

Do-better tourism

On a volunteer vacation, you have to take the tarantulas with the rewards

By Cliff Terry



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By Cliff Terry | Special to the Tribune

Ever gotten into a lake with a dozen catfishes (collateral relatives? Labeled a transplanted species (wild pig) onto a scale, buying it wouldn't work?) flipped the dead tarantulas. My wife, Pat, and I had to believe we were on a volunteer project two years ago to help scientists conduct research in the remote, beautiful Pantanal in western Brazil. What they didn't tell us going in was that kinds of adventures were waiting. "What if you don't step on a pit viper?" our scientist quickly warned. "They like to hang out around the tarantulas' trash house."

A few days later, some of us took a break to walk in the woods. "That's the best place to go," our scientist said. "There's a lot of tarantulas there." A few days later, some of us took a break to walk in the woods. "That's the best place to go," our scientist said. "There's a lot of tarantulas there."



A SCENE BONUS: Most volunteer vacations have time set aside for sightseeing. In Chile, Volcanso was one of the highlights.

Eagle season: The return of the real snowbirds
By Dennis McCann
MINNAPOLIS, Minn. — As my winter bird-watching season begins, I find myself looking for the return of the real snowbirds. The birds are back, but the snowbirds are not. The birds are back, but the snowbirds are not. The birds are back, but the snowbirds are not.

MISSISSIPPI FISHING: A bald eagle makes a catch near Lake and Dam No. 11 in Dubuque, Iowa, last winter.

GEOQUIZ: Origami, the art of folding paper into objects, is a cultural tradition of which Asian country? **ANS:** Japan.

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A chance to help—with some time left for play

Volunteer: It's not all seashells and balloons, but there are rewards



MASSACHUSETTS: Volunteers help with research on wild parrots in Brazil's Pantanal.

UP IN COAST: Bunking back with "Tent" and "Tent" to help build a house for a resident in the Dominican Republic.

THE volunteer work was a mix of hard and fun. The hard part was the research, but the fun part was the play. The volunteer work was a mix of hard and fun. The hard part was the research, but the fun part was the play.

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ICASABLANCA, Chile—Ever gotten into a lake with a dozen caimans (alligator relatives)? Lifted a tranquilized peccary (wild pig) onto a scale, hoping it wouldn't wake up? Flipped fist-sized tarantulas out of a trash container?

My wife, Pat, and I hadn't — before we arrived for a volunteer project two years ago to help scientists conduct research in the remote, beautifully lush Pantanal in western Brazil. What they didn't tell us going in was that all kinds of adventures were waiting. "Watch out you don't step on a pit viper," one scientist quickly warned. "They 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 person advised. "That's where the piranhas like to be."

Numerous stories have been written in newspapers and magazines about the increase in volunteerism. Most of the articles, though, are of what one editor calls the "goody-two-shoes" variety, and which one magazine headlined "Do-Gooder Tourism." But few have touched on the less rewarding elements that pop up now and again. Despite those perky stories, volunteerism isn't all halos and hosannas. Just ask the volunteer who, during a Global Village Habitat for Humanity International work project in Chile this

fall, was momentarily stunned when whacked on the head by a hammer-wielding 2-year-old.

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

On another volunteer excursion, early 2002, we arrived in Honduras with our two young-adult sons to help build homes with Episcopal Relief and Development for the victims of Hurricane Mitch that had devastated Central America. We discovered that a month earlier, a Philadelphia church group arrived at the same airport in San Pedro Sula, boarded a bus and were promptly robbed at gunpoint by local thugs. When the perps left, the Americans got off the bus, and took the next flight back to Philly. Later, the work project driver told us he'd recently had a van taken from him, also at gunpoint.

However, if volunteering isn't all seashells and balloons, it also isn't all gloom and doom. On the final day of our Chile work, we all gathered at one finished house, where the owner was presented with Habitat's traditional house key and Bible and choked up (as we did) in thanking us for our help.

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.

“My expectations were that the Chile trip would be a good experience, but it FAR exceeded my expectations in every way,” said Lou Piezzo, 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.”

The two-week Chile project involved building wooden homes from scratch, or finishing ones that had been started by other groups, in Casablanca, in the heart of wine-growing country, an hour

west of Santiago, the capital. Our work trip fee was \$1,520 per person, which included a donation to the building program, food lodging and even four days of sightseeing expenditures. (Airfare is on your own.)

The low-income families help in construction through their “sweat equity,” lowering the cost as they eventually repay their no-profit Habitat mortgages. We started work on three new houses, finished one home a previous group from Ireland had begun and built an extension of an existing home. The houses consisted of two rooms totaling about 240-square-feet, with no running water, bathroom or kitchen plumbing, but with electrical conduits. (Residents used facilities in an existing house, or an outhouse.) With three generations living under one roof, the obvious need was more space to alleviate overcrowding. (One family of 14 included 10 children, six of them adopted.)



Photo by Pat Terry

TERRY WRITERS

We were split into four teams to dig foundations, mix “el concreto,” build wooden trusses and rafters and install siding, wallboard and insulation. Construction experience varied widely, from semi-professionals to those who hadn’t known 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). Picking up words like “la huincha” (tape measure), we took instruction from our local, skilled “maestro” (sort of a foreman), and there was a lot of waiting around for materials such as nails and bags of cement to be delivered. (We also learned, quickly, to go with the local flow—a difficult task especially for the Type A’s among us.)

Our own accommodations were four cabañas (cabins), where we ate breakfast and dinner. We were led by a retired government worker from Washington state and a high school Spanish and Japanese teacher from New Zealand. Phone interviews were held, presumably to screen out any dilettantes and also to ascertain a demographic mix. As it turned out, our group—11 women, 9 men—ranged from a 20-year-old member of the New Zealand Air Force to a 75-year-old retired obstetrician-gynecologist. Some spoke Spanish. Hometowns included London, Vancouver, Singapore and scattered U.S. cities. Some of us were on our first Habitat trip, and one was chalking up his seventh. There was good humor and self-deprecation all around, with plenty of wine and beer drinking at day’s end. (We’re not sure Jimmy Carter would approve, but his brother Billy certainly would have.)

When it comes to volunteering, many people are apprehensive, as were some first-timers on the Habitat trip. “The thing I was scared of was actually building the houses,” admitted Julia Li, 23, who works in the biotech practice of a Vancouver accounting firm. “I’m a city girl who didn’t know anything about carpentry. In the interview I was asked if I spoke Spanish and had specific building skills, and I’m 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 is not to hurt anyone else!”

Frankie Allen, 40, a divorced mother of two from Kirkland, Washington, had different concerns: “I don’t speak Spanish, so that was a worry. Also, I didn’t know how it would be living in close quarters with so many people. And, I was afraid I wouldn’t have enough underwear to last!”

Photo by Pat Terry





Photo by Pat Terry

Inevitably, there was some grousing. One woman complained she was disappointed that she wasn't more involved in the build, and that one member of her team dominated too much. "Everyone had their own reason for coming here, and there's no RIGHT reason," said Dana Martinez, 29, of Live Oak, Texas, who works in call centers management for Sprint in the Philippines. "But you just can't just do it on a whim, like it's going to be peaches and cream. You can't get picky about things that you would get picky about back home. There was a lot of waiting around, which was frustrating. And by the second week, personality differences started to come out. But that's just being human."

Piezzo agreed. "Things like the safety conditions could always be better, but you kind of expected that coming into it. You just have to leave your 'Americanism' at home. And if you do that, keep your mind open to meeting new people, experiencing something new, you're going to get SO much out of it. Obviously, I'd do it again."

On our volunteer work in El Octotillo, Honduras, we were driven past makeshift shacks on a riverbank, past garbage strewn along the roads. Our sons were visibly affected by the poverty. "I've been in Latvia and Lithuania," one remarked. "Those are SECOND-world countries."

Our assignment was to clean off forms used to make hand-made cinder blocks. The work wasn't especially taxing, and best of all, we could do it in the shade. Later in the week, however, they asked us to dig trenches for water pipes; our picks were incredibly dull, and the ground—incredibly hard and dry—refused to budge.

Two years earlier, Pat and I worked on the same site, sawing, shoveling sand and tamping dirt. We were helping finish a cluster of nine houses made of cinderblocks—a project launched by the Episcopal Diocese of Honduras and the Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief in partnership with Habitat for Humanity. The Fund purchased 100 plots of land (each about 700 square feet) for the construction of four-room homes with electricity and indoor plumbing. The homeowners pay about \$27 a month for 10 years.

We were housed in an American-chain motel, where fellow guests, evangelist missionaries, would discuss how many "conversions" they had made. ("I got two in the Dunkin' Donuts last night," one claimed.)

In Brazil, we volunteered for 12 days with Earthwatch Institute, helping its scientists collect data on such animals as frogs, snakes and peccaries to gain a better understanding of this highly threat-

ened area. The other six volunteers were from places like Buenos Aires, England and Malta. It was early April, the tail end of the rainy season and our base was the Fazenda Rio Negro, a lovely, sprawling, 20,000-acre onetime cattle ranch where pantaneiros (cowboys) still tend to cattle and horses, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul.

The scientists were an impressive lot, if occasionally a bit testy as they shepherded their volunteer amateurs. One of them researched the white-lipped and collared peccaries and feral pigs, scoping out population numbers and the animals' response to seasonal fluctuation. (Previously, I had read a book review which mentioned "the fearsome white-lipped peccary" that, with its "flat, scissorlike canines, administer death by slicing.")

One of our assignments, setting peccary traps, eventually netted five animals. Our job was to help lift the anesthetized animals onto a makeshift scale—hoping, of course, that they didn't awake. The animals were fitted with tiny computer chips before their release. On another project, Pat took water temperatures standing neck-deep in a lake, when several caiman jumped in (but, fortunately, stayed in their own space).

Mostly, though, we targeted frogs. Most thumb-nail-sized, they bounced off plastic fences and fell into deep plastic buckets. But not only frogs landed in the buckets. One of my chores, using BBQ-length tongs, was to take out tarantulas and

toss them into the brush—as far as possible. Pat's team had the misfortune to be on duty the day after a heavy rainfall, so there were many more frogs than usual—which meant long hours in the lab, tediously weighing and measuring them and recording the data.

The weather was brutally hot, but the work was rewarding (and, obviously, often exciting!) as we began to see how various living things are in some way related to the survival of each in this fragile, magical place.

Despite wild pigs, bus hold-ups and hammer-toting toddlers, there are all sorts of serendipitous rewards through volunteering. Some were out there in nature, from magnificent jabiru storks and beautiful hyacinth macaws in Brazil to the snow-covered mountains looming behind a football (soccer) stadium in Santiago.

But it was the work projects that remain 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.



Photo by Pat Terry

And, at the housing complex in Honduras, social worker Rosa de Blanco, 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.”

Cliff Terry is a Chicago freelancer, and former Tribune writer and critic.