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Work Trade Programs as an Antidote to Overtourism

Essay and Photos by Ellen Ray

As stewards of sustainable tourism, we must look at the ways we choose to travel through a critical lens. For example, what can responsible travelers do to avoid contributing to overtourism? How can we take strides to protect cultural authenticity? Are we supporting sustainably operated tour providers and businesses while also seeking adventure? And is it possible to immerse ourselves in a foreign environment without joining a structured program? I think I've found a very sustainable, not to mention affordable, answer—work trade programs.

Overtourism is a term used to describe the growing issue of too many tourists visiting a select location at any one time. Work trade programs address this issue in a unique way. These trendy programs appeal to travelers of all ages who aim to experience a culture in its rawest form while providing a service to the host in exchange for meals and accommodation. These services are incredibly broad and include teaching, farming, shoe-making, honey-making, and graphic design. The options are seemingly endless, as there are about 30,000 hosts in nearly every country around the world. Any skill set you possess can be transferred and applied, allowing you, as a traveler, to contribute to local communities.



The author and a fellow work trade traveler paint a mural for a school in Thmor Sor, Cambodia.

The benefits of work trades extend beyond the relationship formed between host and traveler. Because tourism is one of the biggest industries in the world, any negative impacts affect host communities on a colossal scale. Overtourism is significantly compromising quality of local life in tourist destinations across the globe. It also makes it harder for visitors and members of the host community to engage in authentic ways. With many hotels and tour providers angling to make a profit, the incentive to increase tourist numbers in these areas continues with little regulation. This leaves the local population backpedaling to maintain its cultural identity as their homes become nothing more than backdrops for tourist selfies. It also frequently leads to a hostile relationship between tourists and locals, decreasing the quality of local life and stripping the tourists' experiences of cultural authenticity.



A local woman herds sheep in Huancayo, Peru, a location that has seen very few tourists. It was discovered through workaway.info.

The implications brought to the host community through overtourism are presented in the documentary “[Bye Bye Barcelona](#).” In the film, Barcelona serves as an extreme example of how significantly tourism can alter local life when there is a lack of regulation or varied itineraries. One local man states, “This is not a city to live in. It’s a theme park. There is no local life left, it is all decoration.” A frustrated local woman adds, “The massification [of tourism] means that life here for the local person becomes intolerable. Tourism is not going to be forever, and it’s destroying other ways of life... We cannot live with these floods of people day after day.” These sentiments in Barcelona are paralleled by residents in a vast number of cities across the globe, including Amsterdam, Cusco, and Venice. It is essential, during this period of overtourism, that alternative methods of travel are discussed and considered.

The issue of overtourism is not linear or one-dimensional. Thanks to technology, the world has become “smaller” and more accessible even as the world’s population continues to grow rapidly. With the world at our fingertips, the internet plays a significant role as a modern-day, word-of-mouth resource

influencing the destinations chosen by tourists. Often overlooked, however, are the ways in which the internet can be used to avoid crowds, hotel chains, and tourist traps. While work trade programs provide opportunities for hundreds of thousands of travelers and their hosts, most travelers remain unaware of options like these. I was an exception; I discovered work trade programs right out of high school, and, suddenly, the world opened up for me. It was no longer a question of how I could afford to travel, but where and how quickly I could get there. As I was a traveler on a tight budget and with an insatiable curiosity for the world, this was the key to experiencing true local culture while giving back.

Once traveling through work trades began, it snowballed. Through [workaway.info](https://www.workaway.info) and [wwoof](https://www.wwoof.com/), two well-known work trade platforms, opportunities arose that would have otherwise remained a well-kept secret. I worked on a mushroom farm in Peru, helped with cob construction in Ecuador and a sustainable tourism project in the Andes, and worked on a handful of organic farms along the way. Engaging in these programs allowed me to experience each destination in a mutually beneficial way. I provided the host communities with worthwhile assistance in the development of their projects while observing alternatives to the Western lifestyle in their unfiltered forms. It was through immersion in work trade programs that I understood the true importance of sustainable tourism. I also tapped into the infinite learning opportunities this world has to offer.

Work trades provide a seamless platform for developing or expanding a desired skill set. For travelers looking to travel long-term, hosts posting on [workaway.info](https://www.workaway.info) offer apprenticeships enabling travelers to hone in on a specific skill. Because apprenticeships and hands-on courses are often expensive, work trades relieve the burden of high costs. These opportunities typically fall into the nature of learning a trade, which can carry significant value. While volunteer programs targeting tourists have the potential to take paid jobs from the locals, work trades follow a more sustainable model. Work trades serve to compliment pre-existing projects that are created and managed by the locals opposed to a third party. This ensures that the project will maintain momentum while work traders come and go. Once established, these projects have the potential to generate local employment.

There is unparalleled beauty in discovering the corners of this world that remain untapped by mainstream tourism. Once we find our way off the beaten tourist path, experiences become less manufactured and fiscally-oriented. Experiencing the authenticity of a foreign culture brings us back to the nature of humanity, creating opportunities for growth, education and reflection. Forgoing mainstream tourism through work trade programs also benefits the host community and provides an alternative style of travel that is truly sustainable.