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VOLUNTEER ETIQUETTE 101 – HOW TO BE A STAR VOLUNTEER!

Volunteering, giving back, serving in purpose, helping out, learning something new – They all sound easy and should be second nature to each of us.

In many ways, volunteering is easy. You decide to do it, find something to do, sign up, and arrive ready to go.

Your preparation as well as your approach to your volunteer work can have a huge impact on both the local people as well as your co-volunteers.

It is common to arrive with ideas of what you hope to accomplish during your time as a volunteer. Just as Greg Mortenson found in the book, *Three Cups of Tea*, sometimes our good intentions and desire to help are secondary to the priorities of local community.

Every volunteer wants to make a good impression. The volunteer etiquette ideas can help you arrive prepared and be that fantastic volunteer of legend that every one speaks of with awe and affection after you have left.

CONSIDER THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

RESEARCH. Take time to research the country, city and culture where you will volunteer. Most guidebooks have excellent information and the volunteer sending organization (VSO) will most certainly be able to help you with acceptable behaviors, dress and different cultural norms.

BE INTERESTED IN THE PROJECT! There will be enough things during your trip that can challenge your flexibility and sense of humor. However, if you are enthusiastic about the project, these things will be minor annoyances instead of huge issues. Besides, you are spending your time, money and energy during a vacation to volunteer. You do not want to waste one moment of it in a probably preventable disappointing experience.

AT THE VOLUNTEER SITE

EXPECTATIONS - You will have a wonderful experience when you are realistic about what you will be able to accomplish during your stay. No matter what task you plan to do, ask the local supervisors from both the VSO and the local director what is the most important project or

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goal during your stay. Check in daily with them and make sure that you are working at something that is a high priority. It may be something very different from what you planned. For example, you may arrive expecting to teach English in an elementary school. However, if there is a downpour overnight and the bottom level of the school has flooded, you will most likely be mopping the floors instead of practicing nouns and verbs.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU - Many cultures revere personal relationships and greetings and casual conversations always come before any work begins. Many VSO's emphasize cultural understanding along with working together on a specific task. It may be a little confronting to be asked personal questions about yourself and your life. You may feel that hours spent over long meals or personal conversations about family and friends are not as important as accomplishing something concrete. Relax. You have an opportunity to learn about their culture and make life-long friends. Moreover, the volunteers that come behind you will most likely finish whatever you begin during your trip.

GOOD INTENTIONS - While we all want to serve, arrive with the intention to help, not to save. Realize that while many places in the world can use your assistance, they are also proud of their own community and do not need pity or saving. One of the most eye opening things that many volunteer experience is that while others have few possessions or luxuries as compared to home, they are happy, content and incredibly generous with what they do have. When you view the experience as an opportunity for two-way learning with both parties benefiting, you will understand the addicting quality of this type of travel

THE LARGER COMMUNITY

BIG EYES AND HANDS OUT - You may see children begging in the street, which can really pull your heart. However, VSO's usually recommend giving to a local charity that supports many children, rather than giving to an individual child in the streets. Giving money to a child encourages them to stay out of school to earn a small amount in the short term, instead of getting an education that can help reduce poverty in the long term.

COMMUNICATION – It can be daunting to be in a community where you do not speak the local language. Luckily, there are many ways to learn the information that you need. Beside the local language lessons you may have, remember that you have two eyes, two ears and one mouth. You will be amazed how much you really do understand if you watch and listen. Then when you do speak, it can be for clarification of a certain word or topic. Help yourself by arriving with these five phrases already in your head – Hello, Good By, Please, Thank You, and Good Morning.

THE OTHER VOLUNTEERS

There were volunteers before you arrived and there will most likely be others coming behind you. Just as you may have to deal with issues left by former volunteers, your behavior and conduct can impact future volunteers.

LEAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT – The consistency of your actions at the volunteer site can have lasting affects of those who come after. This especially affects food storage not only in kitchens but also in your rooms. For example, if you are living in the bush, it becomes almost immediately apparent why it is important to keep ANYTHING that is edible in sealed, heavy plastic or metal containers. Leave one little candy out and the next day you may be dealing with a column of ant, or furry beasties with long tails. Solid storage containers are a good rule for not only food and snacks, but also medicines and toiletries. Without knowing why, future volunteers will appreciate your thoughtfulness.

DID YOU BRING ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE? - Before giving money or personal gifts to your new local friends, remember that not all volunteers will do the same. Your gifts may unintentionally lead to future expectations of this type of giving from all foreigners and volunteers, which may not be the case.

You love to help. You want to make a good impression. You want to make a difference. You can. Review the ideas above, arrive, and be ready to repeat daily the most highly desired words to be said to the local project coordinator, “What can I do to help you today?”

You will be the STAR, “Number 1” volunteer to the local hosts and your co-volunteers as well.

Until next month, please

Travel in Safety.

Jane