

# Charity begins overseas

More and more people are taking the opportunity to combine travel with charitable work. But can 'voluntourism' really make a difference? BY MARIJKE TIMMERS

Combining the trip of a lifetime with the opportunity to give back has never been more popular. But with many agencies now recognising this trend, and voluntourism becoming an industry in itself, what can people do to ensure that the time and money they spend is really making a difference?

By following a few simple rules, it is possible to have the experience of a lifetime and find that those you intended to help actually leave more of a lasting impression on you than expected. Below are a few clues on how to stay street-smart when volunteering abroad...



## DO YOUR RESEARCH

Most volunteer agencies charge for the privilege of helping others. Some of your fees will go towards administration to cover your security and insurance, but most should go to the beneficiaries you're there to help. Ask about the percentage that goes to those you'll be working for and get references – volunteers are generally not afraid to give their honest opinion!

## KNOW THE LOCAL THREATS

Quiz your agency, speak to people who have been there and Google everything. Naïve Westerners are easy targets – even the homeless street kids know how to take advantage – so be informed. Know distances, landmarks and currency conversions.

## BE AN ETHICAL TRAVELLER

Avoid handing over cash, whether to directors of seemingly reputable local organisations or starving street children. While you may feel better in the short term, these are not strategies that will benefit the local people over the longer term. Corruption is rife and locals have become extremely savvy in knowing exactly what to say and how to say it to get maximum sympathy. Unfortunately it's often not true and your money won't always end up where they say it will.

If you want to provide financial support, there will no doubt be a number of organisations that are already addressing your concerns so seek them out instead. For example in Siem Reap, the tourist capital of Cambodia, thousands of street children spend their days begging around the temples and guesthouses. Handing over a dollar only serves to aid the poverty cycle and keeps children out of schools.

There are numerous organisations working to provide a better future for these same children by supporting their families if they go to school. Some such NGOs provide rice for the family every day their child attends class. While it's heartbreaking to turn your back on a hungry child, there's no doubt your dollar would be better spent supporting such organisations.

### AVOID THE TOURIST TRAPS

Think twice about engaging in some of the 'tourist' activities. Orphanages are not zoos and unfortunately, many of the ones that encourage visitors are not putting the children's best interest first. Questioning why such tourist attractions exist and for whose benefit is always a good place to start.

Cambodia, for example, has created an industry of orphanages – initially the result of the Khmer Rouge atrocities, many enterprising locals discovered the ease at which foreign aid was obtained through needy children.

The Cambodian government are introducing new standards and making it harder to register orphanages but change is slow and the activities of tourists and volunteers could make all the difference. If you want to help children

in orphanages, make sure you're working with an organisation with a local track record and one that encourages children who have families to keep that bond.

As with the street children problem, there are a number of organisations working to strengthen the family unit and help transition children from institutions back into their own communities.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Marijke Timmers is Founder and Director of Dara Children's Trust, a charitable organisation registered in Australia and New Zealand that supports underprivileged children in Cambodia.

#### ABOUT DARACHILDREN'S TRUST:

Dara Children's Trust is a small, independent charity that fundraises for and manages a children's centre called Stellar Child Care in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Our children come from homes broken by HIV, drug abuse, domestic abuse and general poverty. We aim to provide a safe environment where kids can be kids but where they also learn the importance of education and how to break the cycle of poverty.

All the money raised goes straight to the centre which is run by volunteers who have a personal interest vested in these children and in making sure that we know where every dollar of our donors' money goes.

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