

A world of good

» cover story



Ecumenical: (top) the community of Taize in France. Picture: AFP

Helping hand: (above) working for Australian Volunteers International.

Conservation: (right) up close in Peru with Projects Abroad Australia.

Travellers have many opportunities to engage with the world in a meaningful way, writes **Marianne Betts**

GONE are the days of just holidaying for the sake of, well, holidaying. More and more travellers are going overseas with a purpose other than lying on a tropical beach, cocktail in hand.

They may be enjoying some fun in the sun, but they're also doing volunteer work, taking part in sporting events and learning new skills.

It's the age of meaningful travel. Australian Volunteers International communications manager Christine Crosby says people want to engage with the world a little differently.

"They want to get to know people from other cultures," she says.

"It's not just about looking at tourist attractions; it's about embedding themselves in a community and being a part of a new environment."

It's also a career development opportunity, Crosby says.

AVI, one of three organisations to deliver programs on behalf of AusAid, the Australian Government's international development agency, uses skilled volunteers.

"A lot of volunteers strengthen their skills or develop new skills that they hadn't had in their area before," Crosby says.

Volunteering falls into two categories: "volountouring", which is run by commercial organisations who charge for the experience; and others such as AVI, which pay airfares and a living allowance.

US-based Lonely Planet author John Vlahides says people's desire to make travel more meaningful is growing as the global economy collapses.

"Things we thought were so concrete seem to be a little more like jelly, but... the human spirit is not. It's indomitable, and that's what we have to feed," Vlahides says.

But making a holiday more meaningful doesn't mean abandoning hedonistic pursuits. It may just be about taking a slightly different approach.

Wine lovers, instead of just going on holiday and drinking, could time their break to coincide with a wine-makers' dinner, Vlahides says, where they could learn about food, wine and its manufacture.

STA Travel product and marketing director Basil Hyman says the trend is for young Australians to travel to Asia and South America, where a much lower cost of living and the draw of work, learning and volunteer programs has made such developing countries more attractive.

Gap Adventures has voluntouring packages — a tour and a stint at volunteering.

"So it's a combination — you're doing something really worthwhile and seeing different destinations," Hyman says.

Projects Abroad Australia director Will Pashley says the global trend is towards volunteering after being made redundant.

"One key thing is you meet local people who aren't paid to be nice to you... it gives you a totally different insight into the country."

Here are some ideas of how to make your next holiday more poignant:

» Swim, Fiji

There are few better ways to get through a Victorian winter and be motivated to stay fit than knowing a swim and holiday in sunny Fiji is the light at the end of the tunnel.

Swim alongside Olympic greats Murray Rose and Shane Gould in the Fiji Swims next month.

Fiji Swims, started by Australian David Handley in 2004, includes three different events from August 13-15.

The 18km relay swim from Denarau Island to Beachcomber Island, which passes tropical coral atolls, can be done as



Simple beauty: (above) open up your mind with a School of Life program.

Tasty: (left) there are many cooking classes to choose from in Thailand.

Pilgrimage: (right) the ancient city of Fez, Morocco. Picture: AFP

teams of five, duo or solo. One-kilometre and 2.7km events are also offered.

Accommodation discounts are offered to swimmers at Treasure Island Resort, the Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa, and the Tanoa International, through codes on the swim's website.

more > www.fijiswims.com

» Conservation, Peru

Projects Abroad Australia is one of several commercial organisations offering a smorgasbord of volunteering opportunities, at a price.

One of its more exciting opportunities is conservation work in the Amazon rainforest in Peru.

"We run exotic pet trade rehabilitation and release programs, and we have an experimental farm there which we work with local farmers to try to produce sustainable cash crops for them," director Will Pashley says.

"We demonstrate and pioneer a few ecotourism techniques there as well. So it's a real mix of scientific and physical work."

It's in the middle of the Amazon rainforest and is remote, two hours from the nearest town in a boat up an Amazon tributary.

The cost is \$2995 for two weeks, \$3695 for a month, \$5695 for three months and \$1545 for each month thereafter.

The cost covers food, accommodation, transfers to and from the airport, travel and medical insurance, and support.

more > www.projects-abroad.com.au

» Volunteer work, Africa

Australian Volunteers International is recruiting for a range of roles in the Middle East, Africa, the Pacific and Asia.

The not-for-profit organisation offers volunteers three-month to two-year stints and pays return airfares, a living allowance, health and travel insurance, and helps with accommodation and on-the-ground support.

Communications manager Christine Crosby says they are now recruiting for education roles in several African countries.

This includes training local primary teachers in various methods and building up their ability to deliver the curriculum.

"So rather than putting them in a situation where the volunteer is the teacher, they're training teachers in the ability to improve their classroom delivery and teaching abilities," Crosby says.

Applicants need to be qualified and experienced primary school teachers for this one to two-year assignment.

A broader range of roles from the legal sector to community development and vocational training are expected to be available from July 25.

more > www.australianvolunteers.com

» Learn a language, Italy

There may be a language you've always wanted to learn, or perfect the one you laboured at in high school.

If it's learning a language from scratch, Lonely Planet's John Vlahides recommends first mastering the basics through a course in your home town.

Then go to a small town in a country in which your chosen language is spoken, and where few speak English, so you're immersed in it.

If it's Italian, spend a month or three in Sardinia. If it's French, go anywhere in France, because that's the language they prefer you to speak.

» The big picture, Morocco

There's no better way to learn your place in time than by going somewhere still steeped in ancient traditions.

The 1200-year-old walled medina of the city of Fez is believed to be the world's largest car-free urban area — and is home to the world's oldest operating university. Vlahides says a visitor can endlessly

wander the twisting alleys of the Islamic city, losing themselves in a bygone era.

Locals still make crafts by hand in the streets, just as they did in medieval times.

"It had great meaning afterwards to me because it made me realise I live in a very specific time and place, and the world has not always been like this," Vlahides says.

» Cooking, Thailand

Thailand's cuisine is hard to beat in the delicious and easy-to-make stakes.

A cooking course can last hours or days. There are plenty to choose from, be it in the northern town of Chiang Mai, the capital Bangkok or Phuket in the south. Some are in private homes, others are run by chefs in top hotels.

Typically, they will include a market tour where ingredients are identified and you prepare several dishes before leaving with a recipe book.

Skip breakfast on the day of your course because there's so much eating to do. Courses are recommended in good guide books.

more > <http://www.thailand.net.au/activities/cooking.php>

» School of Life, England

Experience one of the quirky London-based School of Life's holidays, sermons or a meal.

Its holidays, designed to open people's eyes to the ordinary and find beauty in the everyday, have included a guided tour by best-selling author Alain de Botton with Heathrow Airport the destination.

School director Sophie Howarth says instead of shutting down your mind, these holidays are about opening it up.

Events include Holiday Inside Your Head, Philosophy by Bicycle, A Sky Weekend, Photographing London and A Voyage in Epicurus. The cost is from \$150.

The school was set up by academics, artists and writers.

more > www.theschooloflife.com

» A pilgrimage, France

More than 100,000 young people from around the world make pilgrimages to Taize each year for prayer, Bible study and communal work.

The ecumenical Christian monastic order at Saone-et-Loire in Burgundy was started by Brother Roger in the 1940s.

Vlahides says Taize is famous for its music, which is used in prayer, meditation and worship.

"You can also do a silent retreat — it's cheap, and there's plenty of dormitory accommodation," he says.

more > www.taize.fr

