

Volunteering: a guide for traveling the world with few expenses and many experiences

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The first time I heard about voluntary work / work-exchange / volunteering, I really didn't understand how it could be possible. [...] Why would someone work for free? I just didn't get it. [...] Now we are traveling with the savings we have from all the years we spent working and having a "normal" life. Of course the savings are not infinite, but thanks to a very efficient travel style and a very low budget, I can assure you that they last a lot longer than you would imagine.

To make the savings last, it is essential to reduce the unavoidable expenses of the trip: accommodation and food. You will always have to sleep somewhere and eat something. In this guide, I want to tell you all about one of the ways we use to reduce these expenses: **work-exchange**.

Work-exchange and the collaborative economy

Work-exchange goes into the category of **collaborative economy**. That is, a system of nonmonetary exchange of goods or services, based on solidarity and **mutual benefit**. In the case of voluntary work it consists of that we, travelers and volunteers, provide some hours of work and the other part provides accommodation and in some cases also meals. These both come in handy when we are traveling on the long term and with a low budget. Anyhow it is important to be clear that volunteering **is not the same as being on vacation with full board**, in exchange for some benefits we have some responsibilities.

Why to do volunteering?

Because, as we told you above, it is a **great tool to reduce expenses**, especially on a long journey where you have abundant time. It also **encourages our preferred way of traveling**, which is moving very slowly and immersing ourselves in the culture of each place. Living with and as locals and not simply passing through, as tourists. Not to mention that doing voluntary work is a spectacular way to try for a limited time countless jobs, lifestyles and different realities which we might have never tried otherwise. It is something like **playing a role-playing game** and asking the question "What would my life have been like if I had dedicated myself to...? Or what would my profession have been if I had been born in ...?" For example, during our three-week volunteer work in Essaouira (Morocco), we had the opportunity to see what our life would be like if we lived on a farm and had 25 animals, including some that I had never met before, like camels!

What kind of work-exchange jobs exist?

The variety of voluntary work is incredibly broad and there are assignments of almost anything that comes to mind. For example we have done: language teaching, childcare, caring for animals, mural painting, house maintenance, reception work in hostels, ecological construction, harvesting fruits and veggies, permacultural farming, cooking, planting a medicinal garden, cleaning trekking paths, designing logos and posters, social media management etc. etc.

How many hours do you work in a volunteer job? Are there days off? What's the deal?

It is important to clarify that there are no universal agreements or rules in the work-exchange world and each case is unique. Details such as number of hours of work, schedules and type of work, type of accommodation, what food is included and what is not, etc., should be agreed between the parties before closing the deal. For example we have usually worked from 3 to 5 hours daily with one or two days off. We try to look for accommodation in a private room, but many times the volunteers share a common room. Sometimes the host provides for everyone and shares the meals with us, but sometimes we buy and cook our food independently. Advice: be clear on your needs and negotiate.

How to get a volunteer job?

Luckily in the internet era this is incredibly easy. There are many different platforms to apply for a work-exchange. Here I explain shortly, the characteristics of the best known ones and those that we use and recommend. In all these platforms you have to pay for a membership, but before registering, you can look at the voluntary work assignments that are available. You can filter the assignments by location, type of work, minimum duration, etc. Advice: Choose wisely the platform that best serves your personal travel plan.

Worldpackers

It has work-exchange offers in **170 countries** with all kinds of jobs. To apply for the assignments, you have to create a profile and pay an **annual membership fee**, which is **49 USD for one person and 59 USD for doubles** (couples, friends, etc.). With the membership you can apply to any number of job offers. This platform is focused on safety, so you have a 24/7 support service and they guarantee you up to three free nights in a hostel if the assignment is not suitable for you. During those three days the Worldpackers team will help you to find another work-exchange in the area.

Workaway

Pretty similar to Worldpackers. A big variety of voluntary work is offered in **178 countries**. To apply to the assignments, create a profile page and pay the **annual membership fee of 36 Euros for one person or 48 Euros for doubles** (couples, friends, etc.). Once the membership is paid, unlimited applications can be made.

WWOOF

WWOOF – World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms is oriented to work-exchanges on organic farms, so if you are specifically interested in this topic it may be a good option. WWOOFing can be done in many countries of the world and **the subscription price depends on the country of your choice**. This is an important difference with the two previous platforms, which include many countries with a single subscription, so this is something to consider depending on the type of trip you are planning (if it is to a specific country or includes several countries). You can also subscribe to the WWOOF Independents which hosts all the smaller countries which don't have their own WWOOF organization.

How to build your profile page and how to contact the hosts?

It is very important to make an **attractive volunteer profile**. For this, tell a little about yourself, who you are, what have you done so far and what are you looking for. Also tell why you are interested in doing voluntary work, what knowledge and skills you have to offer, what experience do you have and what would you like to learn. In short, **make a profile that promotes you well** and summarizes why a host should choose you. Don't forget to add some good quality photos of you with a wide smile!

I recommend always **contacting the hosts through the platforms**, since they are the intermediaries in these future relationships. In each volunteering offer you will find the option to contact the host through a message. Some tips to put together a solid message could be:

- Use polite and positive language
- Write a brief presentation of yourself (although you have already written it in the profile, this message will be the first reach out that the host receives from you and if they are in a hurry or not totally interested in what they see in the message, they probably will not even read the profile)
- Briefly explain why you are interested in that particular job offer and what you can contribute so it's a win-win
- Write this message in the same language that the assignment is published, or if in the ad the host mentions that he speaks other languages, you can choose one of them
- Clearly detail on what date you would like to start volunteering and for how long
- Ask all the questions you have