

WORK & PLAY

Volunteering holidays give you the chance to try a new challenge and make a real difference, as well as meet like-minded people. **Steve Newman** suggests a few places to start

Not everyone's idea of the perfect holiday is a far-flung beach and multi-coloured cocktails. More and more of us are taking working holidays as community volunteers. The reward of 'giving back', the chance to meet new friends and be part of something that matters: it's not hard to see the appeal.

This is especially true when the holiday is part of an environmental, conservation or eco sustainable project. These holidays can be taken at home or abroad and can range from looking after elephants in Cambodia to repairing paths on Welsh hillsides. You don't have to be an eco-warrior to join in, either. All you need is a

commitment to making a difference... and having some fun at the same time.

Working holidays are a great experience for anyone who loves being outdoors and enjoys meeting new people from different backgrounds and of all ages. You don't need to be super fit and have amazing DIY skills and as part of the holiday you're given training by qualified instructors. Some schemes even deliver the chance to do community support work with the world's poorest children.

If you're looking for an authentic, worthwhile trip this year, why not give volunteering a whirl? Here's a few tried and trusted options.

Garden with The National Trust

In the UK one of the largest organisations offering working holidays is The National Trust. It has 12 distinct types from rebuilding walls and paths, to completing wildlife surveys, gardening and working as a guide/helper in one of its historic properties. The Trust offers these breaks right across the age range and family groups are also welcome to apply.

I joined a group working at the Trust's Cragside House in Northumberland. One of the Trust's most popular properties, it was the first house in the world to be lit by electricity and has some of the most beautiful parkland in the country. Created by the Victorian industrialist Lord Armstrong who planted hundreds of thousands of trees, created lakes and scenic drives and moved millions of tons of rocks and earth, the estate needs constant managing to maintain its condition.

The group's ages ranged from 19 to 65 and we were tasked with cutting back the rhododendrons, one of the estate's biggest

draws: beautiful flowers but an invasive species to say the least. Others started removing vegetation from around the lake to keep the vista as its Victorian designers intended it to be seen.

I was struck by the fact that everybody got on so well and laughter seemed to be the order of the day. Ali Hatton was our group leader: a volunteer herself for many years, she travelled from the Welsh Borders to take part. "You never know what you're going to find on these holidays," Ali says. "There are some beautiful orchids in this grassland and I had no idea they were here. It makes you understand it's the reason we're cutting this by hand with secateurs rather than a modern strimming machine so they can be preserved." (nationaltrust.org.uk/holidays/working-holidays)

Restore canals with Waterway Recovery Group

Love to set yourself a tough new task? WRG Working Holidays run week-long residential restoration Canal Camps every year on the derelict waterways of England and Wales. They're an opportunity to try traditional skills that otherwise are the preserve of expert craftsmen. At a Canal Camp you can learn the intricacies of bricklaying, heritage restoration, machine operation and stone walling. As a bonus, they also only cost £56 for the week so it's an affordable way to test out a working holiday.

Susan, 70, from Scotland signed up last summer. "I spent a week in thigh-deep mud at Bowbridge Lock in the Cotswolds, as well as two weeks on the Lancaster Canal driving dumpers and using a brushcutter. I used my existing skills, learnt new ones, and enjoyed meeting people from all walks of life. It was a real change from my usual life." (waterways.org.uk/wrg/canal_camps)

Join an archaeological dig at the Bamburgh Research Project

If you're into history and archaeology the Bamburgh Research Project might be for you. Bamburgh Castle was the fortress palace of the Anglo-Saxon kings of Northumbria, and has been in continual use for more than 3,000 years. Today, The Research Project is an archaeological dig that seeks to uncover the castle's multi-layered story.

Volunteers receive training in

archaeological fieldwork at several different dig sites, and experts are on hand to explain what happens next: post-excavation processing and theorising. And there's much of significance to discover. "We have the privilege of working on one of the best known sites in North East England," says Director Graeme Young. "We have a wonderful state of preservation in our trenches, including over four metres of stratified deposits. This means we are able to get excellent data from our work and contribute to the archaeological record."

At Bamburgh, volunteers are a wide mix of people of all experience levels. There is no age limit and people who have physical or mental restrictions can also apply as the Trust is more than happy for volunteers to sit by the side of the trenches, washing, photographing and drawing the finds if they feel they cannot be fully involved with other aspects of the dig.

There's a fun social side too with quiz, barbecue and pub nights and guest lectures. Volunteers come from all over the world and, as Graeme says, "We hope everyone leaves us feeling more comfortable about their excavation skills than before." (bamburghresearchproject.co.uk)

Visit Latin America with Globalteer

Globalteer is a UK charity that organises volunteer holidays with community, conservation and wildlife projects in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Unlike many volunteer travel companies, it sees a high proportion of over-50s signing up, especially at the community projects in Peru, Cambodia and Colombia, which include after-school clubs, reading groups and support work in care homes. There was even a volunteer in her 80s at a school in Peru recently!

Volunteers assist local staff in everything from teaching English and crafts to helping with sports and games, plus doing some light manual work such as gardening, painting and cleaning. There's also the chance to accompany the children on excursions around the village or into the countryside.

The charity offers lots of useful travel and cultural advice prior to every placement and has full time English-speaking staff to provide on-the-ground support. It's also a non-profit organisation which is important



Susan at work on the canal



Erika volunteering in Colombia



Digging into the past at Bamburgh



Rewarding: volunteers learning new skills

to a lot of travellers who are looking into volunteering overseas.

Erika Oakley, 58, from Eastbourne, volunteered for ten weeks at Globalteer's Colombia Children's project in Medellin in 2014. It was her third volunteering trip but the first time she had volunteered with disadvantaged children.

"I loved the fact that Globalteer are so well organised," says Erika, whose mum is a lifelong WI member. "A taxi picked us up at the airport and took us to our lovely hostel in Medellin. We met Elena, the Globalteer volunteer coordinator that evening and she gave us a local mobile phone to use and arranged to meet us the next day to take us to the project after our free Spanish lesson. We were given a pre-paid metro ticket for our stay.

"But as well as being well organised they also have real passion and commitment to helping projects like the one we volunteered with. We were working with vulnerable children and I believe we really did make an impact, improving their life chances and showing them that we really cared.

"I felt that as older volunteers in our mid-fifties we were able to draw on lots of life

experience. Age is definitely not a barrier – it's an asset." (globalteer.org)

Be part of a team with The British Trust of Conservation Volunteers

The British Trust of Conservation Volunteers has a range of holidays around the UK from wetland conservation and habitat management to dry stone walling. There's a strong focus on teamwork and the communal experience as you'll join between six and 12 other people to complete a conservation project. (tcv.org.uk/)

Preserve our coastline with The Marine Conservation Society

Love a good beach? The Marine Conservation Society looks for individuals, families, couples and friend groups to help keep Britain's beaches clean. Why not combine a seaside break with learning

about wildlife protection and keeping the UK's beaches pristine? Beachwatch comprises all-year-round beach cleans and surveys, some of which volunteers organise themselves from scratch. And you're guaranteed some spectacular scenery to enjoy while you work. Plus the odd seal sighting or two... (mcsuk.org/beachwatch)

Monitor wild birds with The RSPB

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is Europe's largest wildlife conservation charity and with more than 200 UK nature reserves (and a few abroad) there's plenty of scope for selecting a volunteering holiday that suits your interests. You can stay for a minimum of one week to a maximum of eight months, working on projects as diverse as hide building and species monitoring to replanting natural forests and flora. (rspb.org.uk/volunteering) ■

IS A VOLUNTEERING HOLIDAY RIGHT FOR YOU?

1. Do your research. Make sure you are working for a reputable organisation which tells you where your money goes.
2. Work should be led by qualified staff. Ensure that training for any tools or machinery you will be using is given before you start work by qualified instructors. Some projects require a basic knowledge of tool handling, computers and wildlife identification, as well as the ability to carry out strenuous physical labour; others simply require enthusiasm for the cause and some practical knowledge.
3. Be clear about what you want to get out of the holiday before you apply and make sure the organisation can offer that to you. Find out what will be happening day to day, the type of accommodation, insurance, food and other factors. How much free time will you get?
4. Who will be your fellow workers? Find out the profile of the average person booking with the company. Do clients enjoy the trips so much they re-book year after year? Are there social activities planned in too? Checking the company's website can pay dividends.
5. Remember that you will probably need to cover your own travel arrangements to the destination, but accommodation and food are usually all provided. Holiday costs will vary depending on length of stay so work out a budget before you commit.