



Newgen stayed in a dingy basement in this neighborhood.

I DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR THIS!

These women thought they were doing good when they committed to volunteering abroad on their vacations. Instead, they endured greedy tour operators, unsafe accommodations, and questionable work assignments. Is the voluntourism industry a sham? *Carita Rizzo investigates*

■ HEATHER NEWGEN, 33, considered herself a veteran volunteer. The Los Angeles-based writer had already traveled to Morocco in 2008, where she paid \$4,600 to volunteer at an orphanage for impoverished kids with cerebral palsy. The experience was so memorable that she itched to do it again. "I loved the first program I did, but it was very expensive, and I couldn't afford to spend that two years in a row," she says. "I was naive and thought all the companies were essentially the same."

For her next vacation, she enlisted with an outfit called Volunteering Solutions, which had her flying to New Delhi to volunteer at a local school. Total cost (including airfare): \$2,100. But when she arrived at the airport, no one was there to greet her. She languished for several hours before a guide finally arrived and took her to her accommodations: a cot in the basement of the program manager's house, with no windows or ventilation, during an August heat wave. The bathroom she

shared with eight other girls was crawling with roaches. Most disturbing, the volunteers were expected to find their way to the school, located in one of New Delhi's rougher slums, on their own. "There was no map, no address. How were we supposed to remember how to get to a random location in the slums by ourselves?" Newgen says.

After just a day, she and several other disillusioned volunteers left the house and checked into a cheap hotel. "I was devastated. I made such a >>

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"I made a huge effort to go there. But at one point I was scared that I would disappear and no one would find me."
—HEATHER NEWGEN



The slums surrounding the school where Newgen taught.

>> huge effort to go there. I saved up all of my vacation time to volunteer in India, to help make a difference," Newgen says. "At one point I was scared that I would disappear and no one would find me."

The scariest part of Newgen's story? It's more common than you think. Each year an estimated 4.7 million Americans devote their vacations to so-called voluntourism, which means they pay to volunteer. Driven by a hunger for authentic adventure, an earnest desire to help those in need, and even a yearning for their own *Eat, Pray, Love* journey, these do-gooders are shelling out big bucks to build homes, tutor kids, and feed the poor halfway across the world. "Most can't go and join the Peace Corps or make a two-year commitment to something," explains David Clemmons, founder of voluntourism.org, a guide for philanthropic travelers. "They see this as a way of participating in a deep and meaningful experience."

The problem, say experts like Clemmons, is that because the industry is relatively new and exploding in size—between 2003 and 2007, the top 10 voluntourism destinations saw a sevenfold increase in the number of projects marketed to vacationers, to 1,741—many of these programs, especially those based overseas, are largely unregulated. And with tour operators easily charging in excess of \$1,000 (not including airfare) for vacations ranging from a few days to a few weeks, it's no wonder that the industry is drawing so many fly-by-night outfits. All it takes is a professional-looking website and you're in business.

Two years ago, Samantha Cleaver, a 28-year-old teacher from Chicago, signed up for a two-week getaway with Eco-Volunteer Up, which promised her

the opportunity to pitch in at a school in Quito, Ecuador, and clear trails in a cloud forest. At \$1,200, including room and board, it was a bargain. But when she arrived at the school, she was told by the frustrated school director that she didn't even know of Cleaver's tour group and that there wasn't much for her to do. "As a teacher, I know having someone come in for a week then leave can be more disruptive than helpful. A volunteer can become just another thing for someone else to manage," Cleaver explains. The next week, in the cloud forest, Cleaver was asked to lay a bamboo floor in a new cabin that her guide was renting out to tourists for \$300 a night—hardly the charitable experience she'd signed up for. (Eco-Volunteer Up's program director, Maria Viteri, said that tourist cabins are sometimes used as volunteer housing and that Cleaver must have been repairing the cabin for winter. "In our placement, it says there can be changes at the last minute," Viteri said.)

In many cases, the only way to verify whether a tour operator is legit is to actually speak with—not e-mail—former customers. "If you're not going with a big organization"—like United Planet or World Teach—"it's kind of a black hole," warns Cleaver, who is nevertheless considering another volunteer vacation next year. But this time she'll ask more questions: What will the work entail? Where is all my money going? What are my accommodations like? Adds Cleaver, "When you're sitting in the middle of nowhere, all by yourself, crying, you'll think, Oh, God, I totally should have thought of those things." **mc**

Carita Rizzo is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer. She is a frequent contributor to *TV Guide* and *The Hollywood Reporter* and is the co-founder of volunteers.com.

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