

Travelers' Philanthropy: Dos and Don'ts of Travel Giving



A project of the Center for Responsible Travel **CREST**



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Travelers' desire to help, interact, and learn from those they meet during their holiday is clearly positive. However, there are sometimes unintended consequences from these good intentions. Misguided contributions can perpetuate cycles of dependency, cause corruption, burden communities with unwanted or inappropriate donations, and require recipients to spend time and resources to handle 'gifts' they didn't request or cannot use.

As part of our Travelers' Philanthropy program, the Center for Responsible Travel asked a dozen experienced tour operators and tourism organizations who are engaged in supporting local community projects how they respond to some of the most frequently asked questions and suggestions from travelers about 'giving' while on holiday. Though they sometimes expressed differing views, overall they agree that when, how, and what to contribute needs to be decided by the host community, not the tourist or the tourism company.

Below is a summary of their responses. It is intended to highlight some of the complexities behind donation and help build a more enlightened traveling public. It's also intended to assist tourism businesses in crafting appropriate ways to harness the goodwill and generosity of their guests while meeting genuine needs in the host communities. A more in-depth summary of the responses to this survey, as well as a condensed "bookmark" version is available online at: www.travelersphilanthropy.org



Schoolchildren in
Tibetan Children's Village,
Dharamsala, India

When visitors suggest:

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

Experts respond:

"It is important that guests who wish to make a contribution to local communities do not simply impose their own will on such communities. The community should be consulted and involved."

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

"Offering financial assistance towards a project is the most beneficial way of making a difference as a guest. Projects to be supported through guest donations emerge from many hours of negotiation and consultation [between the tourism company's 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 the sustainability of the project will be compromised."



Fund a Water Well in Cambodia
through GoPhilanthropic and
Journeys within Our Community



**When visitors suggest:
"Let's send books."**

Experts respond:

"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."

"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."

"If you are thinking of sending books, first consider:

Is 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 they clear customs and reach their destination?

In what state are the books? If they are outdated, damaged or irrelevant, they will just add to a trash 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."

"An alternative would be to sell your used books and donate the money to a program that purchases new books for schools and libraries in developing countries."

**Positive Approach:
Myths & Mountains
READ Global Program, Nepal & India**

In partnership with rural Himalayan villages, READ establishes library-community centers that grow into hubs of education and enterprise and act as catalysts for economic and social development for these communities.



Global Village Foundation, GoPhilanthropic, Vietnam



When visitors suggest:

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

Experts respond:

“Great – more than welcome to – though make sure your intention is not to stand at arms length and ogle, to engage in ‘poverty tourism.’ Do not bring your binoculars, and ensure that respectful leadership is provided by a local person. Ensure that you carry the energy of a visitor, not as someone who possesses power over another because of the material things you have.”

“Visits should only be undertaken with prior arrangement through your tour operator or through a local person in appropriate authority who can arrange a suitably managed opportunity.”

“Children are not pets. Orphanages are not zoos. Unless the visitor is giving a skill to a place, interacting with kids needs to be monitored and shouldn’t be happening on a regular basis.”

“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.”



Global Village Foundation,
GoPhilanthropic, Vietnam

Positive Approach: **Micato Safari’s AmericaShare** project educates visitors about the HIV/AIDS epidemic and provides support for affected women and children, in the form of school sponsorship programs, shelters, and community centers.

“We endeavor to prepare our guests not only about the wildlife in Africa but about *life* in Africa. 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, AmericaShare. After a visit, many guests are moved to help. And through AmericaShare’s programs, they can.”

Dennis Pinto, Managing Director, Micato Safaris, New York



AmericaShare Project,
Kenya

**When visitors suggest:
"Let's send used clothing."**



Youth with donated clothing, Basecamp Explorer, Kenya

Experts respond:

"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."

"Clothing 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. Never send secondhand underpants for both reasons of hygiene and dignity."

"It sends a subtle message that because a community is materially poor, it 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 a context of emergency relief situations."

**When visitors ask:
"Should we bring school supplies to hand out?"**

Experts respond:

"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."

"Don't 'hand out' anything. That will only encourage a situation where 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 unavailable or very expensive to buy locally."

"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."

**When visitors suggest:
"Let's start a penpal program with a local school."**

Experts respond:

"They are difficult to manage very well and have 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."

"Better to send to a class so that if one person doesn't get a letter they won't feel left out."



Nature Kids Foundation, Nature Air, Costa Rica



**When visitors inquire:
"Can we visit a village or home?"**

Experts respond:

"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 visits through the community-based programs with whom we have links. These are established community-based programs who know how to handle visitations 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 his home, that is fine as well. But just as it would be inappropriate to drop in on people unannounced at your home, you should not just stop in at a village without having a relationship or an invitation."



Patacancha Community Project,
Country Walkers, Peru

"Use local guides – this is key because through them, you develop trust with a community and before you know it, you're welcomed into a home."



Kids in Pak Beng, Laos, Intrepid Travel

Positive Approach: Intrepid Travel

Sarawak, Malaysia

Intrepid Travel groups regularly stay in an Iban community-built and run longhouse in Sarawak. A rotational arrangement is in place with the men who transport visitors in their boats to the longhouse and with the women who prepare meals. Visitors sleep in a common area with all families contributing mattresses. The result is that the workload and income of hosting visitors is shared. The best way that travelers can give back in this community is through shared interactions during the stay and by purchasing handicrafts. During one of the evenings of the homestay, all the families display a selection of their handicrafts in the communal area. Travelers can buy items at fixed price directly from the maker.

Lake Baikal, Siberia, Russia

Intrepid uses a selection of homestays with Buryat families, the indigenous people of Lake Baikal in Siberia. They also employ one of the family members as a local guide for this region. Buryats were discriminated against during the Soviet period, due to their religious beliefs (Shamanism and Buddhism). Now there is something of a cultural revival, and Intrepid groups are able to help promote an interest in local Buryat culture.



Home visit, Basecamp Explorer,
Dharamsala, India

When visitors suggest:

"I'd like to volunteer for a week following my vacation. What suggestions do you have?"

Experts respond:

"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."

"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."



Wilderness Safaris

A traveler volunteers time and talent
Global Sojourns, Sub-Saharan Africa



Yachana Technical High School,
Yachana Foundation, Ecuador
©Frank Sánchez

When visitors suggest:

"Let's take computers and set up a computer lab."

Experts respond:

"Depends on where. Is it in a town? What is the availability of servicing? Does the school need them?"

"Did somebody ask for a lab? Do they have a teacher? Do they have electricity?"

"There is no point in giving a printer to a school that cannot afford printer cartridges or giving computers without appropriate software."

"Do not use poor communities as a dumping ground for redundant equipment."

When visitors ask:

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

Experts respond:

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

"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."

"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."

WARNING

Please **DO NOT** give candy (sweets) to the Maasai children. They are unprotected without fluorides, toothbrushes, painkillers and dentists. Abscessed teeth and chronic pains are often treated by Maasai elders without anesthesia.

TOURISTS WHO GIVE SWEETS ARE CAUSING MAJOR TOOTH DECAY AND SUFFERING !

Dr. raymond S. Damazo - Director, world Health Dental Org.

Sign posted on an East African tourism truck,
courtesy of Jane Crouch

When visitors ask:

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

Experts respond:

"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."

"Giving gifts in an arbitrary way often turns the people in a destination into beggars, who see Western travelers only as people who give them things."

"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 appears 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."

When visitors ask:

"Should I help local children earn a bit of money by letting them carry bags or serve as my guide?"

Experts respond:

"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."

"Depends on the situation. Always consult local tour guides first to see what is the right thing to do in that area."

Positive Approach:



Juan Carlos [Yanez] is exemplary of a local guide who is truly invested in a community-based project. He was a key figure in establishing the Patacancha Dormitory Project which provides housing and educational infrastructure for Peruvian students who would otherwise face an unmanageable daily commute to school. Juan Carlos is an excellent ambassador for Patacancha, regularly bringing travelers to the community and even inspiring them to contribute donations."

Sonya Bradley, Responsible Tourism Program, Country Walkers

When visitors ask:

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

Experts respond:

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.

"I don't think it's an appropriate transaction to take a photo of someone and then give them money in return because it may feed into the handout problem."

"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."

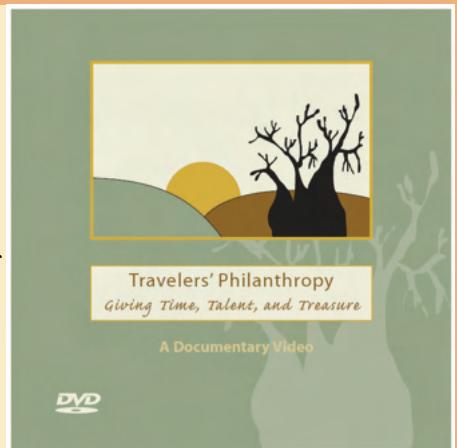


Traveler interacts with local children, Intrepid Travel, India

"Giving Time, Talent and Treasure"

**The first ever documentary on
Travelers' Philanthropy**

This 58 minute film examines the challenges inherent in successful philanthropic projects and showcases examples of Travelers' Philanthropy in Costa Rica, Tanzania and Kenya. It includes interviews with experts, tourism operators and community leaders. This impressive documentary was shot, edited, and produced by two talented young filmmakers from Stanford University, Peter Jordan and Charlene Music. We are grateful to ProParques and Basecamp Foundation for underwriting the production cost.



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2008 Travelers' Philanthropy Conference

Conference proceedings are available and include clips and transcripts from keynote speeches as well as all presentations from panel speakers.

www.travelersphilanthropyconference.org

**Tourism Enterprises:
Grow your impact!**

Increase benefits for the community-based projects you support by joining the Travelers' Philanthropy network.

For more information on how to become a partner organization.

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**To purchase a copy of the film (US \$15)
please contact**
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This is the first of a series of publications that will be collected into the forthcoming Travelers' Philanthropy Handbook to be released at the World Travel Market in London in November 2009.

Those who gave us answers and insights for this survey are:

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www.andbeyondafrica.com

The African Safari Lodge Foundation (Sandra Mombelli)

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Country Walkers (Sonya Bradley)

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READ Global (Carol Erickson)

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Pepy Tours (Daniella Papi)

www.pepytours.com



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A more in-depth summary of the responses to this survey as well as a condensed "bookmark" version is available online at: www.travelersphilanthropy.org. We invite your additions and suggestions as well. Please send to: • ae@responsibletravel.org