



# guide to volunteering abroad

**N**owadays there are an ever-increasing number of organisations which place volunteers abroad. Many of these run safe, well-researched and worthwhile projects, but it is important to look out for any volunteering organisations that are in the business for the wrong reasons. This document has been written to try and help you choose the right volunteering organisation to go with and prepare yourself for your volunteer project. Volunteering overseas can be an extremely rewarding experience, but is not something that should be entered into lightly. Below are some of the things you need to think about before parting with any money.



## Why Volunteer and Who Volunteers?

Different people volunteer abroad for any number of different reasons. Indeed, people from all ages, nationalities and walks of life approach us to help them find the volunteer experience which is right for them. Here are some examples of some of our volunteers:

1. A school leaver looking to take a gap year before university
2. A university graduate looking to take a gap year before beginning his or her career
3. A university student on summer holiday looking for relevant work experience (for example, to join a teaching project for their education degree or to join a wildlife research project for their zoology or biology degree)
4. A staff member on long-term sabbatical leave from their company (these can often be company funded)
5. A person seeking a career break in their 20's to 50's, who is fed up with sitting behind a desk and wants to do something a bit different for a few weeks / months
6. A career changer – perhaps someone who has been a lawyer for 15 years but really wants to be a marine biologist!
7. A retiree – someone who has finished work and decided that they want to put their skills to good use on a volunteer programme
8. Vacationers wanting to make a difference. Even at short notice with only a week or two, it is more than possible!
9. Families are increasingly finding volunteering to be an incredibly rewarding and bonding experience.



## What Type of Programme is Right for You?

When searching for an overseas volunteer programme you will find that there is a huge amount on offer, making choosing the right one for you seem a bit daunting. A good place to start is to ask yourself the following questions:

**Where do you want to go?** Have a think about what part of the world you want to volunteer in. Do you want to go to an English-speaking country or a country where you will need to learn a new language? Is there a particular country or continent which you have always wanted to go to? Also make sure you research your chosen country – have a look at the government's travel advice, the climate for the time that you are going and the political situation. Buying a guidebook to the region will give you lots of information about the place you are going.

**What do you want to do?** There are all sorts of things that you can do to get involved in volunteering, ranging from wildlife conservation projects to research expeditions, teaching programmes and community development projects. Work out what your strengths are and where your interests lie. All good volunteering programmes will offer you some training, so even if you do not have any previous experience you will still be able to make a big difference.

**How long do you want to go for?** Volunteer programmes are on offer from one week to two years. Some organisations specialise in offering shorter term programmes and others have more of a variety. It goes without saying that the longer you go for, the more of an impact you will have on the environment or community that you are working in. Yet do not despair if you only have a fortnight to spare as you can get lots done in two hard working weeks!

**Do you want to be on your own or with a group?** Again, think about what you want to gain from your volunteer programme. You may feel that you have had enough of being around people and want some solitude or you might be using this volunteer programme as an opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. All the options are out there, and programmes range from being more individualised and small group projects to programmes requiring larger teams of volunteers.

**Work out your budget** Most volunteer organisations will ask you to pay for your own expenses, which will include flights, insurance, vaccinations, and your food and accommodation while on the project. Think about what you can afford to spend, especially if you are planning on travelling afterwards. How much you will need on a weekly basis will very much depend on where you go in the world as well – if you are on a strict budget, find out which countries have lower living costs so you can make the most for your money!





## Short Term Volunteering

Nowadays many people choose to use their holiday time from work to volunteer. There is no doubt that you can do a lot in a two week period, but we would advise you to look carefully at the volunteering programme and what it entails so that you can be sure that your presence will benefit the programme you are working on. If too much training is needed in order for you to be able to fulfil your volunteer duties then by the time you are able to work usefully and efficiently it will be time to go home again!

Yet please note: when you join programmes which require minimal training and have a staff team on-site to help you get settled in quickly, even in two weeks you can achieve lots!

GVI offers a number of short term volunteering opportunities. However, on projects which require intensive training and where community involvement is high, we impose a four-week minimum duration so that the local community is not affected by the continual movement of volunteers.



## Learning Skills while Volunteering

Some volunteering programmes offer individuals the chance to gain competence, qualifications and practical experience in a range of specific areas, such as conservation, education and outdoor skills, while at the same time benefiting a local environment or community. Learning new skills in this way gives you the chance to enhance your experience, test out a possible career change or just add another notch to your belt! There really is nothing quite like learning 'on the job'. Therefore you might want to do a TEFL course and then spend a month or two teaching, do a SCUBA diving course and help monitor the state of the coral reefs, or perhaps take a language class and get out into a local community. All of these options are available with a range of different volunteer organisations.

## Responsible Travel

Responsible travel is a big 'buzz phrase' at the moment, which refers to travel that minimises the traveller's impact on the places they visit and maximises their positive connection to the people and environment. It is about respecting the environments and cultures that you travel to and supporting the local communities and economies, as opposed to supporting the very limited amount of people that mass tourism benefits.

All travel and tour operators should be able to show that they behave responsibly and are economically, environmentally and socially responsible.



## Examples of economic responsibility:

- Ensuring that a fair proportion of the money received goes straight to the community or programme you are visiting
- Some tour operators, travel companies and volunteering organisations set up charities to support projects independently
- Buying local produce and supporting the local economy
- Utilising local suppliers and businesses to ensure that local communities are benefiting from your presence.

## Examples of environmental responsibility:

- Ensuring the sustainability of the programme that is being run
- Running the programme in a sustainable manner – i.e. reusing rainwater, using solar power to produce electricity, recycling and composting
- Using all natural resources in a sustainable manner
- Sharing good environmental practices with the local communities
- Ensuring that any data collected, methodologies and research rights all stay in-country
- Using good practices in the organisation offices – i.e. recycling all paper and packaging, producing promotional materials from sustainable sources of paper and encouraging the minimal use of transport wherever possible
- Offsetting the carbon emissions of all staff
- Offering participants the chance to offset their own carbon emissions produced from their travels.

## Examples of social responsibility:

- Ensuring that the programmes will benefit the local communities
- Ensuring that participants are well-prepared for their experience, so that they are culturally sensitive and respectful of local ways of life when on the programme
- Employing host country personnel on the programmes
- Assisting in the education and training of local communities in the host country, either through adult and children's language classes, environmental education or sustainable tourism projects.



## Why Pay to Volunteer?

Paying to volunteer is becoming increasingly common. Indeed, more and more people from all over the world are realising that it is an effective way of donating their time and money to NGO's, charities and small organisations overseas that need support. It gives you, the volunteer, a chance to live and work in a totally new environment, learn a new language and new skills, meet like-minded people and fully immerse yourself in the culture of a new country. It also provides the NGO's, charities and small organisations with the chance to survive well into the future.

The most important thing to remember is that without the recruiting organisation, many project partners and host country charities would be struggling to survive. The majority of organisations that GVI works with do not have the skills or the resources to promote themselves within the global marketplace. Through us they can be seen by the wider world and recognised as valuable projects which are supported by a steady stream of hard working volunteers. They also provide those same volunteers with a safe and enjoyable experience.

Costs are involved both before the programme begins and in the field. You should find out from your hosting organisation what percentage of your money is spent in the field, and ask for more detail of the cost breakdown if you are unsure where your money is going.

In order to source suitable potential volunteers, set up worthwhile projects and take the weight of the admin booking away from the host partner, it is inevitable that there will be costs involved. These costs are likely to include: staff wages, office rental and utilities, communications, office equipment, the website, print and press advertising, public relations, events (open days, trade shows, career fairs), programme research and development, health and safety training and procedures, and staff recruitment and training. Once in-country, volunteer costs are incurred in: the transport from the airport, food, accommodation, training and ongoing support, and sometimes the odd extra adventure activity!

The most important thing to check is: does the recruiting organisation cover ALL costs on behalf of the project? For example, GVI ALWAYS asks the project what they need. Many organisations tell projects how much they will give them and leave them no choice. GVI always give the projects the choice.

Projects might ask for 100 volunteers' a year and \$2,000 or 10 volunteers' a year and \$100,000. It is at the core of GVI's mission to be able to provide projects with both volunteers and funding, if that is what they need. GVI is simply the facilitator.

## Checklist of questions to ask when you approach an organisation:

Prepare yourself with some questions to ask about the project so that you can make an informed decision and can be sure that the work you are doing is going to be worthwhile for the local community or environment.

**What work will I be doing?** The website or brochure of the organisation you are going with should be able to give you a detailed description of what kind of work you are doing on the project, what sort of training you will receive and when you will get time off.

**Does the organisation work with a host country partner?** Find out if local organisations are involved in the project and always try to ensure that the project you work on is one that the host country wants and needs.

**If I join a research-based programme, what happens to the research?** Find out who the research is shared with and what it is used for to ensure that the work you do is being passed onto the right places. At GVI all research rights stay in-country – we do not claim any research as our own, rather we simply assist the host country partners in collecting the data they need and compiling it.

**How do the finances work? Does the organisation send money to the project?** You need to feel confident that the project you join is benefiting from being supplied with volunteers and is not having to spend money it cannot afford on feeding and housing those volunteers. You should also find out how your money is spent and get a general breakdown on what it is spent on the GVI website. For more information on GVI's project costs and breakdown, [please click here](#).

**Does the organisation have a policy on responsible tourism? Can they give you examples of how their work contributes to responsible tourism?** You want to be able to see some proof of how seriously the organisation in question treats their environmental and social responsibility. You can see an example of GVI's Responsible Travel Policy [by clicking here](#).

**How long has the project been running for? Is the organisation offering long-term support?** You need to feel confident that the project you join is sustainable and that the organisation you are booking through will continue to support it. GVI only takes on projects that have long-term and sustainable aims, and as long as the project continues to run smoothly, GVI will carry on supporting it for the years ahead.

**Where exactly am I going and who will I be working for?** Make sure the organisation you book through can provide you with the exact details of where you will be going, and the names and contact details of the project staff. You should ensure that you have this information before departure so you can feel confident that the project is genuine and can pass all the relevant contact details to your friends and family.

**What support and training will you receive?** You need to know that you will be fully supported by the organisation you book with. Not just in pre-departure but while you are on the project as well. It is important that you are shown a clear procedure of what to do in an emergency or if you have a problem. You also need to be sure that during the first few days or weeks on the programme you are given thorough training so that you can carry out the work safely and effectively.



### Practical points to consider before booking:

- The project length, as projects vary from short-term placements of a few weeks to longer-term projects of two years or more
- Most organisations will ask you to pay a fee for arranging the trip for you
- It is important to check whether the project provides for travel, accommodation, food and pocket money
- Some projects ask for people with particular skills or experience
- Some organisations are aimed at those of a particular religion
- Applications to do overseas voluntary work should be made well in advance.



### Emergency Response Work

When there has been an international disaster here at GVI we often get phone calls and emails from people who want to help. Although we commend such a response, GVI and our volunteers simply do not have the skills to respond to an international disaster, and we would not like to pretend otherwise. Experienced relief organisations always respond in these situations and rarely require extra staff. Relief workers are specialists in their fields, being highly qualified and having significant experience. If extra staff are taken on, it is more likely to give jobs to local people, rather than unskilled international volunteers.

### Raising the Money

More often than not you will need to raise all of your own expenses before you volunteer, which usually include your international travel, insurance, training, food, accommodation, etc. Many organisations can provide you with a fundraising pack to give you ideas of ways to raise money.

If you have the time and patience, it is best to search the web or your local library for a list of grant and fundraising options. Not all organisations offer funding to individuals, so be selective – you don't want to spend more money contacting them than you might receive in a grant!

Local contacts may work better: you could contact your local Rotary Club, Lions, etc. If there is a local paper in your town, they may do a short article about your trip and free local newspapers are also worth approaching. Often a local approach like this can be far more beneficial than approaching larger organisations. Look out for books with ideas for fundraising, whose many suggestions could include organising a party, dinner, sponsored walk or swim.

[Click here to view GVI's fundraising pack.](#)

### Checking Organisations

It is important that you check out any organisation thoroughly before handing over any money or leaving the country.

### Speak to a former volunteer

Ask if you can be put in touch with people who have been on their projects before. If possible, try to speak to someone who has volunteered in person, rather than just reading volunteer testimonials.

### Membership and regulatory bodies

Another good way of assessing an organisation is to see who they are affiliated with and what membership organisations they are a part of. For example, GVI is a member of the Adventure Travel Trade Association ([www.adventuretravel.biz](http://www.adventuretravel.biz)), WANGO (the World Association of Non-Governmental Organisations) ([www.wango.org](http://www.wango.org)), Responsible Travel ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) and NASRO (National Association of Socially Responsible Organisations), all of which have membership criteria.





## Find out what support you are going to get

Booking your volunteer programme through a reputable organisation should mean that you are fully supported both before you go and while you are on your programme. The list below highlights the minimum support you should expect to receive:

### Pre-Departure:

**1. Ex-volunteers** Ask to be put in touch with an ex-volunteer – they will be able to give you the most realistic information about the programme you are joining.

**2. Meet someone from the organisation** Any organisation should be able to give you the opportunity to meet them, whether it is in their offices or at a trade show, event, local college or university, etc. That way you (and your family) can be reassured about the credentials of the organisation.

**3. Detailed, written information about your placement** Before you go you should receive detailed information about the project you are joining, suggestions of what to take with you and when / where to arrive, etc. Make sure the organisation you book with is able to provide that.

**4. Fundraising advice and support** Ask for help with fundraising and find out if they have a fundraising pack or equivalent which will help you reach your targets and give you more ideas.

**5. Travel assistance and advice** Most placement organisers will not actually be able to arrange flights for you, but they should be able to recommend a flight provider who will offer competitive flights to suit you.

**6. Insurance services** It is absolutely crucial that you get the right type of travel and medical insurance to cover your time away from home. Many conventional travel insurance policies do not provide adequate cover for volunteering or expeditions as they often exclude any manual work or any form of hazardous activity whilst overseas. Check very carefully that your travel insurance will cover the full range of activities you will be participating in.

Ensure that your travel insurance policy specifically includes all necessary medical expenses, including emergency air ambulance charges. You are likely to be responsible for all medical and evacuation costs incurred (to later be reimbursed by the insurance company). Also ensure that you disclose any known pre-existing medical condition to insurers in order to have full cover under your policy.

**7. Equipment and kit** Many organisations have relationships with equipment providers from whom you will be able to get discounted items, so it is always worth asking!

**8. Pre-departure training recommendations / opportunities** Whether it is an evening course in Spanish, a TEFL weekend, an outdoor survival course or an online species identification test, your chosen organisation should be able to recommend pre-departure training based on the placement you are doing so that you are fully prepared when you venture into the field.

### On the Placement:

**1. Pick up from the airport / transport arrival point** Most organisations should be able to pick you up at your arrival point.

**2. Welcome and orientation session** It is important when joining a volunteer programme that you are given a full orientation to the place you are working, to provide you with information about what your working day will consist of, when you get time off, how to get to the nearest town for email, etc. Ask your provider to confirm that you will get this on your placement.

**3. On-site training** Every project is different and requires different skills. Some placements will only need a half-day training session to prepare you for the work you are doing, whereas others will require a two-week intensive session. Whatever the case, find out whether your training is included in the price and what it involves.

**4. Food and accommodation** Many placement providers include food and accommodation in the fee, yet some do not, so make sure you are clear on whether food and accommodation is included or not.

**5. In-country coordinators** If you have a problem on your project, you need to know that there is someone you can turn to for advice / support.

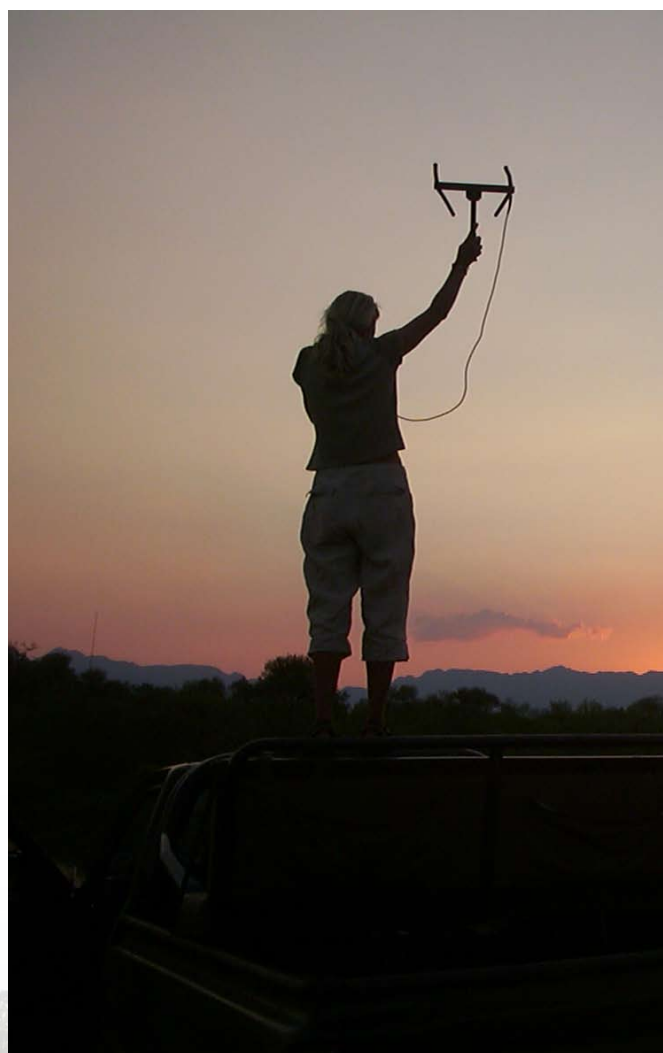
**6. 24-hour emergency phone** In case of an emergency you should be provided with a number (in wherever the placement provider is based), which you can call at any time of day or night and speak directly to a staff member who will be able to help.





## Pre-Departure Checklist

- Inform your placement provider of your flight details
- Check the latest government travel advice for the area you are going to
- Buy a guidebook for the place you are going to
- Passport:
  - Check it is valid for six months AFTER your return from the programme
  - If flying via the US, ensure that your passport is machine readable, which means that it has the bar coding on the bottom of the page! If not, you will have unnecessary problems with US immigration
  - Make sure the correct date and length of stay in the country is entered onto your entry visa or visitor permit when at immigration.
- Immunizations - keep written records of these with your passport on an International Vaccination Certificate
- Take photocopies of all important documentation – passport, credit cards, airline ticket, insurance policy, medical details, travellers' cheques, etc. You may also want to leave copies with a family member back at home
- Order and collect travellers' checks / foreign currency
- Pack clothes and equipment as per the kit list that you should be given by your placement provider (including a basic first aid kit)
- Make sure you have had a dental check-up
- Pack adequate supplies of prescription drugs (if required) which clearly indicate the required dose
- Pack spare contact lenses and / or spectacles and a copy of your optical prescription
- Arrange comprehensive belongings and medical insurance
- Think about whether you need to pack some small presents for your project hosts, homestay providers, etc.
- Inform your family and friends of mailing address
- Inform your family of emergency contact numbers
- Make arrangements to get to the airport
- Don't forget to take details of the meeting time and place with you!



## Keeping in Touch with Home

Don't forget to let everyone know how you're getting on! Nowadays it is pretty easy to keep in contact, even from some of the more remote parts of the world. Make sure you have got a reliable email account set up, and check whether your mobile phone will work in the country you are going to. It is also worth thinking about setting up a blog or an online diary so that your friends and family can see what you are up to. You can also download your photos to a website (providing you have a digital camera) so people can see proof of all the good work you are doing!

## Health and Safety on Your Volunteer Placement

Make sure that your placement provider is able to provide you with details of how they go about ensuring your safety while you are on your programme. Reputable providers should be able to show that they have strict systems and procedures for the introduction of new project partners, as well as for the day-to-day care for all participants in the field.



## Resources

### Keeping in touch while you're away:

#### Social networking sites (click links)

<http://www.facebook.com>

<http://www.myspace.com>

<http://www.bebo.com>

<http://www.goabroad.net>

#### Travel blogs (click links)

<http://www.travelblog.org/>

<http://www.travelpod.com/>

<http://www.getjealous.com/>

[http://www.lonelyplanet.com/blogs/travel\\_blog/](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/blogs/travel_blog/)

<http://www.statravelblogs.com/>

### Travel health:

GVI cannot advise you medically, but instead would suggest that you seek advice from your Doctor or a travel clinic. There are a number of websites which can provide information and advice about medical issues that may relate to your trip:

**The London Hospital of Tropical Diseases:** A world centre for tropical disease management, the London HTD also has an excellent website with information for travellers.

[www.thehtd.org](http://www.thehtd.org)

**Center for Disease Control and Prevention:** The US government provides medical advice for citizens travelling overseas.

[www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)

**Smartraveller:** The Australian Government's travel advisory and consular assistance service.

[www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au)

**Canadian Public Health Agency:** website with excellent advice for travellers.

[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv)

**The National Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC):** it is funded by the Department of Health to promote clinical standards in travel medicine.

[www.nathnac.org](http://www.nathnac.org)



### Finding volunteering work overseas:

#### Internet (click links)

- For information on relevant agencies for gap year activities visit [www.gapyear.com](http://www.gapyear.com)
- There is a guidance for young people (and their parents) on planning a gap year at <http://www.yearoutgroup.org>
- <http://www.experiencedevelopment.org/> has information for people hoping to enter the field of international development
- General information and ideas to help you get involved: [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)
- Working Abroad hosts information about organisations recruiting volunteers and has previous volunteer feedback stories
- <http://www.ethicalvolunteering.org/> will give you independent advice about how to go about choosing your volunteer placement and what to look out for
- <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/info-for-tourists/ethical-vols.html> - Tourism Concern is another independent organisation that is looking out for the needs of the local communities and wanting to ensure that international volunteers benefit the communities and countries in which they are working.





## Books

### **Ethical Travel Guide**

By Polly Pattullo

### **International Directory of Voluntary Work**

By Victoria Pybus

A thorough guide to short-term and long-term voluntary work overseas. The guide includes a section on the agencies that operate within the major global regions and provides details whether agencies provide for travel, accommodation, expenses, etc. It also explains age and skill requirements.

### **How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering**

By Joseph Collins, Stefano DeZerega, Zahara Heckscher

A comprehensive guide to international volunteerism, outlining how to choose an organisation that best fits your interests and personal needs. [www.volunteeroverseas.org](http://www.volunteeroverseas.org)

### **Volunteer: A Traveller's Guide to Making a Difference Around the World**

By Charlotte Hindle, Nate Cavaliere, Rachel Collinson

The Lonely Planet's Guide to international volunteering, organised volunteer programmes and the practicalities of volunteering. [www.lonelyplanet.com/volunteer](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/volunteer)

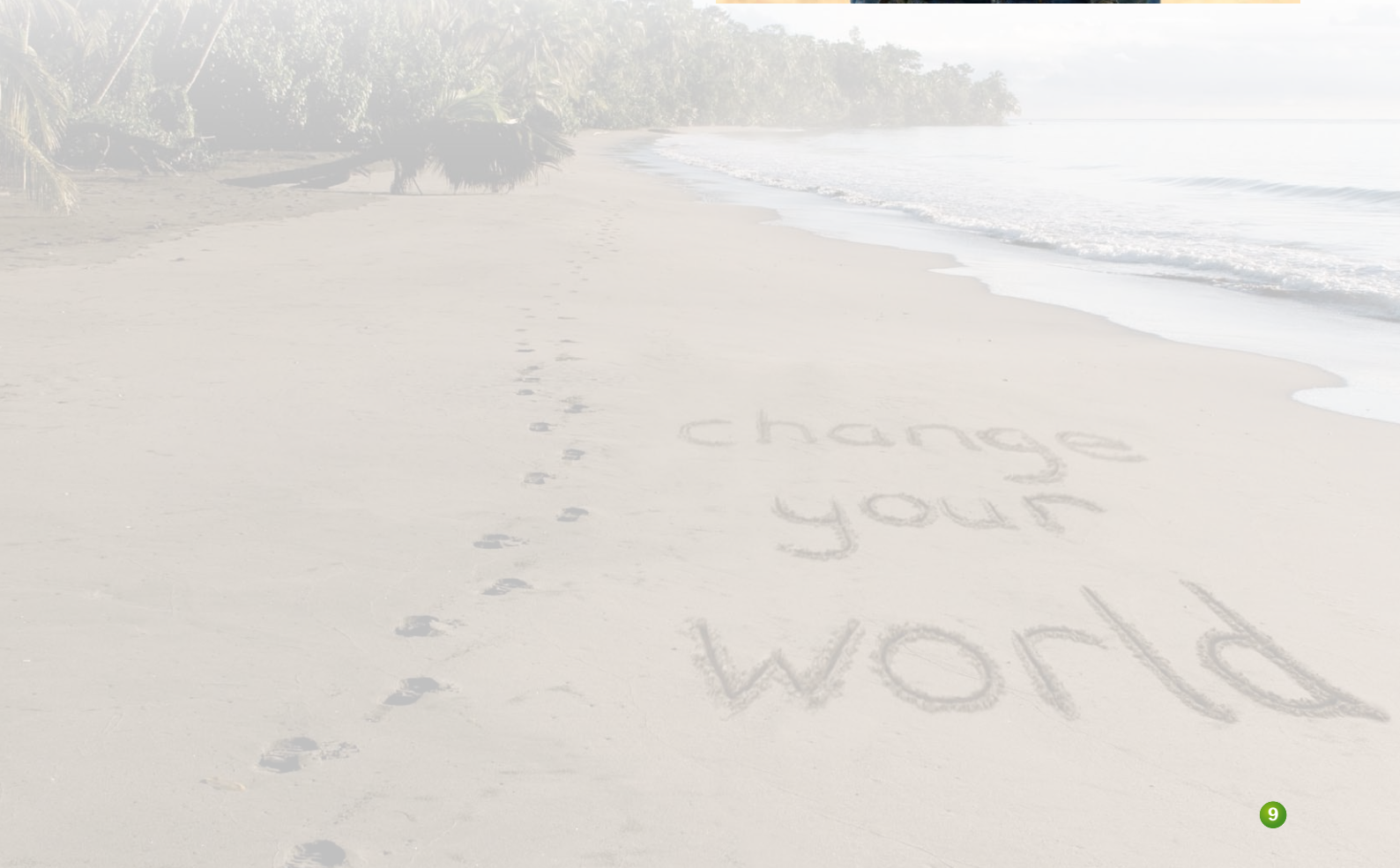
### **Worldwide Volunteering**

By Roger Potter

An A – Z directory of projects for young people in 950 organizations and over 200 countries.

### **World Volunteers**

Concentrates exclusively on opportunities for volunteers in the developing world, with contact details for over 150 organisations. [www.worldvolunteers.org](http://www.worldvolunteers.org)





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