



Where Is She Heading

Jane Stanfield, Where Is She Heading  
P.O. Box 27482, Lakewood, CO 80227  
303-988-1356

[wiladyjanes@gmail.com](mailto:wiladyjanes@gmail.com)

[www.janestanfieldwish.com](http://www.janestanfieldwish.com)

## **How to have an amazing Volunteer Vacation? Know Thyself!**

As people begin to research taking a volunteer vacation, it is common to become paralyzed with the overwhelming number of options, organizations and non-profits that offer volunteer travel experiences. To sort through the choices, it really comes down to two words – Know Thyself.

The volunteers I experienced that either had or caused the most difficulty were those that had not clearly evaluated the project before departure. Disappointment can happen for volunteers when the selected project was not picked based on a true desire to help or to experience something, or when they simply went along on someone else's pet project.

For many of us, an international volunteer vacation may be a once-in-a-lifetime or a very occasional experience. Why go into one without the proper preparation? Depending on the location or type of work, you will most likely be spending your money and precious vacation time to have this experience. But with proper due-diligence and honest introspection, you can find a volunteer project that fulfills your interest, time, budget and heart at the same time.

### **WHY DO YOU WANT TO VOLUNTEER?**

*To do good? To feel good? To learn something new? To be a citizen ambassador for your country? To learn about yourself? To travel inexpensively?*

The answer to this question will help guide you to find the agency or type of volunteer work that fits you. This can include everything from infrastructure and longevity or reliability of the project, to time schedule and standards of accommodations. Each of these factors can make a huge difference in the quality of your experience and your comfort

### **TYPE OF WORK**

There are many ways to begin the sorting process. It is common for one or two of these questions to be the most important to find that perfect fit project.

**What volunteer work will you do?** Is your preference to work with people, animals, nature, conservation, data or inanimate objects?

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**Where will you go?** Think not only continent or country, but also city, suburb, rural or bush.

**When will you go?** This may include time of year, length of trip, and seasonal considerations including the hemisphere you will visit.

**Who will you serve or who will be working next to you?** If working to serve others, consider the range can be from infants to seniors. When contemplating your co-volunteers, look at the preferred ratio of men to women, the range of ages, and the mix of nationalities.

Write down several ideas or combinations to investigate further.

Now you have an idea of what, where, when and who, it is time to spend time looking at what will make you comfortable when you are abroad. Take plenty of time with these questions, because they are a major part of a successful volunteer experience.

## COMFORT ON THE ROAD

Ask yourself, when you travel what is your preferred standard of comfort?

**What is your preference for accommodations? Restroom and bathing facilities? Source and variety of meal options?** Most volunteer locations tend to offer double occupancy rooms or at times, dorms or camping. Depending on the location, restrooms and bathing facilities may be shared or more rustic than at home. Meals may be catered for the volunteers and focus on local cuisine. Other times, volunteers may cook for each other on a rotating basis. Are you game? If you have specific preferences, write them down and evaluate each opportunity against your list of possible volunteer options.

**How many hours/day or per/week will you work as a volunteer?** Depending on the project, volunteers may work between 4 and 12 hours a day and for 3-6 days per week.

**What will you want to do during your off hours?** Do you envision yourself retreating right after dinner to the peace of your room? Or are you more interested in finding local entertainment most nights? How will you feel if the norm is to join the team and local volunteers every night for meals and entertainment?

**Do you step forward or retreat in a culture where English is not the first language?** Some agencies focus on cultural exchange and their priority is lots of local interaction. There may be interpreters, or at times you may be asked to step up and make an effort in a language not your own.

**How flexible are you when things are not as you expect? How do you handle stress and disappointment?** The answer to this question is important to see how far away from your comfort zone you are willing to go on your volunteer vacation.

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**How will you incorporate some real vacation time during your trip?** Are you expecting to vacation during your volunteer work? Or perhaps you will have extra days before or after the work to focus on sight seeing or downtime to relax.

Once you have taken stock of the type of volunteer work that fits your goals and understand what to will take to make you feel comfortable, you can evaluate potential volunteer opportunities against your preferred criteria.

Volunteer vacations can be life changing in so many ways. The amount of planning that you do prior to the trip is key to making your first trip a success. Take time to plan. Complete your due diligence on your personal goals and preferences. Research the type of project, agencies involved and the communities served. Chose well, expect to have a great time, and then get out there and make a difference, not only to the world, but to yourself as well.

Travel in Safety.

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