

HOLIDAYS WITH A DIFFERENCE

DO MORE THAN JUST SIGHTSEE AND SHOP ON YOUR NEXT TRIP ABROAD. "VOLUNTOURISM" IS A GREAT WAY TO LEARN ABOUT NEW CULTURES WHILE GIVING BACK TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND SUPPORTING IMPORTANT CAUSES.

As travellers, we're told that shopping locally is one way to support small businesses and contribute to the local community. But what if you wanted to do more? "Voluntourism" is something that anybody can get involved in. A combination of the words "volunteer" and "tourism", this form of tourism sees travellers giving their time, skills or energy to charitable projects that benefit local groups or the environment.

These five volunteer projects are a great way to see the world, experience a different culture, and champion special causes. To make your journey even more rewarding, book a stay at a social enterprise hotel. These hotels are dedicated to sustainable and ethical business practices and support local communities.

SVEG & HARADS, SWEDEN

How you can help: *Go bear viewing and tracking*

If you fancy a trip to the pristine Scandinavian wilderness, then this volunteer project is for you. For a week every August and October, wildlife-loving volunteers roam the Sonfjallets National Park in northern Sweden in small groups. Here, they learn basic survival skills and compass reading, and get to go fly-fishing, canoeing and hiking. There is also a day or two of bear watching and tracking, and perhaps even an opportunity to visit bears' hibernation dens. Along the way, you will come across other wildlife like moose, lynxes, wolverines and reindeer.

A week-long experience starts from £435 (\$780), and includes accommodation in a wooden cabin, lunch

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A different kind of vacation: Bear watching and tracking in the Swedish countryside.

during guided activities, pick-up and drop-off at Sveg (four or five hours north of Sweden), and all training, supervision and guiding. For more information: www.workingabroad.com/projects/sweden-bear-volunteer.

Stay at: Treehotel

Treehotel, located near the Lule River in Harads, northern Sweden, offers incredible views of the surrounding valley, river and tall pine forest. Designed by some of Scandinavia's top architects, the tree-house-like rooms are suspended 4m to 6m above ground, and are easily accessible by ramp, bridge or electric stairs.

There are six room types: The Cabin, The UFO, The MirrorCube, The Blue Cone, The Bird's Nest, and The Dragonfly.

2 Treehotel's rooms are designed by some of Scandinavia's top architects.

3 The uniquely designed UFO accommodation at Sweden's Treehotel.

4 Treehotel's rooms are suspended 4m to 6m above ground. No trees were destroyed during construction.

At 52 sq m, The Dragonfly is the biggest of all the rooms, accommodating up to four people and boasting a range of modern conveniences, including WiFi. The architect behind this design was Sami Rintala from Rintala Eggertsson Architects.

Local construction companies were engaged to build Treehotel. The rooms were built on live trees, and no trees were destroyed or chopped down during construction. The materials and construction techniques chosen make as little environmental impact as possible, the electricity is supplied locally from green hydroelectric power, and the lighting consists of low-energy LED-systems. Other "green" features include environmentally friendly combustion toilets, where everything is incinerated at 600 deg C, water-efficient bathroom sinks, and chemical-free, eco outdoor wood flooring. Treehotel also uses local food suppliers. Guests get to dine on dishes made from wild, seasonal and local produce, such as reindeer, salmon, Norrland bear, moose, and caviar of Kalix.

Room prices start from 4,700 Swedish kronas (S\$738) per night and include a buffet breakfast. Visit www.treehotel.se for more information.

LONDON, ENGLAND

How you can help: Try conservation or gardening work outdoors

If you enjoy being out in nature, why not give your time to conservation projects along the English coast or in the countryside? The National Trust offers volunteers the chance to make these natural environments more habitable for people and for wildlife. The tasks vary but all are rewarding: Think dry stonewalling, woodland work, and maintaining fencing and pathways. You can even conduct bio-surveys.

Green thumbs can sign up as garden volunteers. In this role, you get to work in some of England's most famous outdoor spaces, with tasks that range from planting and pruning to cataloguing seeds and helping local groups grow their own produce. For more information: www.nationaltrust.org.uk.



Stay at: The Wesley

The Wesley is a hotel committed to sustainable business practices and social responsibility. Whether it's the food, linen or building supplies, guests will feel good knowing that the hotel's products do not rely on the exploitation of people, child labour, animals or natural resources. The Wesley is also dedicated to reducing its carbon footprint, through the recycling of food waste, the use of locally sourced and organic ingredients in its meals, and the use of water-efficient kitchen appliances.

In 2012, The Wesley was awarded a Social Enterprise Mark, which recognises a business or organisation that earmarks a portion of its profits towards beneficial social and environmental programmes.

The chic 100-room hotel is conveniently located near the Kings Cross, Euston and St Pancras tube stations in London. Guests can expect all the comforts of a four-star city hotel, from plush bedding to modern furnishings. Rates start from £100 (S\$180) per night for a Superior Double Room. For more information: www.thewesley.co.uk.

5 Got a green thumb? Volunteer to tend to some of England's most beautiful gardens.

6 The Savannah Restaurant at The Wesley is not just eco-friendly, it uses ethically sourced produce and serves biodynamic wines.

7 The Carrington in New South Wales combines old world charm and modern elegance.

NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA

How you can help: Participate in a bush care programme

Just a 50-minute drive from Sydney, the stunning Blue Mountains National Park is home to the famous Three Sisters rock formation, ancient Aboriginal rock art, walking tracks, camping sites, and unique flora and fauna.

Bush regeneration is one way you can help conserve this UNESCO World Heritage Site. Every second Saturday of the month, from 9am to 12pm, the Valley of the Waters bush care group meets to protect Australian native plants. Working along the urban/bushland boundary of the park, the group carries out tasks like weeding, erosion control work, creek maintenance, and brush matting to contain and define tracks. This project offers gorgeous views out across Jamison Valley. Morning tea, training and tools are provided, and participation is free. For more information visit www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/Volunteer-activities/valley-of-the-waters-bushcare or call NSW National Parks on +61 4787 3104.

Stay at: The Carrington

The guest rooms and suites at this historic hotel in Blue Mountains feature traditional touches, such as claw-foot baths, bay window seats, stained glass windows, chandeliers, and Art Deco-style bathrooms. Some rooms also have fireplaces, and French doors that open out to a balcony overlooking the valley.

Saving water, reducing electricity usage, minimising chemical use, and the use of energy-saving light globes in all light fixtures are just some of the environmentally friendly initiatives The Carrington has adopted. Over the years, waste avoidance and recycling practices have reduced the hotel's landfill waste by 40 per cent.

The Carrington also supports a number of local businesses where possible. For instance, its spa services are provided by nearby Yindi Spa, its staff wears uniforms produced by Katoomba Workwear, and most of its honey, bread, flowers, butter, nuts, wine, eggs, and other fresh produce are sourced from vendors in the area.

A Traditional Room (No Ensuite) starts from A\$155 (S\$158) a night. For more information: www.thecarrington.com.au.

GANSBAAI, SOUTH AFRICA**How you can help: Get involved in a marine project**

If you are not afraid of sharks, this could be the adventure of a lifetime. All Africa Volunteers offers a Great White Shark & Marine Project, geared towards those who are adventurous, reasonably fit and healthy, and have a strong interest in these intelligent and vulnerable creatures.

On this project you will learn about the Great White, and then get to put that knowledge to use by assisting in research and conservation efforts. Most of your time will be spent on board the Shark Fever as part of its crew; you'll help with cage diving operations, collect data, enjoy lectures from marine biologists, and more.

The fee to take part in the project costs about US\$500 (S\$670) per week. Go to www.allafricavolunteers.com for more details and to book.

**Stay at: Grootbos Private Nature Reserve**

Nestled in an ancient forest and surrounded by mountains, Grootbos consists of freestanding suites stylishly furnished with canopy beds, and featuring separate lounges with fireplaces and private wooden decks offering beautiful views of the surrounding greenery and beyond. This luxurious resort also boasts tranquil gardens, fine-dining venues, serene ponds, and a pool.

Your stay at Grootbos supports the non-profit Grootbos Foundation, which was established in 2003 to help in the conservation of the region's biodiversity, as well as develop sustainable livelihoods through ecotourism, enterprise development, sports development and education.

Rates start from R5,700.00 (S\$550) per person per night sharing, or R17,100.00 (S\$1650) per suite per night. For more information: www.grootbos.com.

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Grootbos Foundation's Green Futures Horticulture and Life Skills College provides educational training to unemployed young adults.

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Build homes for disadvantaged families in Cambodia - no experience required.

SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA**How you can help: Build houses for the underprivileged**

Help house some of Cambodia's most financially challenged families. Many of these families include widows or widowers with children; they are barely able to feed themselves, let alone afford a safe and secure dwelling.

Volunteers help build traditional wooden Khmer-style houses for these families in rural areas, with tasks that include moving earth for the foundations of the house, measuring and preparing timber, and more. In some cases, volunteers may be required to conduct repairs on existing houses. No building or construction experience is necessary; volunteers work alongside local builders and will not be asked to perform any task that they are not confident doing.

Volunteer Building Cambodia accepts volunteers for its House Building Project. For more information: www.volunteerbuildingcambodia.org.

Stay at: Sala Bai Hotel

Sala Bai was founded by Agir pour le Cambodge in 2002. This French non-governmental organisation was started in 1984, in response to the humanitarian crisis that had gripped Cambodia by the end of the Khmer Rouge regime.

As the name suggests, Sala Bai is a hospitality school. Its students: Cambodian youth who are hearing impaired and those who are vulnerable to poverty and human trafficking. Here, the students are trained in various hotel and restaurant training programmes, from cooking and housekeeping to front office.

Both the hotel and restaurant are open to the public from October to July, giving Sala Bai's students the opportunity to work in real conditions and practise what they have learnt. Guests also help finance their training. There are six guest rooms and suites, starting from US\$25 (S\$33) per night. The restaurant serves inventive Asian and Western cuisine. For more information: www.salabai.com.

