



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Don't Let the Downturn
Keep You Down

BY HEATHER BOERNER

What to do when “I really *need* a vacation” coincides with “I simply can’t afford a vacation”? Perhaps you’re among the thousands considering canceling travel plans to save some money or opting for the now popular “staycation.” Cheer up and consider challenging yourself to travel creatively while cutting costs *and* doing something gratifying in a far-off community.

Here are some alternative travel tips to avoid tourist traps and experience other cultures by living in their natural habitats.

WWOOFing it in Tuscany and Maui

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) is an organization that matches eco-conscious urbanites with organic farms around the world. It was founded in 1971 as “Working Weekends on Organic Farms” by a London secretary with a keen interest in the organic lifestyle. WWOOFs are continuously evolving, spreading knowledge of ecologically sound living practices and advancing our connection with nature.

Hosts provide free accommodations and share meals with their WWOOFers, making family dinners a regular occasion. In return, WWOOFers perform various farming tasks such as weeding, planting, preparing beds or even building a fence or a roof. San Francisco resident and former WWOOFer Stephanie Sales describes her farming adventure in Tuscany: “It was always interesting and thoroughly fulfilling. My friend and I helped re-roof a 13th-century Tuscan farmhouse and stayed in our own separate (although spidery) farmhouse.” Some WWOOFers are invited to stay in the family house or guest quarters, or to sleep under the stars.

“We would cook meals all together with freshly plucked organic produce, share stories and siestas with our neighbors — we even formed an impromptu band one night,” recalls Stephanie. “You get a real intimate sense of the community, and the friendships are so familiar, even though you are put somewhere you have never been before.”

You don’t need gardening experience, but be prepared to commit five to six hours of manual labor per day. Because farming is seasonal, projects will vary from place to place throughout the year and require a longer commitment. Bring an open mind and a willingness to work. “It’s very rewarding to feel strengthened by working the Earth. I never thought I would enjoy baling hay.”

Interested in a relaxing and rejuvenating vacation in Hawaii while learning to grow your own food? Hale Akua Garden Farm on Maui is another popular WWOOF. It’s run by Lori Grace, who divides her time between the Bay Area and the farm. Hale Akua offers a holistic lifestyle experience and the opportunity to learn organic farming with Maui’s top teaching farmers at a lush, tropical, certified organic farm. Free classes include composting, recycling, solar energy, green living, yoga and meditation. All WWOOFers receive free training in the methods of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) championed by Marshall Rosenberg, a frequent guest teacher at Hale Akua. Work exchange may include farming, landscaping, office work, cleaning, or maintenance on the seven-acre property. It’s complete with three hot tubs; a large, chemical-free swimming pool; sauna and spectacular views of Haleakua mountain crater. Thirty miles of untouched coastline, including a 200-foot waterfall, surround the farm.

Local resident Heather Martin gushes about her WWOOF experience at Hale Akua as having been transforming beyond all possible expectation. “I learned more in my months in Maui than during any other period of my life, including college,” she said. “I learned about life, love, the world, others and myself. Thank you for allowing me this gift.”

WWOOF.org charges a small fee for membership and access to their host farm directory, according to the country you select.

Resources

wwoofusa.org
wwoof.org
haleakuagardenfarm.com
localharvest.org





Voluntourism: Will clean for karma

Brooke Bailey was new to both yoga and volunteer work in 2006. But after seeing the devastation Hurricane Katrina wreaked on New Orleans in 2005, Bailey decided she could do something to empower the spirit of the suffering community. Soon after, Brooke found herself practicing yoga with heightened awareness morning and night, and filling the rest of her Big Easy afternoons with gutting, cleaning, painting and the renewal work the city desperately needed.

That was Brooke's first volunteer vacation but it hasn't been her last. Since then, she's received her yoga accreditation and organized *karma* yoga (selfless service) volunteer groups and retreats.

"It was amazing for everyone on the trip — life changing," she says now. "I learned about giving just to give, not expecting anything in return. I realized that even if it isn't literally my community, even if they're 5,000 away miles from you — or halfway around the world — it's still humanity."

Although it's not always the cheapest way to travel, the right research may find you opportunities to volunteer for free room and board, and the karmic experience is priceless. Brooke found the combination of yoga with volunteer work essential. In extending her heart with hands-on work, Brooke learned about overcoming obstacles as part of a unified community.

There are multitudes of ways to volunteer on your vacation and entire books dedicated to volunteer vacations. When searching, consider a location where you can be outside saving the planet. Never been to a rainforest? Participate in a restoration project. A surf buff? Check out WAVES for Development, an affiliation of nonprofit organizations dedicated to making the world a better place through surfing. WAVES originated on the beaches of northern Peru when a group of international surfers shared a desire to help local youth who had few resources enjoy surfing. Based on your skills and experience, you can contribute by teaching Earth sciences, English, or swimming and surfing.

Resources

voluntourism.org
volunteeradventures.com
the7interchange.com
handsupholidays.com
crossculturalsolutions.org
wavesfordevelopment.org

Homestay: Home Sweet Homestay

Shel Horowitz has been sleeping on strangers' floors, couches and luxury guest suites for decades. In the process, he's met peace activists, ecologists, and lifelong friends his family still visit. Homestaying can be as traditional as a student foreign exchange or as innovative as *Servas*, the peace outreach program Horowitz has been involved in since 1983. Shel is doing his part to spread cross-cultural understanding while keeping his own travel expenses affordable. *Servas* has been very educational for Shel.

During one homestay, he visited Colorado and met a couple that gave him a private tour of their Native American art collection. Last year, he stayed with the director of Guatemala's National Park Service, as well as a man who'd been active in sustainable development work in the country's highlands for years.

"You get a richer experience traveling with homestays," he says. "I'll stay with someone who will take me to places I'd never see otherwise. Or they'll say, 'Don't go there. It's a tourist trap.'"

There are a few things to keep in mind when homestaying through *Servas*, says Horowitz. First, the average *Servas* homestay is only two or three nights. If you decide to stay longer, consider using a different network, or paying or trading with your host for their hospitality. You'll be expected to stay at home at night sharing in the culture of your host family, so you should plan to party-hop on another trip. Appreciate the "nightlife" of enjoying each other's company and opening up to new customs and perspectives.

Finally, be prepared for any kind of accommodation. "You have to be somewhat adventurous, since you don't know what you'll get with your visit ahead of time," he says. "I've experienced everything from 'Let me move these papers off the floor so you can unroll your sleeping bags' to staying in a private guest house."

To increase the authenticity of your homestay, actively engage in your destination's sustainability practices. Try taking on the local cuisine and observe how it makes it to the dinner table. Take an exhilaratingly cold outdoor shower, if that's how the locals wash. I bet you'll save water!

To join *Servas*, you'll need to pay a membership fee (\$50 for U.S.-only travel and \$85 for international travel) and a deposit on lists of potential hosts. Be aware that most other homestay programs require you to pay your host for a long-term visit.

Resources

usservas.org
backtotheearth.com



Home Swapping: *Mi casa es su casa*

Melanie, a San Francisco renter, assumed home swapping was not an option for her. The only people she'd known who'd swapped their home for inexpensive vacations were homeowners. But, mere months later, she found herself curled up in a petite Parisian studio in Paris's ninth *arrondissement*, with easy access to all the city's major attractions. Its greatest appeal? It's her very own home base. Melanie says she would gladly do it again.

"For years I wanted to go to Paris. Then one day I found an inexpensive ticket and decided no matter what, I was going." That's when she decided to give home swapping a try. "It gave me a way to connect with different people and put myself in situations that allowed me to see the world through someone else's eyes, which was easier to do while literally eating off [their] dishes! (We always eat off someone's dishes.)"

Scores of home-swapping websites streamline and vet potential swaps for safety. But Melanie simply posted her ad on *craigslist.org* and received a reply from a 20-something French traveler. He wanted to visit his girlfriend, who was temporarily living in San Francisco.

Because his girlfriend was local, Melanie was able to meet her and personally hand over the keys before taking off. And Melanie and her "French connection" allowed each other to use their home computers while away. They explained how to use household appliances and the best neighborhood venues to enjoy local fare. To avoid coming home to any undesired surprises, set some ground rules before you go. For instance, Melanie told her swapping partner not to hold any big parties, and she similarly got permission for a London friend to stay at the apartment with her for a few days instead of assuming approval.

Remember that when home swapping, you also swap carbon footprints because you access the same power sources, transportation and local amenities. That's cause to be conscious of the way you use energy while away. 🍃



Resources

homeexchange.com
craigslist.org