

Volunteering – Who Really Benefits?

Cusco, high in the Peruvian Andes, has long been a tourist hub as the gateway to Machu Picchu. Over the last twenty years or so, the whole area has boomed as a tourist destination, thanks to breathtaking mountain scenery, Inca heritage, and perhaps most of all, the chance to observe a way of life that seems to come from another time.



Millions of Peruvians still live as subsistence farmers, raising cows, pigs, llamas and potatoes and living in stone or mud houses with no electricity or indoor plumbing. There is a living – but highly endangered – tradition of weaving in Peru’s Andean highlands. Villagers typically weave and dye their own clothes, but as synthetic cloth and dyes become cheaper than traditional alternatives, there is a danger of losing this priceless tradition, which produces some of the most beautiful and labor-intensive textiles in the world.

More and more travelers are interested in staying in these villages, learning about the way of life of the weavers. Many would also like to help local communities, and this is where issues of etiquette and ethics become complex.

Working with indigenous communities is a fine balance between giving, creating ownership and helping. We find the ancient local concept of **ayni** – ‘today for me, tomorrow for you’ helpful in our approach to communities and try to maintain this principle in our work at all times.



The idea is **not** for a group of well-intentioned tourists to come to a community and construct something, while locals look on contentedly. A couple of decades of this kind of well-intentioned charity have had an unfortunate effect on many communities in the region.

Just a couple of months ago I was in a village called Patacancha, where 20 teenagers from the UK were hard at work at peeling bark off eucalypts to build a new market... while three men from the village sat

on the hill and watched them!

Something that can be hard for first-world travelers to accept is that poor communities do not need our physical labour –they have that in abundance, and are far more skilled at it than most volunteers. What they **don't** have is money for materials, and that's what they really need from us. Realistically, buying a weaving at a price which recognizes the time and skill that have gone into it is the best way to help. Making a physical contribution like digging a well helps us (to ease our consciences) more than it helps the locals.



Travelers also like to teach classes in schools. This encouraging the idea that foreign culture is somehow superior – more important than the normal school curriculum. A group of teenagers coming into a school room and teaching a class for a day can have benefits in terms of interaction but... it also is outside the normal curriculum and disrupts the flow of classes. Would we consider it good use of time in our child's school for a random group of tourists to come and teach a class about whatever they please? Again, we need to carefully evaluate if the community service is equal in its distribution of benefit.

If you are contemplating a 'service' holiday, please consider these issues. And if the best possible thing you can do is enjoy a holiday and make a financial contribution – that's a win-win, right?

Wherever you are in the world, and particularly in remote villages, please also consider the following:

Don't hand out sweets, loose change or small gifts, this only serves to create a begging mentality where none existed before.

Churches are often viewed as tourist attractions; however, their primary purpose is as houses of worship for local residents – visitors should be quiet and respectful.

Be flexible in your expectations. You're in a different world, after all. Sometimes plans change and a chance for more in-depth learning or a unique cultural experience presents itself. Adapt yourself to the situation rather than trying to change the situation to you.

Act as an example for other travellers who are less informed than you!

Photos: Michael Marquand

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