



Heard recently from a friend: "Community service trip? You telling me to sign up for a vacation that isn't a vacation, but just a tough job helping other people? I've worked hard this year and deserve to get away for relaxation."

"Doggone it! I'm entitled to bask at the shore, toss dice in Vegas, sip vino in Tuscany or dine at an outdoor Paris cafe. Who knows? With the economy the way it is, maybe it'll be my last chance for years to enjoy a vacation."

If that's the way you feel about signing up for a community service trip, maybe you're not really familiar with them. Actually, all you have to do is make a slight change in one of your future travel plans. You can do something as enjoyable and satisfying as a fun vacation, while at the same time earn the great satisfaction of knowing you're doing something of meaningful service to others.

Remember what John F. Kennedy said many years ago? "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country". If you truly believe in that theme, would it be so bad to give up some of your vacation time, labor and skills where they're needed? In some cases, desperately needed?

In America and other parts of the world, there are community service projects you may find appealing and challenging. They could include repairing homes in poverty areas, disaster clean-up, archaeology digs, teaching, nursing, ecology, protecting endangered species and hundreds of other projects where your enthusiasm and skills are needed, and you can make it worth spending your free time helping others.

In some, living expenses are provided; in others, volunteers may be required to pay a token fee or full charges. While most of the projects accept both young and senior volunteers, some are geared specifically to the physical limits of participating volunteers. For instance, many older volunteers wouldn't be comfortable climbing and hammering on Habitat for Humanity home-rebuilding projects. However, they'd be physically able to contribute their experience and wisdom for accompanying a class of inner-city pre-schoolers to the city zoo.

How do you sign up for volunteer vacations? Check the many sites on the internet, and additionally, find out if your church, synagogue or professional organization is planning a project that fits in with your schedule.

Contact local branches of familiar community agencies, such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army, and investigate their ongoing projects geared for vacationer time slots. Government agencies, such as the Department of the Interior, Army Corps of Engineers and individual national and state parks welcome volunteers for summer terms of service in some of the most beautiful areas of the country.

Many private, non-profit organizations offer volunteer vacations that range from just a few days on a specific task, to weeks and months on long-term projects. An example is Earthwatch (Earthwatch Institute, 3 Clock Tower Place, P.O. Box 75, Maynard, MA 01754-0075; (800) 776-0081, www.earthwatch.org)

This worldwide volunteer enterprise has more than a hundred individual projects in 18 U.S. states and 44 countries. Some of its activities include archaeological digs, improving world health, preserving rare animal habitats and protecting oceans and open land from pollution.

Another is Global Volunteers (Global Volunteers, 375 E. Little Canada Road, St. Paul, MN 55117-1628; (800) 487-1074, www.globalvolunteers.org) This non-profit organization also offers more than a hundred programs throughout the world, involving volunteer service at schools in impoverished neighborhoods, as well as help in medical and social services in areas where it is poor or non-existent.

Whatever your choice in making your next vacation a volunteer one, you can be sure you'll return home with pride and satisfaction that you've done something meaningful to help others.