

new horizons

Sometimes, the treadmill of work and bills can seem never-ending and leaves us gasping for a holiday. Meanwhile, every day seems to bring a report of another species in jeopardy or a community facing ruin - but what is the average working person supposed to do about it?

Over the past couple of years, an increasing number of Brits have discovered a new way to take a break from the rat race and reconnect with the world at the same time. Welcome to the volunteering holiday, the gap year of the working generation and the perfect way to make a difference without chucking in the day job. Instead of booking two weeks in Tenerife, the thinking goes, why not spend your holiday tagging turtles at the Cayman Islands, building

houses in Honduras or teaching English to children in Sri Lanka?

A slew of websites and organisations are now around to put Brits in touch with inspiring opportunities abroad that can reinvigorate tired workaholics. As Deirdre Bounds, founder of volunteering resource I-to-I meaningful travel, says: "People come to us because they feel burnt out. Volunteering abroad gives you time to think and act outside your everyday life, and benefits the place you visit as well as yourself."

With 2005 designated Year of the Volunteer, there's never been a better time to broaden your horizons. And who knows where it might take you? A few days on a conservation break will make you some new mates, but a six-month sabbatical could open the door to a whole new



A BREAK FROM THE NORM

Information analyst, Abigail Davis, 28, took six months out to travel through Central America and help with community projects

"I enjoy my work but, at the end of 2003, I was really stuck in a rut. I wanted to travel but also do something useful that would give me a kick-start.

"I-to-I meaningful travel helped me find projects where I could work with children and learn Spanish, as I'd always wanted to do both. But I didn't realise what a monumental experience I was setting myself up for! In Honduras I was placed with a local family with five children, none of whom spoke English - and I had just eight days' Spanish training! We were helping build proper shelter for the local tribe who lived in shantytown conditions - unbelievable to see first hand.

"I then went to Guatemala to work at a children's home and had to deal with everything from an HIV case to broken legs. But it's amazing how you can just get on with things. Getting to know the local people turned out to be the best bit of my travels.

"Now I'm back in my old life but if I ever start to doubt myself, my parents just have to say: "Think of what you've done!"

trailblazers

BORED OF THE BEACH? WHY NOT GIVE SOMETHING BACK WHILE YOU GET A TAN - ON A VOLUNTEERING HOLIDAY. FROM WOLF MONITORING IN SLOVAKIA TO DRY-STONE WALLING IN JAPAN, IT'S YOUR CHANCE FOR AN ESCAPE WITH A BIT EXTRA...

words: jo moulds





WALKING WITH WOLVES

Clare Numberstone, 32, a manager from Sheffield, travelled to Slovakia last summer to spend two weeks wolf monitoring

"My holidays are usually spent on a beach somewhere with friends, but this time, no-one wanted to go away when I did. I started looking for something I could do on my own and found this project on the internet.

"Our group was based in the Tatras Mountains - an incredibly picturesque location - and ranged from students to 60-year-olds. But we all got on fine, thanks largely to the local beer!

"We worked on local farms, building wolf-proof fences, removing brush piles of brightly coloured material along fences. The farmers thought we were daft - they shoot wolves to protect their sheep even though there's evidence that wolves may become extinct there soon.

"But six months after we got back, we heard that the area hadn't had any more wolf attacks, and the farmers now believe in the project. It was such a buzz, knowing we really achieved something."



FACE LEFT: MAZE GARY / PHOTOGRAPHY; CHECK (7/11)



career. At the very least, you'll feel better for the experience. "There are demonstrable health benefits for volunteers, from physical well-being to mental health and social benefits," says Martin Welford from Year of the Volunteer.

For Simon Gorton, 42, volunteering abroad has led to an exciting double life. He spends eight months of the year running his café in Bourton-on-the-Water, before closing up shop for winter to head for warmer climes to help on conservation projects. "I got the scuba diving bug seven years ago and soon realised that our wealth of marine life is in trouble," he explains. "I took a volunteering stint with Coral Cay Conservation in the Philippines and ended up as the expedition leader, teaching people

about marine conservation. Once you've had the chance to change how people think, you can't stop."

Simon was helping out at a diving centre in Thailand when the tsunami hit last year. His volunteering experience proved invaluable. "Nobody official came for a long time. I worked for two weeks, non-stop, then went back out in February to help rebuild local homes, make furniture, teach the kids..."

That experience has changed his outlook completely. "Having seen the work that the UN Disaster Victim Identification team did after the tsunami, I'm now thinking about working for the UN if I can. So be careful! Volunteering really can change your life." ☺



MUM ON A MISSION

Londoner Anne Hyatt, 46, spent ten days in Japan last September with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. "I used to volunteer when I was at university but it's

only since my daughter, Clare, has grown up that I've had time to think about it again. She's 17 now, so she stayed with her father and didn't mind me going at all.

"I've been a member of the BTCV for a while and I've always wanted to go to Japan. The other volunteers were a mix of British, Japanese and people from countries like Thailand. It's usually hard to communicate with such a language barrier but, when you're working together, conversation becomes easy and it was a fabulous chance to mix with different cultures.

"There's a lot of gobble speaking in Japanese culture. I found out! At the beginning of each day, we'd do exercises and the group leader would make a speech, then at the end of the day we would do it all over again..."

"The project involved restoring dry-stone walls around the paddy fields - hard, physical work and we were working on steep slopes which made life interesting. But at least it was nothing like being in the office! I had the most amazing time - it was unusual, and fun."

Inspired? ...

Find out more

eco interest

• British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), www.btcv.org
For conservation breaks

round the world

• I-to-I meaningful travel, www.i-to-i.com

• Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), www.vso.org.uk

For short and long term opportunities overseas

closer to home

• www.yearofthevolunteer.org

• TimeBank, www.timebank.org.uk
Paid UK-based projects

WIN! Great ideas guide

We have five copies of *Norwiche Volunteering to give away* (£17.99, How To Books, ISBN 1857030100). For a chance to win, send your details marked 'Troublemakers camp' to Kia Moten c/o No 2, Freeport (CV1879), CV21 1HR, before 31/08/05. Full terms and conditions on page 12.

