

Travelers' Philanthropy: Dos and Don'ts of Travel Giving [Extended Version]

This document is a fuller version of the responses provided by the tour operators and tourism organizations surveyed for CREST's recent publication, "Travelers' Philanthropy: Dos and Don'ts of Travel Giving." We again thank the following individuals for lending their valuable insights to this project: Les Carlisle of *&Beyond*, Sandra Mombelli of *The African Safari Lodge Foundation*, Sonya Bradley of *Country Walkers*, Daudi Peterson of *Dorobo Safaris*, Malia Everette of *Global Exchange Reality Tours*, Priscilla Macy of *Global Sojourns*, Lydia Dean of *GoPhilanthropic*, Andrea Holbrook of *Holbrook Travel*, Jane Crouch of *Intrepid Travel*, Dennis Pinto of *Micato Safaris*, Carol Erickson of *READ Global*, and Daniella Papi of *Pepy Tours*.

To highlight some of the complexities behind donation and help build a more enlightened traveling public, we asked these tourism experts how they respond when a guest makes the following suggestions:

How do you respond when a guest says...

"I want to help build or finance a school/water well."

"It is important that guests who wish to make some kind of contribution to local communities do not simply go in and impose their own will on such communities. They should rather, with the assistance of the lodge management of the lodge they are visiting, identify suitable organizations, including NGO's, churches, schools, et cetera that work in the area to offer support to. What is it that the community wants? The community should be consulted and involved. Maybe the community does not need or want a well, but would really like a soccer field for example."

"The key is to see if we have an existing partner or project with which we have ongoing relationship, rather than trying to identify a place where there is a need. First talk to guests and say, "Here are the organizations that we have ongoing relationships with." That way we know that they are transparent with financials and are open to consistent follow-up and monitoring. If there is an existing organization, then connect the volunteers and the organization. If not, capital investments can potentially result in less value than training and capacity-building and increasing level of education. This important not only to point them in the directions to make sure that their money gets to the best place but also to potentially change the way the traveler will give in the future."

"Contributing to a significant initiative like this, where needed, could be great. But to ensure your support is most effective and sustainable long term, and to minimize the challenges, we recommend that you contribute through an established non-government organization (NGO) specializing in this area with a history of effective results.

There can be many obstacles on the path of building major infrastructure, so a suitable NGO will have the experience to bring about the most beneficial outcome. They will understand the existing structures in the society, they will know and work with all the stakeholders including the relevant government departments, and they will understand the local laws and culture and be able to find ways around the barriers that will arise. They may also help you to identify the highest priorities for the community and whether it might actually be best for you to help address another area of need.

Any planning to develop infrastructure should include:

- thorough consultations amongst local stakeholders
- a clear project plan around how the infrastructure item will function, be staffed, and maintained for the long term, i.e. 10+ years
- a plan for the project to be managed largely by the local community.

The last thing you want to provide is a white elephant that wastes your valuable contribution and causes unmet expectations and disappointment."

“Offering financial assistance towards a project is the most beneficial way of making a difference as a guest. Providing skilled social development practitioners with the means to support community responses to meeting their own needs is provides the highest positive impact.”

“Projects to be supported through guest donations emerge from many hours of negotiation and consultation [between tourism companies’ social development practitioners and the community]. The project must be built on a basis of trust – a valuable and often unrecognized quality in achieving success and positive, lasting impact. This encourages ‘partnership’ and allows for ownership of the project to emerge. It removes the critical risk of creating dependency on help coming from the outside.”

“Projects that are identified by guests disempower communities. Projects “given” are not owned by communities. And sustainability of the project will be compromised.

“Let’s send books.”

“If this is an identified need that has emerged from consultation and can be routed through the development practitioner, then great. But as a principle, all donations of *product* are very tough to apply without creating dependency.

Furthermore, sending product carries many hidden administrative costs. There are numerous examples of freight being impounded at customs (requiring significant funds to free up) and/or getting lost or stolen. These costs can severely curtail the value of the in-kind donation.”

“Explain to travelers the benefits of asking for specific titles that an organization needs. Again, responsible giving is about changing the philanthropist’s attitudes, so that they understand that number one thing to do before giving is to understand the needs.”

“In 90% of cases, people send books in English, which is not helpful.”

“Purchasing books in a local language is an effective way to ensure a donation will be used well.”

“It’s important to buy locally to support the local economy and get books that are appropriate.”

“Books, along with any other goods, should only be sent if they are requested and truly needed. We should not send books based on what we believe a community needs or simply because we have a surplus to our needs. If a local school or library in a poor country is seeking books, find out the specifics of what language, subject area and level they are after. If they can be sourced locally or regionally - they are more likely to be appropriate. In many regions there are excellent teaching books that are produced through local publishers. By supporting them you are supporting the capture and dissemination of local knowledge and language and you are helping to bring employment to local authors, publishers and booksellers.

If you were thinking of sending books from your home country, considerations you should make are:

- Are the shipping cost, customs fees, and port taxes on arrival and further transport to the destination going to outweigh the value of the books?
- Do you have a person on the ground who can ensure the goods clear customs and reach the intended destination?
- In what state are the books? If they are outdated, damaged or irrelevant, they will just add to a waste problem.
 - Is the information culturally relevant and useful? A rural school in the tropics without electricity doesn’t need books on microwave cooking or ice-skating. Western romance novels may be deemed downright offensive.

- If the books are in English, are they at an appropriate level?

An alternative use for your old books would be to sell them and donate the money to a program that purchases new books for schools and libraries in developing countries. This way, the local teachers or librarians have the opportunity to choose the material that best matches their needs. And you avoid the costs and logistical difficulties of transport.”

“Let’s send used clothing.”

“Such efforts are very thoughtful and generous, but they often are counterproductive when you consider logistical concerns such as shipping, customs duties, pilferage and delivery of the clothes. It is frequently better to buy and donate inexpensive clothing at the destination.”

“Poor communities are too often used as a dumping ground for all the waste generated in the west. First find out if there is a need. If there is, only send clothing that is appropriate to local conditions and in good condition. Work through community structures and organizations such as NGOs or churches working in the area.”

“It is so important to understand the needs before giving. Check and see what’s available. The shipping costs may be higher than the amount for which the clothes will be sold in the market. Talk to travelers about investing in capacity building, giving people skills, rather than sending things.”

“Clothing, along with any other goods, should only be sent if requested and truly needed. Please check with a suitable organization working in the destination community as to the specifics of what they require. Your tour operator may be able to suggest appropriate organizations. If you are able to hand carry in appropriate clothing, this can be helpful.”

“Find out specifically what type of clothing, gender, sizes, and ages are most needed. Be aware of what is culturally acceptable and suitable dress, i.e. you should not send skimpy women's clothing to a conservative country. Clothing should be clean, in good condition, and in sizes suited to the local population. Occasionally bras are requested, but never send secondhand underpants for both reasons of hygiene and dignity. On arrival, the items are best given to an organization that can fairly distribute them to where they are most needed. If it is for a specific small community, it is always best that community chosen representatives decide on the equitable distribution to those most in need. Avoid handing the goods out yourself or initiating a free-for-all riot!

If you are considering shipping clothing over, you should consider the same issues that arise when donating other goods such as books:

- Are the cost, customs fees, and port taxes on arrival and further transport to the destination going to outweigh the value of the clothing?
- Is your money better spent purchasing the required items locally and supporting the local economy?
- Do you have a person on the ground who can ensure the goods clear customs and reach the intended destination?”

“This is not useful in the context of a development practice seeking to empower people. It directly encourages dependency. It also sends a subtle message that a community, because it is materially poor, is open to receiving second hand goods. As a principle, second hand goods are a mechanism for removing self-respect and dignity. They are useful only in the context of emergency relief situations.”

“Let’s take computers and set up a computer lab.”

“It depends on if it is appropriate technology. A computer lab involves long-term commitment to funding, maintenance, and staffing. If there’s no local capacity, it’s inappropriate technology for the community. You need to provide a small seed grant to get it going until the community can pick it up themselves.”

“Again, consult with the local structures (e.g. schools and NGOs) to meet actual needs. Do not use poor communities as a dumping ground for redundant equipment. Have a plan for maintenance and support in place. There is no point in giving a printer to a school that cannot afford printer cartridges or giving computers without appropriate software.”

“ Some questions to consider:

- Is the community in a town?
- What is the availability of servicing?
- Who will pay for repairs?
- Does the school need them?
- Did somebody ask for a lab?
- Is there a teacher who has the appropriate skills?
- What resources do they have? Do they have electricity?

These considerations are applicable to all other goods that require maintenance – for instance, bicycles.”

“Again, development practitioners are best positioned to sustainably enable the intention behind this guest question. They will know what the context of communities and schools are – if there is electricity for example.

Importantly, they will understand where the community is in the development process. They will provide support to community responses to their digital divide issues. To intervene and set up a computer lab could be pointless and a waste of everyone’s time and money – and, most importantly, disrespectful to the community finding their own way if it was not already high on their Needs list.”

“One-time gifts often require ongoing support or attention. For example, setting up a computer lab requires someone to maintain the machines, run and monitor the site, and train the students.”

“Let’s visit an orphanage, a school, or a health clinic.”

“Great – more than welcome to – though make sure your intention is not to stand at arms length and ogle, to engage in ‘poverty tourism.’ If your intention is to respectfully investigate other people’s cultures and their responses to adversity, and learn and grow from the experience, you’ll have a mutually beneficial time. Do not bring your binoculars, and ensure that respectful leadership is provided by a local person. Ensure you carry the energy of a visitor, not as someone who possesses power over another because of the material things you have.”

“Visits like these need to be done with sensitivity – poor communities are not zoo animals – They must be arranged through local structures, such as the tribal authority.”

“Children are not pets. Orphanages are not zoos. People are not helping by visiting poverty. Unless they are giving a skill to a place, interacting with kids needs to be monitored and shouldn’t be happening on a regular basis.”

“We work with specific orphanages, and it depends on if they are open to receiving visitors. We only allow this if there’s some sort of contribution the guests are making to the orphanage and the children, and it’s not just going and looking.”

“Visits to schools during school hours, orphanages, or other establishments primarily established to educate or house and care for children, or to a health clinic or hospital, should only be undertaken with prior arrangement through your tour operator or through a local person in appropriate authority that can arrange a suitably managed opportunity.

Random or unplanned visitation should be avoided as:

- It can be disruptive to the daily activities of the organization, particularly in areas where there are many foreign visitors.
- It can be potentially voyeuristic and intrusive to the lives of people working at or using the facility and not lead to any beneficial outcomes.
- It can arouse emotions of pity in travelers who want to help in some way, but a brief visit may lead to inappropriate 'band-aid' type assistance or handouts, rather than sustained and truly beneficial support.
- It may not allow the organization the time to ensure appropriate supervision and safety of the children. Sadly, we have to be aware that allowing random visitation can expose children to the greater risk of adults who may have sexual or other exploitation of the kids in mind.
- With schools and orphanages it can encourage a culture of dependency and an understanding in which children learn that if they smile and look cute, it will bring them or their organization gifts and money. Local staff may not be aware of the risks, but we are.

While most tourists are well-meaning and no doubt driven by a desire to help, the cumulative effect of brief visits by many foreigners can be detrimental to the children's long-term interests."

"After providing them with a rich background on politics, culture and social structures in Africa, we take our guests to see the projects of our non-profit arm. Through this organization we aim to provide long-term sustained engagement with local communities through educational, economic and community development initiatives.

After they visit one of our non-profit projects, many guests are moved to help. And through our programs, they can. For example, our School Sponsorship Program allows guests to sponsor a needy child's education; an act that changes the life of a child (as well as the sponsor!).

We feel that this holistic and coordinated approach to giving back—instead of piecemeal gestures, however well-intentioned—is the best way to accomplish the goal of any philanthropic traveler: helping people in need."

"Let's start a penpal program with a local school."

"Wonderful – these can have powerfully positive impact for both children and teachers in schools."

"They are difficult to manage very well and are labor intensive. There are lots of variables to deal with. Is the rural family even used to getting mail? Do they have access to stamps? Does the mail system work?"

"Is there a teacher who is excited about it and wants this program? Are the children already learning English? Is there an existing relationship with a school? The most important thing to consider is whether someone is ready to maintain the program on the other end."

"The teachers need to be very involved to be sure translation is being done and letters are being sent. Better to send to a class so that if one person doesn't get a letter they won't feel left out."

"Check if the school has the resources to manage this. If the children's letters will need translation into English, they may not have adequate staffing resources and time to undertake this. Consult with the school and ask in what way they would like to engage with you and what is practical for them. If there is willingness on their behalf, you may need to supply stationery and postage, or funds towards the cost of the children accessing email. If there is no postal service in the region, you may need to arrange a suitable intermediary to assist with transport and delivery."

"Should we bring school supplies to hand out?"

"It's contingent on what kind of structured relationships the tour company has with local communities and what community priorities are. What must be avoided is 'donor' driven support that does not fit community priorities.

Gifts such as school supplies, computers, and clothing can be more harmful than beneficial if not given in the context of a mutually beneficial relationship.”

“School supplies are needed. My sense is that any kind of donation can be done in collaboration with the community. Ask the schools what they need. Bringing something over without carefully consulting with the community can often not be helpful.”

“Don’t “hand out” anything. That will only encourage a situation wherein it becomes more profitable to hang around tourists than go to school or work. If there is an existing relationship with an organization that has needs, buy supplies from the local economy. The only exception to this is certain items that are very expensive to buy locally.”

“Yes – but not to hand out. Again, facilitation by a development practitioner can ensure that children and teachers are able to absorb the gifts in a fair and equitable and dignified manner. The teacher or headmaster might use these gifts as rewards for good performance if channeled through a development practitioner.”

“Giving gifts in an arbitrary way (such as school supplies or candy) often turns the people in a destination into beggars, who see Western travelers only as people who give them things. As you know, there is a growing view that Western aid – improperly dispensed – not only perpetuates poverty but worsens it.”

“They should be given to a head teacher or principal who arranges their distribution at a suitable time, for instance, at the beginning of term or as incentives for achievement. They should not be handed by you directly to students because this can encourage a perception that 'foreigners come and give you stuff' because you are poor. This can accentuate the unequal relationship between visitors and locals as well as encourage begging. “

If you are taking along requested school supplies, investigate purchasing them in the local community or regional city, so there's the extra benefit of you contributing to the local economy. The items may well be cheaper and may be more suited to their local requirements.

It may not be necessary that you take anything at all. The best giving can be shared interactions: a smile, a joke, a sing-song, dance or playing a game. Giving something of your friendship, time and interest to interact with locals can be the best gift of all.”

“Can we visit a village, a home?”

“These are best pre-arranged through your tour operator or local friends at a time that is agreeable with the local community or household.”

“We facilitate that with the community-based programs with whom we have links. These are established community-based programs who know how to handle visitation and can control for quality and cleanliness.”

“If the villages have set up the program, and visitation benefits the community, then that is alright. Also, if a guide has built a relationship with one of the guests and wants to invite them to their home, that is fine as well. But just as it would be inappropriate to drop in on people unannounced at home without having been invited, you should not just stop in at a village without having a relationship or an invitation.”

“Use local guides – this is key because you develop trust in community and before you know it, you’re welcomed into a home.”

“I’d like to volunteer for a week before or after my vacation. What suggestions do you have?”

“My experience with international volunteers is that they need 6 months to do something significant.”

“For some people it would be ideal for them to volunteer for an afternoon, but I haven’t found anything that is as good for community as for the traveler.”

“I would not support an organization that would let any volunteer in to play with their kids for a day or two. When it comes to kids, there needs to be security and consistency. Volunteers should have a background check and training. There needs to be a real curriculum and a commitment of 6 months to a year, not a new foreigner every day.”

“Volunteer programs require specific skills and capacity to manage. Too often volunteers appear in, say, a child’s life and as the relationship deepens and connections are formed, the volunteer leaves.”

“Volunteer activities must be appropriate. Too often volunteers are brought in to paint a school or build a house and on leaving the paint peels off and the walls must be rebuilt.”

“If they haven’t done the research to set up partnership beforehand, I suggest they go on a trip and see what inspires them. I also encourage them to do more research – what kind of organization do you want to work for? what are your skills best suited for?”

“Much of the important work that needs to be done may be office work or busy work. Ask yourself if you would be okay with that.”

“Your options are either to go on an organized or structured volunteer program where you pay a fee and the opportunity is arranged for you, or to go it alone and seek out an organization that may be interested in your assistance yourself. There are several good references that give information on options such as Lonely Planet’s ‘Volunteer - A Traveler’s Guide to Making a Difference Around the World’ and ‘World Volunteers: The World Guide to Humanitarian and Development Volunteering’. Several tour operators also offer voluntourism opportunities amongst their travel options.

A good way to start is to decide what professional or other skills you have to offer and consider what kind of organization may be interested in your assistance. One week is generally too short a time to be teaching or training people and generally may be best utilized contributing in a practical way such as towards a longer term environmental research project. Orphanages, or other establishments primarily established to educate or house and care for children generally prefer not to have short term volunteers as it is better for the children to be able to build long term relationships.

It cannot be stressed enough – volunteers, unless properly managed, are fundamental drivers of disempowerment of and disowning of projects by communities. All interventions should be approached with caution and respect.”

“Should I bring small gifts (pens, trinkets, candy, or other items) to give to local children?”

“In many cultures it is tradition to bring a gift as a gesture of gratitude for hospitality such as when you are a guest in someone’s home. This may take the form of a small useful household item, a souvenir of your country, or food such as fresh fruit. But generally we would advise against giving items directly to children, particularly if you are just engaging with them for a short time. “Indiscriminate giving by tourists can actually lead to children skipping school or being encouraged by their parents to take to the streets and beg. Do not give candy or sweets as in many communities there is inadequate dental care and malnutrition.”

“Gifts for visited schools (pens pencils paper) are appropriate – but again, only if facilitated through a trusted local development practitioner. The reason for this is that we have seen donations being accepted by the community only to be sold to teachers and students.”

“My recommendation is not to. I’ve seen many communities where children start flocking around tourists because they can get candy. Better to give something meaningful to an institution.”

“Well meaning gifts outside of a relationship result in loss of dignity to both sides.”

“Handouts makes it more profitable and exciting for kids to stand on the street when the tour bus is going by rather than going to school or work.”

“Definitely not candy – responsible for radical rise in tooth decay in communities around Mara and Serengeti [in East Africa].”

“Should I give anything (money, food, etc.) to street beggars?”

“This question is a tough one. We usually say to our visitors that its best to support organizations that work directly with beggars or street kids, or educational and capacity building programs that assist people so they won’t end up on street.

There are many corrupt organizations that will buy kids to beg. The money you give may then go to someone who is controlling children. You could actually be empowering that person.”

“No – it simply perpetuates the problem. If you would like to help them, don’t give to them – support an empowerment organization to make a meaningful difference.”

“Visitors to poor communities, when confronted by poverty. are easily moved to want to assist. But on the advice of various charities working to relieve poverty, we have learnt that giving to beggars can actually be harmful.

Beggars who congregate in tourist areas are often opportunists who do not need to beg or else they may be children who are working in organized teams, sometimes part of a dangerous underworld. But worst are the women and girls begging with babies. The babies may be rented, drugged to keep them quiet and starved and neglected till almost dead. This trade would disappear if people did not give to women begging with babies.

Giving to children is a sure way to perpetuate their poverty, particularly when they and their parents consider it more lucrative than attending school. The best way to support children is by supporting organizations working to provide educational opportunities to the poorest children. Your tour operator may be able to make suitable suggestions to you of appropriate local charities. A good education will be their best opportunity to climb out of poverty.

Giving directly to an individual can give you an immediate feeling of pleasure or pride, but consider whether you are really helping or purchasing gratitude. It can be difficult to refrain from giving to what appear to be really needy cases – such is our human nature. It is good to get local advice on what welfare services there are, particularly supporting people with disabilities and the elderly. If begging is their only option for survival then you may choose to give.”

“Should I help local children earn a bit of money by letting them carry my bags or be my guide?”

“No, those children should be in school! Instead, travelers should support community initiatives that are working to get the children off the street and into school.”

“It’s okay to do so if it is part of a structured relationship or agreement.”

“It depends on the situation. Always consult local guides first to see what is the right thing to do in that area.”

“No, you would be extending the same problem that results from handouts – creating a situation in which hanging around tourists is more exciting and profitable than working or getting an education.”

“We need to be careful not to pay for acts of kindness in monetary terms like paying kids for pointing you in the right direction if you are unsure where you are. We do not want to encourage the development of a society that equates every human action as a potential money making scheme.

“No – You will have every tourist swamped by kids fighting over the bags in no time. Rather, let them become your friends. Giving them money for services will generate a dependency and sense of entitlement in children as they begin to view tourists as anything other than people who wish to share in their world for a while.”

“What do I do when I take a photograph of someone and they ask me for money in return?”

The advice of those surveyed is:

- Ask in advance.
- If you have already taken the photo, and they demand payment, pay.
- If you ask beforehand, and they require payment, only pay if it is an official transaction and a fair price.

“Primarily, it's important to have a sense of what the customs are regarding photos before you travel to a country. In some countries you can take photos freely while in others, you can't. Start up a relationship – if you ask someone for a photo, and they say it will cost you, don't even take the picture. If you say you'll send one to them, then do.”

“Before the picture is taken, they need to ask if it's okay. If the picture is taken only to make money, the visitor should not take the picture. So first, we advise travelers to ask permission, and if the local says “Yes, but you have to pay me,” then they shouldn't take the picture.”

“It is important to interact with the person first and always ask their permission before photographing or videoing. If they ask for money beforehand, which is their prerogative, consider what it is worth to you and negotiate a fair price, or do not take the picture. If they ask for money after they agreed to be photographed and you have taken the picture, then offer what you think is appropriate. By approaching people in a friendly communicative manner they are more likely to be agreeable and allow you a memorable photo.”

“Refuse – but the situation should not arise. In some of the Maasai areas it is expected so agree the price first before you take a picture otherwise aggression will spoil your trip. If you are appropriately accompanied by a trusted, local development practitioner, permission would have been sought and granted prior to photograph. The watch word is respect.”

“I would advise tourists to be careful of whom you take a photo of to begin with. Street musicians, people in traditional clothes. Ask before you take a picture. I don't think it's an appropriate transaction to take a photo of someone and then giving them money in return because it may feed into the handout problem. However, in the case of salespeople, if you are going to take a picture of them, make sure you buy something from them. Better yet, leave your camera at home! You'll have a much better trip if you do!”