

2009

State of the Volunteer Travel Industry



Lasso Communications

VoluntourismGal.com

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Methodology

There have been many anecdotal stories floating around the voluntourism industry regarding the decline in travelers going abroad to volunteer - we at Lasso questioned the validity of these anecdotes. How much was fiction and what were the actual stats? The conclusion we came up with is that the field of international volunteering is booming; it just seems everyone is too shy to shout about their successes. This survey aims to give a quick snapshot of the State of the Volunteer Travel Industry in 2009.

We wanted to get an accurate pulse of the volunteer travel industry, so we made the minimum amount of volunteer work per trip 4 days to try and eliminate those operators that mix adventure and voluntourism.

The survey was sent to all volunteer travel providers that have a US base and met the following criteria:

- Send American volunteers abroad
- Not faith based in any way
- Volunteers have to pay to volunteer
- Travelers work for more than 4 days of straight volunteering (the idea here was to eliminate the adventure companies that offer voluntourism as a side excursion)

We researched companies through a variety of means: google listings, industry associations such as the Building Bridges Coalition and the IVPA, books and magazine articles, blog postings on VoluntourismGal.com and general research through online portals.

While we recognize that this survey is not a complete compilation of the industry, nor is it academic quality research, we feel that everyone was offered a chance to participate and we welcome more participants for the 2010 roundup.

All the companies identified were then contacted directly through email or phone calls and the majority responded. The companies that met the criteria and participated in the survey are:

AIDE Abroad, Airline Ambassadors, Ambassadors for Children, Amigos de las Americas, Bridges to Community, Cross Cultural Solutions, Cosmic Volunteers, Earthwatch, Geovisions, Global Citizens Network, Global Volunteers, Global Aware, Global Vision International, Heritage Conservation Network, Intrepid Travel, International Student Volunteers, i-to-i, Projects Abroad, ProWorld, Relief Workers International, Road Monkey, Service for Peace, Tropical Adventures, Volunteer Adventures, Volunteers for Peace, WAVES for Development, World Leadership School, World Teach.

To see the complete survey questions asked of the above organizations, please view Appendix A.

State of the Industry

Based on the 28 companies that participated in the survey, we found:

- 61% expect to send more volunteers abroad in 2009 than 2008
- 18% expect to send the same amount of volunteers in 2009 as in 2008
- 21% expect to send less volunteers abroad in 2009 than 2008

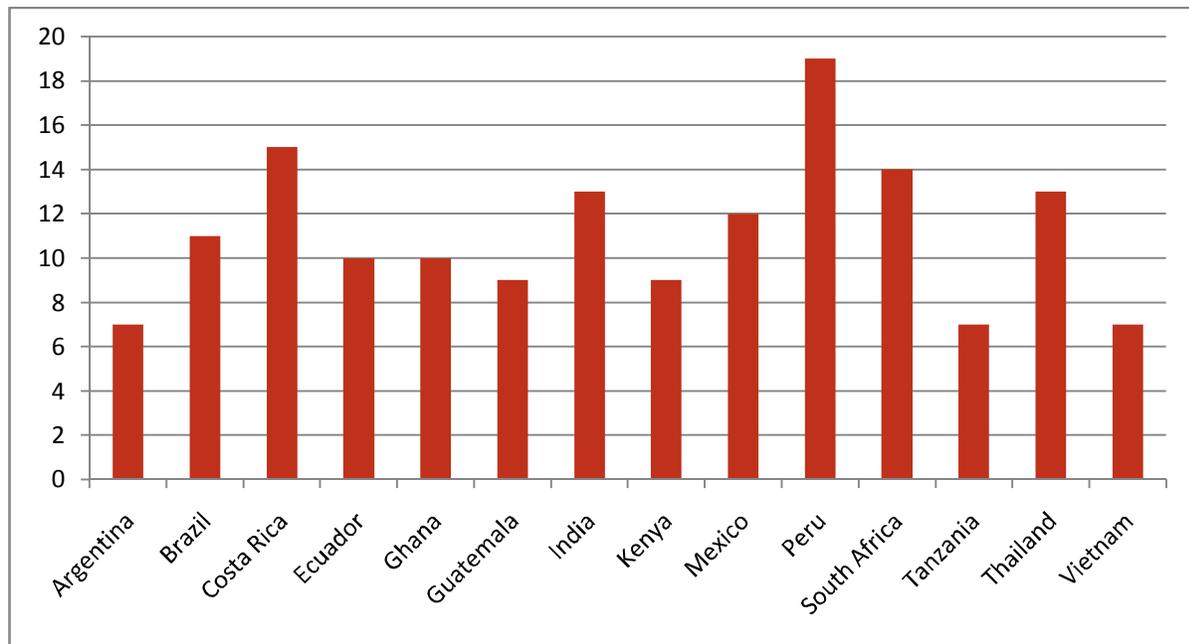
The total number of volunteers sent abroad from the US by these 28 companies was 20,089. The highest number of volunteers sent by one company was 3,400 and the smallest was 10.

Several of the companies that are down year on year have blamed bad strategic moves – poor marketing or strategic shifts – as the reason for their lower numbers in 2009. The companies that are growing in 2009 tend to be the smaller to mid-size companies who find they are agile enough to adjust to the market’s demands and change their messaging to appeal to changing traveler motivations.

For full comments from company directors on how the recession is affecting their business view Appendix B. To see insight they wanted to share with the industry see Appendix C.

Destinations

Of the 28 companies surveyed, the average number of countries offered per provider was 10, with Peru, Costa Rica and South Africa being the most popular countries. The below graph represents the number of organizations sending travelers to a country on the Y axis and the top 14 countries on X axis.



In total, organizations sent volunteers to 86 different countries, for the exact number of volunteers sent to each country please see Appendix D.

The destination results show that most organizations are offering destinations that are sought after by volunteer travelers. According to a recent survey by GeckoGo.com, Peru, Costa Rica and Australia were the top countries where Americans want to volunteer abroad. The only discrepancy then with the volunteer destinations offered is that Australia is highly sought after by travelers but not in the Top 10 countries offered by providers.

For Americans, the top ten countries to volunteer in were fairly similar, with the two lists sharing six of the same countries. Peru was the top choice of Americans (16%), followed by Costa Rica (15%) and Australia (13%).

Table 3: Top 10 Countries where Americans want to Volunteer Abroad

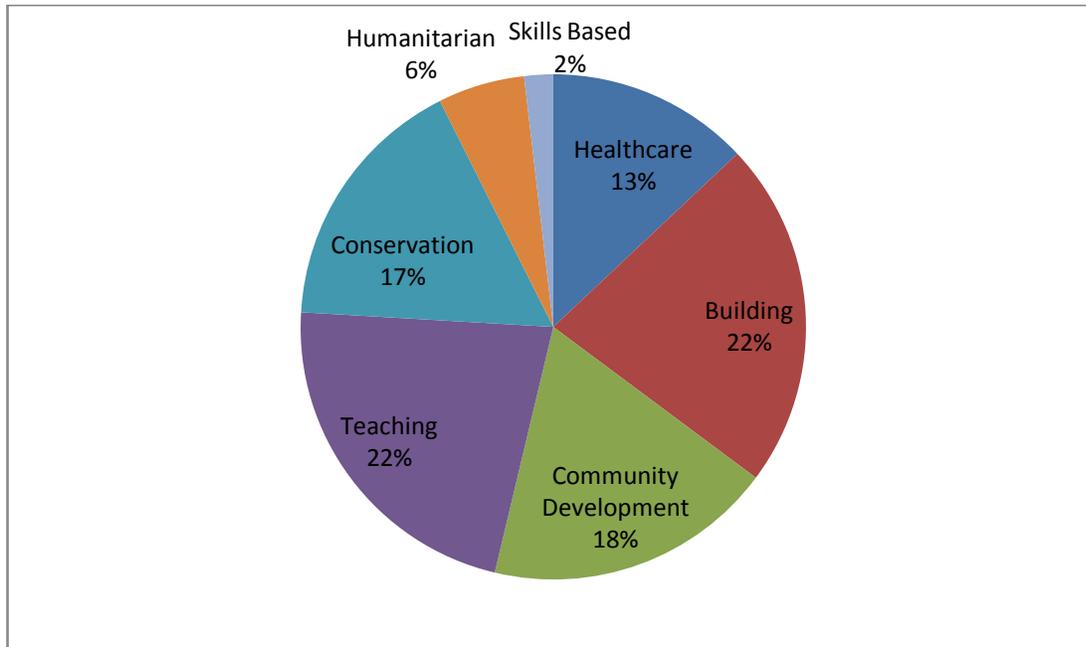
Country	%
Peru	16%
Costa Rica	15%
Australia	13%
South Africa	12%
United Kingdom	9%
India	9%
Brazil	9%
Philippines	8%
China	8%
Kenya	7%

When grouped by continent, South America seems to be the leading continent of volunteer travel followed by Africa and Asia.



Volunteer Activities

The most popular volunteer activity for the majority of respondents was building and teaching, followed by community development and conservation. For the purpose of this survey, community development includes caring for children.



While building and teaching seem to be the top two activities organizations found to be most popular, the Traveler Insight Survey by GeckoGo.com implied that building was a niche activity (only gaining 28% of the interest) while humanitarian work, conservation and teaching were considerably more popular.

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT TO DO WHEN VOLUNTEERING?

The interest levels were pretty close between different types of volunteering activities, with humanitarian work (62%) cited by the most respondents. Conservation and teaching were both cited by 56% of respondents, followed by community development with 53%. Building is a more niche oriented volunteering activity that was cited by 28% of respondents. Other types of volunteer activities cited include legal work and translations.

When looking at gender difference, females were most interested in Humanitarian work (64%) while males were more interested in Conservation work (63%).

Return Rate

According to the results, the average return rate for a traveler to volunteer abroad with the same company is 10%. This number varied widely with one company having a return rate of 70% while others had as low as 1%. The reasons given for higher return rates were higher emphasis on engaging past travelers as well as a distinct correlation with volunteers that worked on hands-on projects like building or conservation.

Terminology

When asked how they identify themselves there was a great disparity between the organizations.

- 14% identified themselves as being a 'volunteer vacation' provider
- 24% identified with the term voluntourism
- 29% identified with volunteer travel
- 33% identified with volunteer abroad

For those organizations that did not identify with 'voluntourism' there seemed to be a complete rejection of the term. Many wrote specifically that they were anything but voluntourism. When feeling that they did not fit into any of the above terms organizations offered alternatives such as: humanitourism, international voluntary service and service learning.

Sources

1. GeckoGo.com - Volunteer Travel Insight Survey 2009 - http://www.geckogo.com/volunteer/report2009/GeckoGo-Volunteer_Travel_Insights_2009.pdf

Appendix A

The questions asked were:

- To which countries do you currently send volunteers?
- What is the most popular activity for your volunteers? Building; Community Development; Conservation - Environmental, Wildlife, or Heritage; Scientific; Health Care; Skills Based Professional; Teaching; Other (please describe)
- How many US volunteers did you send abroad in 2008?
- Do you expect to send more or less volunteers abroad in 2009 than you did in 2008?
- What is your return rate for volunteers?
- Will you participate again next year if this becomes an annual survey?

Optional:

- Do you feel the economy is affecting your business positively, negatively or unaffected? What, if anything, have you done to counteract the effects of the recession?
- Are there any valuable insights or lessons learned you would like to share with the industry?
- Which term do you most associate with your organization? Voluntourism, volunteer tourism, volunteer vacation, volunteer travel, volunteer abroad?

Appendix B

When asked how the recession is affecting business, the respondents replied with a variety of answers. Most agreed that the recession was affecting their organization but the difference came in whether they saw the economic downturn as an opportunity or threat.

The answers have been kept anonymous so the organizations felt they could answer freely.

“Our programs have been affected negatively, as we rely on resources such as sponsorships and in-kind. To counteract, focus more on university groups, that are more organized in the fundraising efforts locally.”

“We have cut projects that would have occurred when volunteers are not in-country, reduced staff, staff have take voluntary pay cuts”

“The combination of the economic downturn and the terrorists attack in Mumbai had a serious impact on our business. We are trying to lower costing so that we can charge less.”

“Positively.”

“Negatively, because people are afraid to spend money in the same amounts. Perhaps positively, because people feel the pull of civic service and volunteerism but on shorter, less expensive vacations.”

“We will send less volunteers this year than last due to economic factors but are reminding our volunteers of Obama's call to service and reaching out to help beyond our own borders.”

“The economy is affecting different aspects of our business differently. We saw a recent rise in internship applications and have seen a consistent stream of semester applicants, but we have seen group numbers go down. We have worked to maintain group program relationships and to help participants fundraise.”

“MOST DEFINITELY AFFECTED. MAIN REASON FOR CANCELLATIONS APPEARS TO BE FINANCIAL CONCERNS. HOWEVER WE HAVE ALSO RECEIVED THOUSANDS OF MORE APPLICATIONS AND MORE CONTRACTS THAN LAST YEAR. TO COUNTERACT THE RECESSION WE HAVE INSTITUED NEW RECRUITING INITIATIVES, OFFERING SCHOLARSHIPS TO NEW AND RETURNING PARTICIPANTS AND CONDUCTING MORE (LATE SEASON) PROMOTION.”

“People are more careful about spending \$\$...we are changing our format and making it easier for people to get sponsored.”

“We have had a few groups drop out because of the recession, so it's definitely affecting us. Fortunately demand remains strong.”

“The economic downturn is having a positive effect on our enrollment. We have received record numbers of applications this year, and have struggled to have enough placements to accommodate all those who are qualified. Our guess is that the weak job market is resulting in this year's college

graduates looking for alternative ways to get experience. Spending a year abroad teaching is a great resume builder.”

“Of course the recession has affected our business. We felt it in 2008 when the recession actually started.”

“We cut costs, and R&D.”

“Signups (but not inquiries) slowed down late last fall, coinciding with all the bad economic news. But things have picked up to normal levels this spring.”

“We feel we have not been affected.”

“Early last year we found slow numbers and adapted programs to fall in line with demands such as shorter durations and more training...We have found positives in our changes and also slightly lucky as increased redundancies have left people wanting to retrain or just use their time more productively. Less graduate are able to find work so have been volunteering overseas and participating on our trainee schemes to gain practical knowledge - also career breakers taking more course based programs. People want to volunteer and also gain a skill for themselves - win win situations.”

“It's hard to say - we've just completed our first year (Feb 08 was our pilot program) so we don't have much to compare to. We're pushing forward; surviving until our big break...”

“Not really - we are small.”

“Donations from corporations and foundations have dipped. Individual giving remains strong. The participation fee only covers about 65% of our total expenses, so fundraising is important.”

“Our Volunteer numbers remain strong. We have more scholarship requests and suspect that more Volunteers will walk away from the deposit for economic reasons”

“We feel that the economy is negatively affecting our enrollment. To counteract these effects, we have increased the available capacity in our highest-demand programs and have increased efforts in marketing to target groups, such as cancelled volunteers and those with funds on file.”

“We are not finding the economy affecting business at this time since we are in the middle of major spring break trips. We also feel that people want to travel but this gives them more of a reason to travel. We are only holding ourselves back with not getting new technology up fast enough.”

“We still feel like it's too early to tell – but we have had increase in cancellations for sure. We have reduced ad spending, and been grateful that currency change in valuation has helped counter some effects.”

“The economy is affecting our business in a positive way. We keep our pricing as low as possible but with a healthy margin to have positive cash flow and no debt. We offer a free resume service from Pongo, so that the tutors or vollies can get their experience on a resume without really thinking about it,

we provide extensive health, accident and dental insurance for up to six months free, we provide 100% refund insurance for medical or accident cancel and if we fail to provide a project or find a host family we have insurance to refund all monies paid and reimburse 100% of the airfare. This coverage is included in the price of our projects. It costs nothing to apply to our program. You pay when you are ready to secure your place and not until. We have a "deal" with Fly for Good whereby a tutor placed at the last minute can get airfare at the 30-day price. These are a few things we do to attract people to our programs during this recession. We break down the fee to show the monthly cost of living with a family vs. other types of programs. Showing them that they can live in Madrid for \$420 a month, and that includes their health/accident/dental (with preconditions accepted), food and housing makes sense during these times. They can barely live with mum and dad for that."

Appendix C

Responses to the question: Any insight you would like to share with the industry?

“It’s time to get innovative.”

“The passion to serve and travel is as strong as ever, across every age range, which bodes well once the current economic climate improves.”

“A lot of program placement organizations abroad are now recruiting volunteers directly through the internet.”

“We need to find ways to not only educate/provide cool experiences for U.S. volunteers, but also make a real, long-term impact in the communities we serve. We all need to work together to find ways to make the double play – education and community development.”

“Just that the current surge of interest in community service, encouraged by the Obama administration, is an opportunity for all of us. I hope we can work together so that all of us benefit from strengthening interest in volunteerism to add an international aspect to the conversation.”

“THE SUCCESS OF OUR COMPANY IS A TESTAMENT TO THE COMMITMENT OF OUR STAFF WORLDWIDE TO OFFER THE HIGHEST QUALITY, MOST FUN, REWARDING, EDUCATIONAL, SAFE AND ACTIVITY-PACKED PROGRAM OUT THERE. ISV NEVER STOPS LOOKING FOR WAYS TO ENHANCE AND IMPROVE PARTICIPANTS’ FULL EXPERIENCE. EXCELLENT COMMUNICATION, ORGANIZATION AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL IN EVERY ASPECT OF THE PROGRAM ARE THE FOUNDATION ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS.”

“Volunteers are giving time and resources to your programs - we have found by trying to give skills (tangible qualifications such as BTECS and college credits) to them during their time they have been more positively reactive to the notion of volunteering.”

“Those who make it out the other side are going to be stronger because of it...”

“We have increased paid and unpaid online listings, ads and social networking activity. We are seeing more interest and greater alumni involvement from those efforts.”

“I cannot think of any at this time, with the exception of regular forecasting and projections based on current enrollment levels.”

“Stay focused on your mission. It is easy to get away from what your goals are if you don't.”

“Being old is helpful from the standpoint that it provides you a sense of "history" since this all started in 1915. It gives one perspective. You choose your friends in this industry by those who think they invented this stuff and those who realize it evolved...and is still evolving. The age-old and continuing rivalry of for and not-for profits is fear-based and steeped not at all in reality. Organizations like the BBC or IVPA are self-serving. Consumers are very smart and can figure it out...and do. Social Media creates no business whatsoever but does create traffic and buzz and that's always a good thing. Press releases

and media coverage is a total waste and provides your competitors with much-needed product intelligence. It pays big dividends to fly UNDER the radar.”

Appendix D*Destinations for Organizations to send volunteers*

Albania	1
American Samoa	1
Argentina	7
Armenia	1
Australia	3
Bahamas	1
Bangladesh	1
Belize	3
Bolivia	3
Bosnia	1
Brazil	11
Bulgaria	1
Cambodia	5
Cameroon	2
Canada	3
Chile	5
China	9
Colombia	3
Cook Islands	1
Costa Rica	15
Croatia	1
Czech Republic	1
Dominican Republic	4
Ecuador	10
Egypt	1
El Salvador	2
Ethiopia	2
Fiji	4
France	2
Germany	1
Ghana	10
Greece	3
Guadeloupe	1
Guatemala	9
Guyana	1
Haiti	1
Honduras	4
Hungary	1
Iceland	1

India	13
Indonesia	1
Italy	5
Jamaica	4
Jordan	2
Kenya	9
Laos	2
Latvia	1
Madagascar	1
Malawi	1
Malaysia	1
Marshall Islands	1
Mexico	12
Micronesia	1
Moldova	1
Mongolia	1
Morocco	2
Namibia	4
Nepal	5
New Zealand	2
Nicaragua	5
Panama	3
Peru	19
Philippines	2
Poland	2
Portugal	1
Romania	4
Russia	2
Rwanda	2
Scotland	1
Senegal	1
Serbia	1
Seychelles	2
Slovenia	2
South Africa	14
Spain	2
Sri Lanka	3
Swaziland	1
Tanzania	7
Thailand	13
Togo	1
Turkey	1
Uganda	5

UK	1
USA	5
Vietnam	7
Zambia	3

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