

Volunteer Vacations

Adventures Ideal for Teens

by Lucy Rimalower, M.A.

When you envision a vacation with your teenager, perhaps you cringe thinking about your very-independent son or daughter, sitting in the back seat of a car, sunglasses on although it's overcast. Her iPod has effectively put her in her own world and given her the excuse to ignore you. Then there's the slight nausea of disappointment that you're in a beautiful vacation paradise and your teen is texting her friends and asking when you'll be at the next Internet café so she can check her Facebook wall. Mostly, you're wondering why you bothered to travel so far from home only to experience



the same disconnect you've been feeling at your own dinner table. Sound familiar? Consider an alternative: a Volunteer Vacation.

The What and the Why of Volunteer Vacations

Organizations such as Global Volunteers offer opportunities for families to get to know new cultures and cities while providing service to communities in need. Work projects vary from nurturing at-risk children who may be disabled or orphaned to teaching conversational English skills to children, youth and adults all over the world.

Volunteers can also help to build and repair classrooms, community centers, health clinics houses, and other facilities.

Far from home and the usual family dynamics, adventures in service create an environment in which families discover new strengths and newfound respect for each other. While most vacations offer a break from the monotonous routine of school, work, and busy schedules, "voluntourism" provides some very unique opportunities. First, by committing precious time-off, energy and money to a volunteer vacation, parents are modeling their commitment to their values and the communities they wish to support. Second, volunteering in a different community or even your own neighborhood provides parents and teens the opportunity to increase their understanding of other cultures, new people, and the world around them. Finally, for those parents with their heads still in their children's report cards, a study in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* found that adolescent volunteers have higher GPA's, higher self-esteem, and a stronger intrinsic work ethic.

An Adventure in Service: Tutova, Romania

I had the honor to be part of a service trip to care for abandoned children in a failure-to-thrive clinic in the very small town of Tutova, Romania through Global Volunteers. Staying in a simple but clean hotel in the slightly larger town of Barlad, we'd start the day as a group, twenty of us having breakfast and learning basic Romanian language and cultural skills.

I had come with my mother, and we were the lucky recruits of a friend making her third visit to Tutova. There were several people from a Rotary Club in Canada, a few women traveling alone, and interestingly enough, several families with teens. The minimum age for this particular program was fifteen. It was during breakfast that I first saw how an "adventure in service" provided a wonderful opportunity for parents and teens to grow closer. One mother and daughter had come in celebration of the daughter's high school graduation. Another family unit was a mother and her two teen daughters. Mom was a lovely blonde woman, coifed and lipsticked even in the August heat of

rural Moldavia. The younger daughter was fifteen, blonde and blue-eyed. The other girl was the apparent black sheep, sixteen years old with dark hair and skin, and heavily-lined eyes. She talked with me about her experience in rehab and how she had been very angry at her family. But she was happy to be here with her mother and her sister. Not just for the opportunity to spend time together but for a pilgrimage. This was the second trip to Romania for her mother. Her first trip had been sixteen years earlier to adopt this beautiful girl before they outlawed international adoption. And now the dark-haired Roma teen was back, Americanized, wise beyond her years, and reconnecting with the land of her birth.

Granted, although this family's trip was laden with a unique emotional meaning, all the parent-teen relationships in our group were amazing to watch. We'd sit in a small dining room with a dry erase board as our team leader taught us phrases like "where's the bathroom?" and "dirty diaper." To see parents and teens on equal footing, stumbling over the same new consonants, giggling over guttural pronunciations that were as hard for the moms who'd taken French as they were for the daughters who'd taken Spanish.

On the bus to the clinic each morning, teens that started out staring out the window with their Ipods, began to share their music with their mothers. Rocking out together on the barren, Romanian countryside, taking in the fields of sunflowers, and sharing Betty Ice ice cream from the service stations. My own mother and I, gratefully long past the days of my moody adolescence, would practice our new Romanian words and laugh at each other. Our bus would stop to pick up a brilliant eighteen-year-old Romanian girl who was the only teenager in town to volunteer at the clinic.

We'd arrive at the clinic met by the smiling caregivers, so appreciative of our help. There were thirty children aged two weeks to six years. Without the volunteers, the children would remain in their beds and cribs, removed only to be fed, changed or bathed. We would all gleefully enter the rooms where the children were awaiting our hugs, kisses, songs and games. As the day would grow warmer, the volunteers would take their charges into the little yard with the makeshift playground and grass patches. Here, again, I would see how the parent-child playing fields were leveled in Tutova. Everyone found their strength: Moms teaching daughters how to change old-fashioned cloth diapers with safety pins; Daughters, with all the energy of being sixteen, running around to fetch fast-moving toddlers; Fifty-year-old mothers moving even faster when they'd see a car, or better a horse-drawn wagon, coming down the road; and Everyone having a good

laugh when the resident stray dog would delight and frighten the children with a cameo.

No one remembered the fights about curfew. No one was talking about Myspace or instant messenger. No one was arguing about family time vs. friend time. No one was feeling anxious about bills to pay and in-laws coming to town. After lunch, we'd all stroll together down the dusty road outside the clinic to get a soda while the children were napping. We'd return for a few more hours of playtime before heading back to our base.

There was nothing much to do in Barlad. We'd all shower when we got back to the hotel, generally speaking with our clothes on. We were so filthy that it was just easier to wash our clothes in the shower. We'd come back downstairs for dinner, changed. The sixteen-year-old had stopped wearing eyeliner. I had stopped checking my blackberry. My mom had started stuffing eggs into her purse to bring to the children.

I did not have the pleasure of seeing how these parent-teen relationships were impacted by the experience of this volunteer vacation once everyone returned to their respective homes. I'm certain that more than parasailing and beachcombing, Romania had allowed us to see each other and ourselves differently. And the quality of time together, under circumstances so different from our everyday lives, was certainly a holiday worthy of celebration.

The Where and How of Volunteer Vacations:

There is a travel program for almost any cause that interests you and your family. Save the Manatees with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. The Beijing Institute for Autistic Children sends volunteers to work alongside Chinese children with autism. Save the Rainforest, Inc. offers eco-tourism and volunteer opportunities in the tropical rainforests from Mexico to Brazil. Yes, in lieu of a week lounging on the beach, you and your family can spend one to four weeks helping communities in venues as exotic as Crete or rural Romania. Or perhaps you might feel more comfortable traveling domestically to work projects in Minnesota or Montana, as offered by Global Volunteers. While most programs require advanced registration for at least one week's commitment, cheaptickets.com in partnership with the United Way, offers the opportunity to sign up for just a day or two of volunteer work within your already-planned vacation.

Links for Volunteer Vacations

For more information about volunteer vacations, check out the following links:

- **Beijing Institute for Autistic Children**
www.worldwidelanguagestudy.com/beijing-volunteer-program.html
- **Global Volunteers**

www.globalvolunteers.com

- **Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute**
www.floridamarine.org
- **Save the Rainforest, Inc.**
www.saverfn.org
- **The Charity Guide**
www.charityguide.org/volunteer/vacations.htm
- **Cheap Tickets.com Volunteer Site**
volunteer.cheaptickets.com

Tips for Traveling With Teens

Travels with your teens can be a wonderful opportunity for family bonding and fun or a nightmare of power struggles in small spaces like cars and hotel rooms. Here are a few tips for traveling with teens to any destination:

It's Their Vacation Too

Consider their ideas and let them choose some activities. Particularly for a volunteer vacation, be sure their interests and talents are factored in.

Consider your teen's input as far as how long to stay. As hard as it is to leave your job and responsibilities behind, it's hard for your teen to leave his life and his friends.

If money and circumstances allow, letting your teen bring a friend along can keep everyone happy.

Autonomy on Vacation

What are the rules for the trip? Are there curfews and allowances? Let your teen earn spending money before the trip through extra household chores or babysitting.

Allow your teens to call the shots on their suitcases. Just remind them that sometimes things get lost or stolen and they're responsible for carrying their own bags.

There's No Place like Home

Bring snacks. It's been a long time since you've packed a diaper bag with Cheerios and goldfish but jet lag and foreign foods make a box of granola bars a travel must-have for picky-eaters and road trip mood swings.

Don't be afraid to let your teen plug into an iPod, email or cell phone. It may help him feel connected to home and give him a break from all that family time.

Sometimes you may have to give your teen permission to skip a family trip. Make sure he's got an appropriate support and safety system at home and he knows how to reach you.

References

Johnson, M.K., Beebe, T., Mortimer, J.T., & Snyder, M. (1998). *Volunteerism in adolescence: A process perspective.* *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 8 (3), 309-332.

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