further, the huge rise in the creation of “orphanages” coincides with the rise of voluntourism. Sadly, there have been many documented cases of “orphanages” being created in tourist-centric cities in developing nations in order to get money from westerners who take pity on the kids. Worse, in many cases, the vast majority of them are not orphans at all, and in some instances, are trafficked into the home by people posing as boarding school personnel. You can read a report about the prevalence of this this happening in Nepal [here](#). UNICEF [published a report](#) about this trend in Cambodia, where up to 75% of the “orphans” were not true orphans. And you can read about orphan dealers in Ghana [here](#). This is why it is crucial to do ample research on the voluntourist organization and the orphanage(s) with which it works.
- Also, many people who have written about voluntourism have raised the point about how we let just about anyone sign up to volunteer with kids abroad, yet if it were in the U.S. they would have to have some sort of qualifications to work with kids (i.e. a background check, training, etc.). Why do we send people to work with kids there who wouldn't be allowed to work with kids here? Are they less deserving of qualified childcare providers? Worse, there are even known cases of sexual abuse occurring in some “orphanages,” and I'm not just talking about that one guy in Kenya. Some of the links I provided discuss the point about unqualified workers.
- This is more of a broader point and one for the country to work out, but there is widespread agreement amongst international development professionals (and even many developing nations' own laws) that orphanages in fact are not the best housing solution for orphans. They suggest family placement is better. This is for many reasons, but one of which is the potential for abuse.

I have added a video in the post that talks about the damages done by orphanage tourism.

To your question about who would pay for local construction workers, part of the problem is voluntourists often want to go to a country to “help” rather than donate money to have the work be done, but this ties into how much of a waste of funds these trips are. I compare six people going to Tanzania to the annual salary of a local doctor, imagine how much further the money could go if it were paying local construction workers. This is why I suggest repurposing the funds raised. Of course, people need to care enough about a situation enough to spend money on it even when it doesn't benefit them at all, which is a huge issue to overcome. Also, I am not naive to think throwing money at a situation will fix it, misuse of funds is a real threat. This is why vetting organizations who are devoted to a region/community/cause is crucial. To your second point, I imagine they could find local workers much more quickly than waiting for teams of westerners to assemble and fly in — ones who are already familiar with the local infrastructure and tools.



o Dec25

[Harlyn Purdy](#)

Gus, you actually answer your own query. You note that funds to hire workers is a real problem – true. However, did anyone in your group consider sending the funds spent on the trip to pay the local workers to build. Most likely the cost of your trip would have been sufficient funding to hire local workers to build the walls and have lots left over for other projects.

I live in Malawi. According to World Bank, based on GDP, Malawi is the poorest nation in the world. It is also among the least developed countries. However, there are many skilled workers that go unemployed (80% unemployment in Malawi) because there are no funds to do the construction needed. Almost 1 year after last January's devastating floods the vast majority of the homes

destroyed remain unprepared. If the funds spent by teams to come and spend a few days "helping" were made available for local organisations to hire locals to rebuild these homes at least two things could happen. First, many skilled workers would be employed for a long period of time thereby enabling them to care for their families and live with dignity. Second, these projects could be used to train others so they will have a skill and a chance at a better future. The salaries paid to local workers enter the local economy and have very positive impacts on the entire community. Someone coming from the west for a few days, or few weeks, does none of these.

In the Malawi context \$ 1000.00 US will provide a local worker with a reasonable salary for 10 months. This will mean her/his children can go to school, the family will have enough food, and all their basic needs will be met. Did your time helping to build a house do that?



18. Dec21

[Mara](#)

I find this to be entirely accurate and it's what I've been thinking for as long as I can remember. There's a book called The Blue Sweater by Jacqueline Novogratz I think you'd appreciate. It stresses building micro-finance systems in poor regions instead of creating a cycle of dependence by simply giving charity. I'm sure there are other, more informative or better written books on the subject, but it is the only one I've read and I really liked her ideas.



19. Dec21

Em

Hi. I really liked this article and agree with what you're saying so thank you. One comment, though, please stop talking about volunteer trips to "Africa," especially if you apparently focus on African International Development. In my small opinion, it really deadened your argument. Saying "I was in Africa" independently or not, kind of makes it sound just as bad as these other bleeding hearts you are commenting on. How hard is it to say you went to Tunisia? Or Senegal? Or Uganda? They're very different places with unique challenges, governments, and people.



o Dec22  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

Fair point. Updated.



o Dec23  
Daniel

Hi I worked in Zambia for 3 years. When i mention this to other people, even the academic and knowledgeable, I frequently get the impression that they have no idea where (or what) Zambia is. So sometimes I just make it easier on them by saying Africa. Yes, I lived in Africa. (Maybe functionally I'm saying If they're interested I'll tell them more, but truth is a lot of people have no clue where Zambia and Senegal and Bali, etc are. Not sure what that means of my fellow Americans, but honestly i had to look up Zambia when I was invited to go there.



20. Dec21  
Andrew Alms

I really appreciate your article, and agree with the negative impacts it has on everyone involved. I'm curious to know if you ever came across the Chalmer's Center for Economic Development in your research? They take this approach to the next level in training people to have real impacts in impoverished communities like these. Their President, Brian Fikkert, was one of the Authors of "When Helping Hurts" that several other readers have mentioned. A great organization that i wish had more leverage on outreach both within and outside the church. I do agree with John though, that short-term oversea's trips can be beneficial for the trip taker, just not under the name of having any greater mission, and with ample consideration of how one's trip impacts the places you go. Thanks, again!



21. Dec21  
Alex

I'm surprised you didn't specifically mention missionary work.

If I had a dollar for every time an American evangelical went to Haiti to "save the children" with bible verses, Jesus music, and anti-demonic prayers, I would have a lot of dollars.



o Dec21  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

Yeah I didn't want to open that can of worms. Religious people have their own reasons for going on these trips, such as to "share the gospel," or "spread the love of Christ," which are totally irrelevant to this article/website. In my view, children can't eat Bibles. But from where they're coming from, spreading the gospel is the best thing they could possibly do for somebody. I'll let them debate that as well as the "fruit" that comes from short-term mission trips amongst each other.



■ Dec22  
Genesis

I have been on missions trip and am studying International Relations and Global Studies. It is a Passion of mine to visit more underdeveloped countries and not just to "build a wall and leave" or "pass out a bracelet". I agree with you on the things you said, people do treat this as a tourism ideal which is so wrong. Although, I have seen impact when I bring the HOPE and share the LOVE of Jesus Christ with people. My goal in the future is find a career that will allow me to help these underdeveloped countries, villages, etc with medical aid and everything you mentioned but moNt importantly sharing the love of Christ. I have seen first hand how God can heal someone INSTANTLY In front of me. It just takes faith to believe He can do it and He is real. I once prayed for this girl because she had one leg shorter then the other, mind you, it was my first time praying for something like that and she had asked me to. I was a little doubtful God could do it, but He DID!!! Her other leg grew out the same size as the other and everything. Heidi Baker once said, a child won't listen to you speak on stories if

He isn't fed. So yes all those things are needed in order to present the gospel to children especially. But the main purpose is presenting who Jesus is. Why? Because we have experienced His SUPERNATURAL love and power one can only understand by experiencing and asking for it. So yes, one may think that missions work is just some religious "friendly" help but it isn't. Sharing the Hope of Jesus and the Love is important because it gives them identity in knowing they have a purpose in life, and have A Heavenly Father who wants a relationship with them. Aside from all this, I really enjoyed your article thanks for it!! It was seemingly true and made sense to what many service or missions trips can tend to do. Christianity may be labeled as a "religion" but it is a relationship with our Creator. Have a great Day 😊



■ Dec22

T.k

All you missionaries come to countries like mine (Tanzania) and think that we think and interact the way westerners do. Don't get me wrong, I have no problem with Christianity or western culture, however, when ignorant colonialist freaks like 99% of christian missionaries come to (discretely) force Christianity upon local cultured communities, it presents a problem. What makes you think your belief is any better than that of the tribal communities you have forced into abandoning their beliefs? Christian missionaries are caught up in a system where they truly believe they are helping, whereas in fact they are only destroying culture. With threats like "you will go to hell if you dont become christian", you are creating fear and destruction among local beliefs.

Thank you and please respect any future person you might believe is in need of aid by not forcing them to believe in the fugasi of christ



■ Jan03

Trudy

Yes yes yes!! Thank you. I'm from the US and am very appalled by this bizarre forcing of religion and western culture on countries who already have their own culture and people who have their own beliefs. It is damaging and embarrassing.



■ Dec23

Daniel

well said



o Dec24

Millie

Holy moly..... THANK YOU for bringing that up!! It's absolutely ridiculous that all these churches and members go on these super expensive "vacations" as I call them and as soon as they get back all

they do is post pics of themselves with children they met, and everyone is just praising them. Like they are God or something. It's absolutely RI-DONK-U-LOUS! It's all about themselves. Period.



■ Dec29

Paul

when you eat a good meal, you want to tell the whole world about it. when you go on a good trip you want to share your pictures and story on facebook. also when you know God, you want to share the good news with everyone. therefore, I believe that those who go on missions to share God's love with others are doing the right thing.



■ Dec29

Michelle Lynn Stayton

I understand many people share your religious beliefs. I read one person say that I overlooked this point, that "spreading the gospel is always worth it." But this was not a mistake. I left religious motivations out of this article intentionally, because it is not relevant here.

This article is not about religious mission trips because this website is not Relevant Magazine, or another religious publication. It is The Almost Doctor's Channel, which is a website for medical students; it's a secular site.

This article has drawn many viewers from religious circles, presumably because of the many similarities between service trips and mission trips. In fact many, many people from church-based organizations have written to me expressing their shared stance on this issue — that youth groups who visit can be more burdensome than helpful.

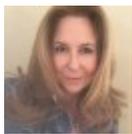
The difference between justifying secular service trips and religiously-motivated mission trips, as you point out, is that sharing "God's love" is worth it. But please understand not everybody believes in the same things as you do.

I respect your desire to share what you believe to be truth and love. I have no doubt it comes from a good place in your heart. But to the many people who do not share your religious views, that argument is invalid.

Without question, an immeasurable amount of good has come from dedicated missionaries and impactful religious-based organizations around the world. This has remained true for centuries. However, religious motivations do not negate the aforementioned damages done by the growing fad of voluntourism. At the very least, to everyone who does not share your beliefs, religious motivations do not compensate for the lack of substantial impact short-term, unskilled, voluntourist trips have.

For a Christian perspective on this, I recommend "[Why You Should Consider Canceling Your Short Term Mission Trips](#)" by the Gospel Coalition.

Aside from subjective spiritual growth, if a mission trip does indeed have a measurably positive impact on a community/cause — one that produces tangible value not at the expense or exploit of the local community — then great.



22. Dec21

[Jessica Gottlieb](#)

I've sent this to my children who have community service requirements for high school graduation and it helps explain to them why I won't send them to Fiji to fulfill that requirement.

When I see white teenagers in a sea of dark faces smiling and handing out whatever it is (food/uniforms/goodies) I feel uncomfortable and embarrassed for them and their families. You've done a wonderful job of explaining why.



23. Dec21

Julia

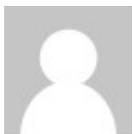
How are we supposed to teach children and teenagers about the severity of poverty in other countries if they are not supposed to go there? Many Americans are truly ignorant when it comes to the way many in the world live. I agree many of these trips are poorly organized and orchestrated, but expressing solidarity with someone living in poverty by actually taking the time to go there is not without any value. I don't expect my daughter to learn to make the poor a priority with her finances and advocacy as an adult if she has no personal emotional investment in it, gained through the experience of observing impoverished places firsthand.



o Dec27

Michelle Lynn Stayton

While I totally agree today's western young people need to be less self-focused and have a true understanding of the world around them, they absolutely do not need to do this at the expense of the disadvantaged. That's even more selfish. I do not pretend to know then answer on how to teach young people, but I do know there has to be a better way than exploiting the local community in a developing nation to do so. People who are only willing to give to a cause if they have had direct involvement in it are part of the problem. There are many legitimate organizations worldwide who through skill and dedication produce tangible results and have a great impact on a community/cause. Most of these organizations do not need to entertain western tourists for a week, but do need financial support to continue to do great work. Sadly, sometimes they cannot get one without the other. (Added to article)



24. Dec21

Nurul Huda

Thank you for the article! A really helpful self-check. I especially like how you provided alternative solutions! Most articles are just refutations, and while they do sometimes succeed at making the reader think twice, that's only half the job done. Because readers will be "So now what?" Without an alternative, not much will improve.

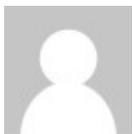


25. Dec21  
Ana

Hey, Michelle!

I was wondering what you thought about different language and other educational programs set up to help kids in developing countries to learn hoe to speak English or manage a computer?

Even though i agree with everything you say, I feel like there is no better way to learn a language than with a native speaker. There are programs that send volunteers to Vietnam, Cambodia, and other places all year long to teach local children languages. These organizations make sure that there is a constant flow of volunteers and all of them are proficient in English. What is your opinion on this?



26. Dec21  
[Lloyd Monroe](#)

Michelle, With all due respect, I call bull on your "calling bull on service trips" broad-brush condemnation. Our family founded Porch de Salomon a decade ago and have dedicated our time, talents, and treasures to this endeavor. Porch de Salomon works hard to avoid the mind-set of "volunteerism" this article lambasts. We also do our best to avoid exploiting natives' poverty or misery. Our low-overhead/high-impact style of outreach and service is "on the ground" 52 weeks a year (now in our 11th year). We're imperfect, by a long shot, but have made a tangible difference in thousands of folks lives over the years. Those folks include the locals and our volunteers. I'd be happy to dialogue this with your friend or anyone else who's interested. We invite skeptics to "come and see" and draw their own conclusions. Maybe even you! Thanks



o Dec22  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

Lloyd, friend, then can I call bull on selectively reading the article? I repeatedly suggest vetting the organization one wants to travel with to make sure it's legit so that they aren't adding to the problems associated with voluntourism. If your organization is legit (i.e. non-exploitative, more focused on the local community's benefit, and producing tangible results), then great. Thank you for doing things right.



o Dec24  
Millie

Oh Geeeez. Here we go.... She didn't say YOU did she?? She didn't say Porch de Saloman did she??? Nope. Surely didn't. Ur just wanting to toot your own horn and start drama. Ridiculous.



27. Dec21  
[Heather](#)

Thank you for being honest. Thank you for calling is BS. Great article.



28. Dec21

[Jennifer Surherland-Miller](#)

Spot on. Here's another piece to add to your arsenal. <http://www.bootsnall.com/articles/15-03/short-term-missions-trips.html>



29. Dec21

Amberly

I had a different experience. I was the "unskilled help" on a medical mission. A clinic that was funded fully by "westerners" was the only low-cost medical facility in the region (there was a hospital with one x-ray machine, but it was very expensive for the locals). The clinic was open in 1-2 week stretches except for hurricane season. All medications, instruments (including a microscope), basic supplies (gloves, q-tips, etc) were brought in by the team and left for the next group. We lived in a gated building, because the neighborhood was dangerous—we had a local who volunteered to patrol our gate all night while we stayed there. We had a family that was paid to provide meals and wash our laundry—even if no team was there. The clinic was only 500 yards away, but because it was around a corner, we couldn't walk there without our local guide (and always in groups of at least 3). Did we see some of the attractions on the weekend? Yes. Including a market that catered to western visitors, a secluded bay and fancy restaurant, and a visit to the ocean during the day. We also traveled to remote mountain villages and attended local church services, provided school supplies to a girls orphanage, and did building projects for a "nursing home". Was it a cultural trip? YES. Was it "voluntourism"? probably. Did it make a difference? YES. 100+ patients/day were seen. Go with an established group, and if you are unskilled, take on the grunt work (I cleaned up the exam rooms, took temperatures and medical histories, counted out pills, and did in clinic fetch and carry). Don't go expecting a holiday-but don't feel bad for resting when given the chance. Short trips can fill a need, if done right.



30. Dec21

[Danyne Bharj](#)

Good read. I agree with most if it. I have been the director of an orphanage in Jinja for twelve years and we love having volunteers. But it takes a lot of work to ensure they are an asset. For the most part volunteers are willing to work hard. I believe its the organization's place to have a plan for them. They are worth the effort if someone can invest it in them. We have had a few who have come on very short trips end up coming back to work with us for years....and it's all volunteer with us. No expat working with us gets paid. Sometimes for us on this side, it's not about what "we" get from them on their first trip but allowing them to come, it opens the door for filling much needed positions.

Given to the pathetic is a huge frustration for those of us with higher standards. Visitors are much more likely to give to the place which knocks down the wall after each visit than to a place like ours that is beautiful. We will never stoop to using pitiful to bring in much needed funds. I would say there are plenty of smaller NGO's without near the overhead of the ones you mentioned. Places where almost all your donation goes into the work. If one can properly vet them and trust in their integrity, they can be a huge blessing..... and I'm falling asleep, hopefully my comment is legible.



31. [Ian Sergeant](#) Dec21

Thank you so much for posting this well-informed article about an ugly aspect of international travel, and especially for mentioning solutions for people who do wish to make a positive impact, and to "be the change they wish to see in the world."

I recently started a Cuba travel company based on the model of a now defunct not-for-profit organization that I had been leading Cuba trips with for years. We are called Soltura Cuba Travel. Our mission has always been about bridging cultures and creating friendships in spite of the US embargo, and not primarily about service. We do contribute to local community projects, and we do try to improve things on the ground where we can, but we do not sell voluntourism trips, the sort of which often exploit the people and communities they pretend to help, and primarily serve to make privileged travelers feel good about themselves.

Authenticity is key. Thanks for keeping it real.



32. Merrick J Dec21

Hi Michelle,

I'm an undergraduate pre-med student thinking about going on a month long medical trip to a Spanish speaking nation because that's the only other language I know. However, after reading this article I'm not sure if it would be doing much good. Are there any programs/foundations that you know of that in Spanish speaking countries that would be doing the population a favor instead of the only medical volunteers? Because I'd rather not add to the problem, but would still like to gain experience.

Merrick



o Michelle Lynn Stayton Dec22

Hi Merrick,

Thank you for the comment. That's great you already know the local language! I haven't directly worked with a medical mission organization in central/south America, so I can't recommend any from firsthand experience. However, when looking at different organizations, try to find any publications the organization has made regarding impact report, financials, and other outcomes. The more transparency the better. If the organization only highlights stories from those who went rather than the effect it has had on the local population, be weary. I have had other people reach out to me since this article's publication informing me of further problems within medical missions, so it's very important to thoroughly vet different organizations and their missions, as I'm sure you already know. Also, keep in mind that some of the most effective ones may not have the shiniest website as their focus/money has gone more into the clinic, etc. rather than building an expensive website. It's also important to vet those organizations, too, but don't pick the organization with the flashiest website because you think it's the most legit. I'm not saying you would do that, it's just something

to keep in mind. Also keep in mind that some of the clinics/organizations the most in need may not be in the country's capital city.

I wish you all the best in your endeavor to become a physician!



o Dec22

Isabelle

Have you looked into volunteering in Texas, New Mexico, or Arizona? There are many people who, because of immigration status, are not able to get adequate health care. I don't know of a specific organization, but I do know there is a need.



■ Dec22

Michelle Lynn Stayton

You are definitely right about that. I know there are a few organizations that do medical missions there and I think it's great.



o Dec23

Debby

Connect with Lloyd from Porch de Solomon up above (based in Guatemala). They've done medical clinics out in the villages. They may also be able to hook you up with other good programs there.



33. Dec21

Angela S.

I've noticed a lot off these "self-fulfillment" trips happening lately in our community and I kind of have to laugh. This article is exactly what I have thought but just never said. Even though I know their hearts are in the right place, what they end up doing isn't all that helpful long-term. Sponsoring a child in an impoverished area is something my parents have done for years. This way the money goes for the things they actually need instead of your airfare. Must warn though that there are organizations out there that are shady, so make sure they're legitimate.



34. Dec22

[Christopher Dainton](#)

These are common criticisms of the voluntourism experience, but in general, NGOs are improving. It's difficult to find sending organizations now that aren't at least aware of those who find their activities less than helpful – more and more of them are at least using words like "partnership" and "sustainable". Check

out <http://www.medicalservicetrip.com> for more on how we're attempting to improve the quality of medical mission-type trips abroad.



35. Dec22

[Dan Vaughn](#)

Another link for study about the history of aid to some specific areas in Africa . This is a bit beyond the spring break trip focus of your article but it provides some useful insights and comparisons. Thanks for the article. <http://www.barrons.com/articles/SB50001424053111903747504579185800700741812>



36. Dec22

George

Thank you so much for this article. As an employee of an NGO we constantly ask ourselves these tough questions and want to work more closely with locals on the ground. We don't always get it right, so we keep asking the tough questions and keep working with the locals to make sure we try to do more good than harm.



37. Dec22

Chris

I totally understand what you are saying and never doubted there are organizations out there looking to profit from the sincere desire of those who want to help others in need.

That said, I hope anyone reading this article who has gone on a service trip that had little to no impact on the "target community" doesn't feel like they completely wasted everyone's time and money. Sometimes these initial trips are in fact more about the volunteer than the people they are supposedly going to help. I think most Americans realize they are fortunate. However, two weeks in Haiti – or even in Appalachia – may be just the wake-up call the average American college student needs to realize just how OBSCENELY fortunate they are. Anyone who thinks these initial short-term trips aren't really all about transforming the perspective of the traveler is kidding themselves. Look at the impact it made on you. I've seen students come back suddenly fully aware of what they wanted to do with their lives and what they really needed to do to prepare themselves before the NEXT TIME they would go abroad for a much longer stretch to help the community they got to know on that first trip. You can read blogs and watch videos until the cows come home, but nothing replaces getting out there and meeting people first-hand.

If you are a young person about to embark on your first missions trip or service-learning trip, certainly take heed of what this article and the comments have to say, but do not be discouraged. The community you are about to invade will teach you way more than you will teach them – just be open and prepared for that and brace yourselves to be humbled.

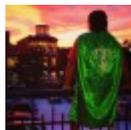


o Dec22

Michelle Lynn Stayton

As long as the volunteer's gain isn't at the expense of the local population. I do hope to discourage people from those types of trips, the ones that are more exploitative in practice. I agree it's important for today's western millennials to better understand their privileged position in the world, I just wish the process in doing that didn't give rise to the problems associated with orphan tourism. As I'm sure you'd agree, it's important to first make sure the organization one is going with is legit and the work they will be doing is effective rather than exploitative.

Thank you for your comment.



■ Dec22

Mike

While I would agree voluntourism is an issue, I think you need to give students, the population you're targeting here, the benefit of the doubt.

Two weeks is sometimes all these kids are able to give in a certain span of time. Assume the genuine intentions are there, you still have to wrestle with the time constraints of a winter or spring break, the willingness of parents to allow you to go, the financials of travel expenses, etc.

There are a lot of limiting factors that yes, even limit the future Peace Corps volunteers, World Bank workers, and humanitarian lobbyists.

You encourage students to consider long-term applications like studying international development, but what about the ones already studying it? Are they not allowed to invest in a 2 week time slot because it will do more harm than help?

You were a student once, you know it's not so easy to drop everything and go, even if you want to.



■ Dec22

Chris

Totally agree, Michelle. Thank you for such a thought-provoking article.



38. Dec22

Charlie C

I absolutely loved this article. Snarkiness aside you directly address the serious conflict with many short term trips. If you can address 2 things for me I would like to hear your thoughts.

1. Funding : Outside of your professional work, which I'm assuming you were on staff for, how did you cover your living costs, travel, & expenses. I know even with many NGO's it's very difficult to get on staff and the majority of volunteers (even some on staff) are self supported.

2. What is your ideal method of short term trips? You do a great job addressing the issues and pointing out somethings to be improved on, but what would you rather see changed? Keep in mind many individuals,

yourself included, would not be doing the humanitarian work they are today if it weren't for that "week in Africa." Granted the damage done and the lack of impact for 99.99% of people on these trips for the remainder of their lives is nowhere near offsetting for the 1 in 1000 individual like yourself.

Doing away with short term trips is not an option, but there are vast changes and discussions that need to be had, especially in the Western Church. I know many and have worked with some permanent expats who live and focus their efforts on the locals, but still heavily rely on the support of short termers due to the unreliability of locals, corruption of local gov, etc. How do you find the happy medium?

Not to be cynical but the "simply paying a doctor and nobody going method" ideally works, but in many situations that doctor may take the money and run, not do the work he's paid for, or other tragically depressing scenarios. This isn't speculation either; I've been a part of groups where this happens and heard countless other stories similar. Just interested in your thoughts & thanks again for directly addressing many overlooked issues with great sourcing and detailed experience thrown in.



39. Dec22

[Wyeth Willard](#)

Having returned from living in Nicaragua for almost 3 years, I have seen the good and the bad with teams. The failures described in this article, represent a failure of leadership in the field, not of teams or their motives. So a couple of counter points.

1. Most long term missionaries and relief workers got their start as a short term team member. It is a great introduction to the field for people interested in the long haul.
2. Creativity is sorely lacking in the educational system of most developing countries. Children in these countries suffer from serious stimulation deprivation. Leadership on the ground must work with groups of goofy teenagers to make sure they bring things as simple as boxes of Legos collecting dust in the garage. Teaching kids how to play creatively IS important and anyone can do it.
3. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of activities that we think everyone "just knows". I give a stack of handouts to a group of American teenagers in a circle, and they automatically pass them around. I do the same thing to a group of students in Nicaragua, and they wonder what is going on. There are no handouts, or books for most students in Nicaragua. Microscopes? Are you kidding me? If leadership on the ground can't identify and use any of the plethora of skills intrinsic to Western culture, some serious soul searching is needed.
4. If leadership isn't charging teams for followup with the communities they work with, who's fault is that?

All good points in this article, but they are points for those on ground to heed. The problems we are trying to solve are thousands of years old, and good leaders CAN make teams a part of the hundred years solutions.



40. Dec22

Lexi

Hello,  
I just want to say thank you so much for writing this. I went on a week long trip to Ayiti (haiti) in 2012. The locals informed us of the problems that a lot of NGOS were causing, like stated above. For example,

all that free food we shipped over there? yeah, that didn't help their local economy. Who can compete with something that's free? That trip changed everything about mission work for me. It really isn't about us at all.



41. Dec22

Jen

I went on my first short-term mission trip in 2002 to the Dominican Rep. The trip was designed to be an introduction to missions (church trip). Under the guidance of long term missionaries and local folks, we did service projects such as painting houses, concrete work, etc. We took supplies to a local hospital and served lunch to a community of Haitians who lived in a dump.

Some people who went on these trips enjoyed a vacation (the trip to the beach might be their most memorable activity), but many who went on this trip become long-term financial supporters of the folks on the ground. The mission we visited has dug wells, constructed homes, schools, etc. through the support of those who have visited on short trips.

I visited the country several times and developed relationships with many locals. One little girl that I met when she was 10 came to live with us in the US when she was 16 for 4 1/2 years. After attending US high school and a year of college, she returned to her country and is about to finish a pre-med program there. She'll start medical school next year. Her (and our) goal in all of this: She wants to be a medical doctor who can help her own people.

At the time we brought her to the US she had no hope of a good education and lacked the foundation for attending college. She is now bilingual and doing great in school. She is the oldest of 5 children, father deceased, and had spent 6 years in a children's home before she came to us b/c her mother could not afford to feed all the children.

She is now a "house parent" for 3 college freshman, while they adapt to being away from home for the first time. All of these girls are supported by individuals in the US. There are also 8 boys in another house attending college and each are supported by a family in the US. We need more of this!! Long-term support for disadvantaged children who can possibly become leaders who can help their own families and the impoverished country.

My point in this is to say that it is not always the short-term voluntourism itself that is the problem, but the motivation of those who go on the trip that is the problem.

My first short-term mission trip inspired me to get my family involved in supporting efforts in that country. We have made trips to visit "on our own dollar," and are blessed to be able to see a young woman fulfill her dreams who might not have had that opportunity had we not participated in a short trip and met her and gotten to know her.

We've also seen first-hand that the cost of one of us going on a short trip to her country can pay for a semester of her medical school.

I agree that your points are excellent and should be considered by anyone going on a short mission or volunteer trip. If it spurs one on to provide long-term support for those in need, then I think it's a great investment. But if it's just an "easy" way to see a new country, then it's a waste of time and money.



42. Dec22

[IVPA](#)

Thank you for your article. The discussions and debate around international volunteering are important.

As touched on in your article even development organizations can struggle with some of the same problems that surround volunteering abroad. Development and volunteering abroad, and everything in

between, are trying to address needs tied to complex social issues. People, interested in helping, need to be aware of the potential negatives of a project.

I appreciate your "Instead" boxes. I think giving potential volunteers the tools to make educated decisions will do a lot move the field forward.

There is also a wide range of organizations, varying in quality, involved in international volunteering.

At IVPA we are working with volunteer sending organizations on best practices and feel it is important to recognize that there are quality volunteer sending organizations who are interested in sustainability, partnership, and meeting actual community needs, as well as providing a meaningful and safe experience to the volunteer.



43. Dec22

[Paulina](#)

Dear Michelle,

I hope that my comment will be read by you. I am absolutely passionate about tackling the issues you describe in your article, in the sector of international volunteering. I dedicate all my free time to the battle against harmful "voluntourism." Back in 2013 I started a small foundation named VOFAIR (short for Volunteer FAIRLY), registered in Chile, South America. The mission of this organisation is to bring transparency to the world of international volunteering and promote only good practices. Although we specialise in verifying projects only in SA (since it would be very challenging culturally to spread to the whole world), we still promote practices that can be applied by international volunteers everywhere. We are a small, and only volunteer-run organisation and we are committed to our mission. Your article is the quintessence of our work and the way we think! Since we have just rebuilt our website, I would like to quote your article there (with your name under it of course)! Is that ok? We are trying to get more people and organisations on board to promote fair volunteering and discourage all the bad practices that you highlighted so clearly. We are not sponsored by any intermediary agency, but we "do it all ourselves" with volunteers working online from the US, Europe, South America and Australia. Thank you again for this great read and for tackling this important matter! Best wishes, Paulina



o Dec23

Michelle Lynn Stayton

Hi Paulina,

VOFAIR sounds like a wonderful organization focusing on how to do volunteering right. As you already know, transparency and promoting good practices in volunteering internationally is vital in the effort to circumvent the damaging effects of voluntourism. I commend VOFAIR's efforts in not stopping after recognizing the problem, but instead producing a solution in an effort to change things. You may definitely quote me/the article. Thank you for reaching out!

All the best,  
Michelle



44. Dec23

[Wei-Jan](#)

Thank you for writing about an issue that many organisations, churches and universities need to address.

As a Southeast Asian, I've seen many teams come and go and very few of them had impact on us. Some were more concerned about visiting touristy places (I'm not against doing typical tourist stuff but if that is given priority, then what about the people they flew in for?), some were concerned about staying connected to home (social media 24/7)...but then I'd meet some who were so impacted that they returned several times after that. Kudos to those people.

Recently, I was at a church in Europe that had a presentation on their recent trip to a Southeast Asian nation. I was excited but became incredibly disappointed midway through the presentation. Why? Majority of the presentation featured videos of them trying exotic food that produced really disgusted facial expressions, preparing gifts for children, playing games with locals and of course, having fun at the beach. Sure, there was probably a clip of them building some building but that went on for only 2 minutes. Towards the end, the volunteers stood up and shared how the trip impacted THEM.

I looked around the auditorium. I was the only representative of my region in that church. I was so angry that people go into these countries to "serve" only to return with a presentation like that. I felt so disrespected.

So, thank you for shedding light on this and may people continue to be educated about the effects of voluntourism.



45. Dec23

anna

Nice one! It takes guts to make fun of yourself like this, in service of a good and important point 😊



46. Dec23

Nick Hinz

With the right planning, networking, project design, and forethought, 2 weeks can make a difference, even in a country such as Haiti, but true that many don't in most places around the world



47. Dec23

Adele

I'm so happy to see this article. Thank you thank you for summarizing so many great points and providing such great evidence to back it up!

I lived in Nicaragua for 2 years and have so many first hand examples to support the claims you make. Here are a few:

-I attended a gated university that was mostly attended by wealthy Latin Americans. Everyday outside the gates, there were three kids – two brothers with their sister. They should have been in school, which was free. But instead they enjoyed staying at the gates where they got money and cookies from the college students. Their parents preferred sending their kids to beg because the kids got money (who doesn't want free money?). There were no financial reasons why the kids couldn't go to school, i.e. no reason they had

to work. The parents did not value education. The result was three kids who grew up with no education and learned to be dependent on hand outs.

-I knew several families that received benefits from World Vision. All it meant was that they would get a package every once in a while. I did not see it provide any significant improvement to their lives. I once saw one mother receive shoes for her daughter. The shoes didn't fit. Instead of giving the shoes to her niece (who fit into them), she kept them on a shelf until they didn't fit anyone and eventually ended up burning them with the trash.

-The same mother told me about when World Vision came to take a picture of her daughter. Her 4 year old daughter had just given herself a haircut (imagine a mullet with 1 inch uneven bangs) and she had been happily playing in the dirt all morning. The mother wanted to bath her daughter and put on her best clothes before the picture . The World Vision rep insisted to take the picture as is. I saw the picture. Her daughter, who is always smiling, was dead faced and dirty. She looked abandoned. In reality, she lived on a beautiful pineapple farm and her family ran a store in town. They were very well off until her parents mismanaged the farm and store, lost both, and had to move in with the grandparents. Now they live in a "house" with 2ft x3ft gaping hole in the wall and have a 50in flat screen tv they are paying on credit.

-I overheard a mother say to her son, in reference to his free TOMS shoes, "don't wear those shoes outside the house, those are your indoor shoes!" The shoes were a recognizable give away so they are a sign of poverty. The mother was embarrassed to reveal to the neighborhood that her son was using free shoes.

-I know a US group who lent \$3000 to a man. The man didn't pay it back and not because he couldn't. In his words, "those Americans have enough to money, I don't need to pay it back".

I could go on....



48. Dec23

[Dylan](#)

Hi Michelle,

I enjoyed this article a lot, it really made me think about the luxuries we have and how we sometimes let our emotions blur what we are actually doing to help. I am a travel/lifestyle blogger and wrote a blog post this morning about your post here.

Here is the link to my blog post regarding your article:

<http://www.outoftheofficetravel.com/reasons-why-a-2-week-mission-trip-is-ineffective/>



49. Dec23

Grace Stewart

I lead medical teams to rural areas of Central America. We take students, and try to make sure they understand what the needs are and how they can help, and not hurt.

May I use your post and citations for teaching?

You're doing great work.



o Dec23  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

Sure, and thank you for the work that you do!



50. Dec23  
Daniel

Are Peace Corps volunteers any better?



51. Dec23  
Brandon

I don't believe you're entirely right because I've been on a trip where the director of it had his own charity in Haiti and we helped build a school, which I believe was impactful considering the amount of work completed in a short amount of time.

But do you do bring up amazing points that I never considered and although I do have that point I mentioned above, I agree with you about a large majority of this article.

Overall, very enlightening and definitely something to think about.



52. Dec24  
Millie

Bravo to Michelle for saying exactly what most of us already think but are too scared to say it. You should be proud of yourself. Great read!



53. Dec24  
Chris

Thanks for such a thought-provoking read. I would be curious of your thoughts on Peace Corps' effectiveness. I have been considering applying for a Peace Corps program in which my skills and knowledge would be best used, but I certainly don't want to be part of something that would not help, or even hurt, the local community.



54. Dec24  
DM

But it gives you one helluva picture for your online dating profile.



- o Dec24  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

Lol, it beats #TinderGuysWithTigers (<http://tinderguyswithtigers.tumblr.com/>)



- 55. Dec25  
Sarah Desciscio

All of what you said is absolutely accurate. I couldn't agree more. Although I am traveling to Zambia next summer for mission work but i don't want to make this about me. I truly want to go a be a set of hands that are solely there to help for them not for me. In your article you said if we "must" go make sure your intentions are correct and you also said some other things. Could you elaborate more? Your opinion for this is a great one and i truly want to stay away form a self fulfilling trip. Thanks



- 56. Dec26  
Carlos

Hello michelle, its safe to say your article has become viral. Congratulations!

I live in Korea and I saw your article on my fb wall. Originally from Mexico, I came to Korea to study public policy in a School that is part of the policy institute that designed Korea's development. I learned here that the key to stop poverty is far, very far from aid. With so few cases of poor countries developing, yet none did it through aid. And most importantly, today's advanced nations became developed in a time when there was no aid.

I don't intend to say that 'development work' is useless, but I think that the needs-based model of international aid is useless in the long term. It can help after extraordinary shocks, but it wont develop anything. What the objective of handouts, toms shos, missions? Do they truly expect poor nicaraguans to ever become soially and economically developed like the French, British or the Japanese?

In fact, I came to the realization that the only way to support real development overseas is through rights-based approach.

The thing is that most of the work needs to be done in the donor countries so that they stop destroying local economies through unbalanced trade practices, impossible financial deals, imposed structural reforms that weaken the public sector, and in more extreme cases, war mongering, sponsoring of political instability (like in Nicaragua), direct military foreign intervention (like in the Caribbean and latin America), or arms trading.

Poverty and crime in latin America is heavily fueled by US weapons dealers, drug consumption, unfair trade deals, and exploitative corporations. Thse problems will not be fixed by creating long lasting impactfull 'needs-solving' infrastructure, like a clinic or a road. But you need to think why local people are incapable of building and maintaining a clinic of their own.

I think that more impactful actions could be things like sponsorship of a student from a poor country to study in the US so he can become a doctor. Investing in corporations of poor countries so they can develop their own light industry (no need for shoes handed out).

Trips are nice, but vacations that are disguised as aid is... Disgraceful. If you want to take a vacation and help, then be willing to pay 50 dollars for a cup of coffee, stay in a locally owned business, donate to a local ngo (vetted one), don't put your traveller needs above the locals.



57. Dec26  
Lynda Pilgreen

What especially touched me was how much money the trip costs – and what that money could do for the community. Certainly more than I can for a week or two!



58. Dec29  
Piper

This is a wonderful article! Hopefully more people will read this and understand how to better their well-intended actions to improve human conditions abroad.



59. Dec29  
DR\_D

Really great points. I've participated in medical trips myself, and considered the overall outcomes beneficial because these trips were longer-term (1month+), with a legitimate organization that only takes skilled medical volunteers, and included training of local healthcare staff and local capacity building as long term objectives. That said, there are still aspects of volunteering (even in a skilled capacity) in a developing country that are problematic, and I had a few ethical struggles (the white – saviour complex comes to mind). I do think that the western world can make some good contributions, especially in such fields as healthcare/engineering/economics, but it has to be executed in a way that is beneficial and culturally appropriate. I admit to posting photos of myself 'doing good' to social media, but part of this was for accountability; many friends/family/coworkers had helped with fundraising and were genuinely curious as to where I was and what I was doing. I would volunteer again in this capacity, but I very much agree that 'volunteerism' is BS in a lot of circumstances. Thanks for the thought-provoking article. .



60. Dec29  
Joshua

Thank you for writing this well thought out, well researched piece.

I encourage would-be humanitarians to pursue non-profits run by experienced and knowledgeable individuals, not those rushing into something (like construction or English education) for a voluntour through Tanzania, Costa Rica, etc. The world needs more kind hearts under the guidance and leadership of

local culture and need. See <http://www.inlander.com/spokane/one-child/Content?oid=2380818> & <http://www.koyominitiative.org/>

I welcome any advice you might have for recruiting 4 or 5 of the right kind of educators for a real trip. How does one find qualified teachers willing to live for a year-minimum, in a remote part of South Sudan (for example) with no travel opportunities and little to no pay? I can't be the only one who is willing. Where does one connect to the right kind of people who care enough to forgo money and adventure, for real and lasting accomplishment in the form of service through health and English education? No selfies, selfless compassion. No saving, empowering the saved. I seem to only meet voluntourists. Please advise.



61. Jan05  
Michelle Lynn Stayton

One of the most thought-provoking comments I've received on this article comes from Facebook. It read, "I love when white folks seem to believe black and brown people exist for them to have life changing experiences."

Another comment I liked came from a different Facebook user responding to somebody who wrote about how they return to the same poverty-stricken area each year to see the same people. In reply, the person said something to the effect of, "If you're really so effective, then why are the people still living in poverty?" She made a good point. Why hasn't their situation improved? Many respectable organizations who work in a region hope to work themselves out of the job, in a sense. The plan is for a community to become self-sustaining and no longer need to rely on assistance.



62. Jan09  
Crys

Great Article! I'm a Zoology major, and when I scanned the title of the article I thought you were going to roundly dump on the kind of, I suppose, "volutourism" that I have been planning to do since I graduated college, which is staying in National Reserves for a couple of weeks and helping to tag marine turtles, wash feed and care for rescued elephants, monitoring local primate populations, things of that sort. These trips are far from glamorous, usually involving sleeping onsite, using outhouses, using one small bucket of rainwater per day etc. I didn't even know that this kind of voluntourism existed, outside of religious mission trips, especially not the kind that involved picking up teenagers and setting them up in swanky hotels! I'm quite shocked and a little nauseated that this is a thing, especially the idea of flitting through orphanages and playing with children, as though they're cute puppies in a petting zoo.



63. Jan10  
Michal

Quite accurate article. I myself have been volunteering abroad for over a year and within that time I've met lots of short and long term volunteers. I must say, most of them came with the best intention. But they ended up with just couple of pictures because of the poor organization. Once they paid money to the volunteering agency no one cared about them much any more. They placed them to the orphanages or some local NGOs and the locals did not know what to do with them. And if you only come for a few weeks, it is very difficult to make your own project running. Many of these young people ended up

frustrated and discouraged. I've always felt more sorry for them, instead of judging them. Anyway, I know that there are people who think volunteering is some sort of vacation. But I think it's a very small percentage. At least I hope.



64. Jan12  
Youth Director Tim

I've got to be honest,..I hated your article. I hated it because clearly, you are absolutely right. Voluntourism is a thing that needs to die. I knew many people who did it, and said exactly what you mentioned about it being about them and what they took away from it, although that was not their intention by any means. It's crazy how the devil finds his way into every good thing, distorting and corrupting it. "Come help these kids,.....and give me your money." Organizations such as SIFAT & SWOK do long term missions like those you mentioned. The problem is that most people can't devote long term to projects that are needed. Perhaps good organizations trying to make a difference can find a way to have genuine groups come in for a week or two that can really make a difference without negatively impacting the people they I wish to help. Thank you for the enlightenment. I will definitely keep this in mind when considering a foreign mission trip for my youth group in the future.

## Trackbacks/Pingbacks

1. [Volunteer organisations good and bad | Pearltrees](#) - [...] Caring for our people. Putting a stop to irresponsible voluntourism. This campaign was launched in April 2015 by two...
2. [Volunteer articles good and bad - volunteer organisations good and bad | Pearltrees](#) - [...] Voluntourism concerns & a film about helping. 7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip To Haiti Doesn't Matter: Calling...
3. [7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip... | mphuynh](#) - [...] 7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip to Haiti Doesn't Matter [...]
4. [7 Reasons Why a 2 Week Mission Trip is "Ineffective" – Out Of The Office Travel](#) - [...] in Australia and have moved around quite a bit since high school posted an article title: "7 Reasons Why...
5. [Service Trips - Lawyers, Guns & Money : Lawyers, Guns & Money](#) - [...] Your (or your children's) service trips, or voluntourism, basically do nothing to affect the w... [...]
6. [Calling Bull on "Self-fulfillment Trips" | Faith, Fashion, and Faraway Places](#) - [...] friends) is whether short-term mission trips are meaningful or not. I recently read the article "7 Reasons Why Your...
7. [Calling Bull on "Self-fulfillment Trips" | Christians Anonymous](#) - [...] friends) is whether short-term mission trips are meaningful or not. I recently read the article "7 Reasons Why Your...
8. [Wishing Upon A Star For Myanmar on Christmas | Young Travelers of Hong Kong](#) - [...] couple of days ago a friend Jesse sent me an article entitled "7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip...
9. [This Week's Links | Angelchrys](#) - [...] Instead of going on service trips as an unskilled worker, consider donating the money you would have spent on...
10. [Orphan Hosting, Cont. | The Common Room](#) - [...] This is a useful and informative read. [...]
11. [Fundraising Friday | January 1, 2016 | Pamela Grow](#) - [...] 7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip To Haiti Doesn't Matter: Calling Bull on "Service Trips" [...]
12. [My Short Foray into Voluntourism | Cultivate The Mind](#) - [...] [...]
13. [Awesome Stories 255 | writing to freedom](#) - [...] trip and this article was a wake-up call to see how they may not really be helping. The article...
14. [Short Term Service Trips | Laced up Lutheran](#) - [...] According to the author of this article on "7 reasons why your two week trip to Haiti doesn't matter,"...
15. [Critical View on 'Voluntourism' | Gaia & the Ethnosphere](#) - [...] 7 Reasons Why Your Two Week Trip To Haiti Doesn't Matter: Calling Bull on "Service Trips" [...]
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