

Floating guava market in Bangladesh

THE WORD

A HELPING HAND

Susan E. Gibson has been involved in the non-profit sector for more than 35 years. She offers her tips for responsible voluntourism

WHERE DID YOU FIRST VOLUNTEER AND WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

Haiti was the first destination I travelled to with the sole intent to volunteer. I was interested to learn how wealthier countries were supporting those with fewer resources. But getting reliable information about programmes operating internationally 30 years ago was a challenge, and it turned out that the organisation was an evangelical mission. I was uncomfortable that the missionaries were carrying out activities that didn't involve the local residents in the planning process and moved on after a month.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT VOLUNTOURISM?

People thinking the desire to help is enough, and that 'popping in' to volunteer for a few hours is helpful. There might be a feel-good factor for the volunteer, but it does little to help. For example, there are extensive studies that indicate volunteering in orphanages in Cambodia exacerbates the problem, since well-intentioned volunteers can be viewed as cash cows and the children don't benefit from a brief visit. Additionally, in



emergencies and disaster situations, the best way to help is often just to donate to those who are best equipped to do so.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO CONTINUE TRAVELLING THE WORLD AS A VOLUNTEER?

When I heard about the success of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, I immediately set my sights on going there to learn about how small loans were making positive change to millions of poor women. I was fortunate that the experience I had as a volunteer evolved into a career in microfinance consulting.

WHERE ARE SOME OF THE MOST MEMORABLE PLACES YOU'VE TRAVELLED AS A VOLUNTEER?

Travelling to Sheikhpura in the Punjab, Pakistan, watching Nasira Habib, a grassroots educator at Khoj, teaching girls who had never had the opportunity to read was uplifting. Seeing Kennedy Odede at Shining Hope For Communities (SHOFCO) in action in Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya, working with local residents to provide potable water and access to education for girls was inspiring. *Susan E. Gibson is author of How to be an Amazing Volunteer Overseas. Barlow Books, £15.99.*

SUSAN'S TOP TIPS FOR VOLUNTEERING

START LOCALLY

First get experience of issues closer to home. There are many opportunities at local soup kitchens, drop-in centres serving indigenous people and refugees, and after-school programmes supporting young people.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Devote time to learning about some of thousands of grassroots leaders working around the world. Go with the intent of learning, not helping. Learning from and partnering with local leaders will have the most impact.

BE RESPECTFUL

Whether overseas or in a local community, it's important to remember that you're a guest at a non-governmental organisation (NGO), so be inquisitive, adaptable and courteous.