

Senior Times



Hope from Horses

THERAPY FOR RIDERS AND VOLUNTEERS

MARCH 2014 seniortimesmagazine.com

INSIDE

GLOBAL VILLAGES

Habitat for Humanity in Portugal

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Hippodrome's Observership Program

PAID
U.S. Postage
Permit #827
Gainesville, FL
PSRST STD

Global Villages

Volunteering in Portugal for Habitat for Humanity

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY CLIFF TERRY & PAT TERRY

Over the years, my wife, Pat, and I have traveled extensively for pleasure, for volunteer projects, or a combination of both. But we'd never been to Portugal — until I spotted a Habitat for Humanity home-building trip north of its capital, Lisbon, and signed us up. The nonprofit organization, whose motto is “Everyone deserves a decent place to live,” offered a chance to combine two of our passions: travel and volunteering.

It was our third Habitat venture, following Chile and Vietnam. The Portugal locale was Braga, the country's third largest city, in the north near Porto. This time out, I learned to sift sand and clay, and mix and schlep buckets of concrete to folks like Pat, who were spreading it on the interior walls of a house. She also had great fun throwing wet clay mixtures on the exterior walls, finding a softball overhand and tennis sidearm much more therapeutic than repeating the concrete spreading motions with her carpal tunnel-afflicted wrist.

Our team, led by Bob from Montana and, ah, Biff (luckily, he really wasn't a “Biff” at all) from Pennsylvania, was truly international. In addition to eight Americans, there were four Canadians, two Germans and an Italian. Ages ranged from those in their 20s to those in their, ahem, 70s. Perhaps surprisingly, we all got along splendidly. We lunched in

Cliff Terry and Canadian volunteer (British Columbia) Cathy Felck take one of several much-needed breaks from shoveling concrete into a wheelbarrow. Just add water — to the concrete and the volunteers!





nearby restaurants and for dinner we moved from one excellent (and inexpensive) eatery to another. Our leaders also treated us to an excellent football (soccer) match.

Such Habitat pleasures are usual. On a two-week Habitat build in Chile, our R&R weekend included meals and wine pairings at two wineries, a tour of famed poet Pablo Neruda's home on Isla Negra and a visit to the ski resort of Portillo, high in the Andes Mountains bordering Argentina. Our getaway weekend in Vietnam took us by high-speed ferryboat to Phu Quoc, a little-known resort island in the South China Sea near Cambodia.

Since we hadn't visited Portugal before, we first explored a few towns by train en route to Braga. Our itinerary included bustling Lisbon; charming, castle-filled Sintra; the university town of Coimbra; and the Atlantic Ocean port of Porto. Pat, who can handle Spanish quite well, picked up a little bit of Portuguese but as usual, didn't understand the replies all that well. However, in addition to being extremely friendly, the people, everywhere, were tolerant of the Chicago attempts.

A few years ago, I wrote a story for the Chicago Tribune's travel section on volunteering. The editor insisted

Habitat trips, as do other volunteer "vacation" opportunities, attract a wide mix of ages and — often — nationalities. Dana Shin, who reviews patents for originality, and Roy Catalano, who also volunteers as a guide in Alaska, checks out an old board for nails, before reusing it again.

he didn't want a "goody two-shoes" piece, so the article included our efforts helping scientists conduct research in the remote, beautifully lush Pantanal in western Brazil. Which meant that all kinds of thrilling adventures were waiting. "Watch out you don't step on a pit viper," one scientist quickly warned. "Those snakes like to hang out around the fazenda (ranch house)."

A few days later, some of us took a break to wade in cooling river waters. "Don't go too far," the same woman advised. "That's where the piranhas like to be."

During our stay there, Pat's water-monitoring swim into a black water lake attracted the attention of one curious caiman (a small alligator relative), and I helped lift a tranquilized pecary (wild pig) onto a scale, hoping it wouldn't wake up.

Numerous stories have been written in newspapers and magazines about the increase in volunteerism. Most of the articles, though, focus on what one magazine headlined "Do-Gooder Tourism." But volunteerism isn't all halos and hosannas. Just ask the 30-something volunteer who, during a Habitat project in Chile, was whacked on the head by a hammer-wielding 2-year-old. Or the Philadelphia church group that flew into San Pedro Sula, Honduras, boarded a bus and was promptly robbed by local thugs. (When the perps left, the Americans got off the bus and took the next flight back to Philly.)

However, the rewards far outweigh the risks of volunteer travel. On the final day of our Chile work, we all gathered at one finished house where the owner choked up (as we did) in thanking us for our help.



ABOVE: Cliff and Pat Terry wear the requisite hardhats while mixing concrete in a wheelbarrow outside a home Habitat was completing. The homeowner's husband had died suddenly several years earlier, leaving her to raise three young sons in a concrete-walled cellar with no toilet hook-up.

TOP RIGHT: Lynne Cortes sifts out the fine sand, leaving small rocks and gravel, in preparation for other team members who will mix batches of concrete by hand while her project partner, Cliff Terry, takes a photo breather. (Volunteers switch jobs a lot, according to ability.)

BOTTOM RIGHT: First-time Habitat volunteers look a bit apprehensive as they check into their small, but comfortable hotel in Porto before the home-building project began. Far left, Guido Huter from Germany, who'd never done anything like this before but had looked on the Internet and decided to "change his life." (After the build, he took a temporary job in Finland, met a lovely young woman and DID change his life.) Just ahead of him, Mike and Lynne Cortes from Colorado probably deserved a "most fit volunteers" prize with their backpacks and incredible stamina.

"My expectations were that the Chile trip would be a good experience, but it FAR exceeded my expectations in every way," said a 48-year-old business system's analyst from Valley Stream, NY. "I mean, you kind of lose sight of the value it means to these people. They're so appreciative. It just validates what we're doing, making a difference. When that home owner thanked us, it was very touching."

"One thing we always tell people is that these are not 'missionary' trips," declared a 64-year-old retired teacher from Vermillion, SD, during the Chilean excursion. "We're not out to convert anyone."

Volunteering doesn't always come cheap. In Portugal, for instance, we donated \$1,680 apiece. The trip covered such expenses in Braga (the build site) as meals, lodging and transportation. Airfare is on your own. However, not only is it a great travel experience, but also as a volunteer, you can write off a good portion of your trip. The rewards — getting back, as well as "giving back" — are great, even though participants realize they aren't about to dramatically change the world in two weeks.

Habitat is not a giveaway program. The low-income families help in con-

struction through their "sweat equity," lowering the cost as they eventually repay their no-profit Habitat mortgages. Their house payments are placed into a revolving fund used to build more houses. Construction experience of our volunteer teams varied widely, from Mr. and Ms. Handypersons to those who didn't know a chalk line from a pick-up line. We quickly learned basic skills, such as driving home four-inch nails (much harder than hammering two-inch jobs). We took instruction from a local, skilled person who served as a sort of a foreman.

There's usually good humor and self-deprecation all around. Some first-timers are apprehensive.

"The thing I was scared of in Chile was actually building the houses," admitted a 23-year-old who worked in the biotech practice of a Vancouver accounting firm. "In the interview I was asked if I had specific building skills, and I'm

"One thing we always tell people is that these are not 'missionary' trips. We're not out to convert anyone."

like, 'No. No.' But I feel I've learned a lot. Like, hammering might go really slow at first, but then you get into it. My biggest goal was not to hurt anyone else!"

And a 40-year-old divorced mother of two from Kirkland, Washington, had a different concern: "I was afraid I wouldn't have enough underwear to last."

Looking back, it's been the total experience that remains most firmly in memory. In Chile, one volunteer was handed a letter from an 11-year-old girl which read, in part, "I always thought that angels were only in heaven, but when you came to build with concrete my mother's dream, I realized that they also exist on earth."

In Honduras, a taxi driver asked what

we were doing there and when he found out, said, with tears in his eyes, "Thank you for helping my people" — which, of course, brought tears to our eyes.

At the housing complex in Honduras, a social worker summed it up: "I believe we are planting many seeds from which we will reap much fruit. One of the things is to look around and see the people so happy, so joyous and so committed to helping one another. Maybe this is what is being taught out here, this is what we are learning — to be more human, to feel the needs of others more closely and to serve them. This desire to serve came up in many people after Hurricane Mitch. Maybe the suffering has brought this gift to us." ■

Windows

Direct to You!

ENERGY EFFICIENT REPLACEMENT WINDOWS

Fairbanks CONSTRUCTION

Built in Florida, for Florida Homes, By Florida workers. Financing Available (W.A.C) Easy terms & Low monthly payments to fit your budget.

FREE INSTALLATION

Minimum of \$3000 installed to qualify for FREE INSTALLATION. No other discounts applied. Must mention offer on initial presentation. Offer expires 4/10/14

352-732-8600
FairbanksConstruction.com

The Highest Efficiency Rating Available with These Windows