

# *Lending a* **HAND**

Whether you're 16 or 60, combining a vacation with a philanthropic activity can be one of the most rewarding ways to see the world... *Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna*





## VOLUNTEER AT AN ORPHANAGE

When most of us think of our childhoods, we have fond memories of growing up with plenty of toys, going to friends' birthday parties, snuggling up in our favourite "blankie," or being kissed goodnight by our parents as we settled into our comfy beds, ready for a night of sweet dreams, hopes and wishes for a bright future. Worrying when—and what—our next meal will be (let alone whether or not it would be hot) and if we would have a roof over our heads fortunately wasn't a concern for most of us, but sadly some children aren't so lucky.

The devastating earthquake and ensuing tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, not only destroyed land and claimed countless lives, it also left hundreds of children orphaned or displaced, without a home.

Even now, nine years later, there's still an enormous need for volunteers in the orphanage of Thailand's Phang Nga province, home to many children. While the orphanage is a relatively established set-up, it relies solely on the money from private donors and institutional grants to keep it running, as well as volunteers to handle the day-to-day care of both the centre and the children. Using the donations, the orphanage is trying to build a path towards self-sustainability, with a cafe, bakery and craft shops as part of the complex.

**"The devastating tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean in 2004 left hundreds of children orphaned and homeless"**

Providing the children a safe place to live (there are about 25 children between the ages of six to 15 years old currently in residence), the orphanage also funds the school that they attend. This includes the costs of their education, books and pens. While many of the children who live in the orphanage were orphaned by the tsunami, some of them are also street children who were abandoned by their parents.

Volunteers do everything from helping teach the children in various subjects, to playing sports, gardening and creating art projects. When you're not busy helping them learn to read, write, sew or cook, you

can just spend some quality time with the kids instead. School days are from Monday to Friday: You can choose whether you'd prefer to volunteer and help out during class hours, thus taking personal time to explore the islands during the kids' weekends, or if you'd prefer to volunteer by spending time with the kids when they are at home or off school (and taking your personal time "off work" while the kids are at class instead).

The volunteer activities both at school and beyond are sure to keep you busy for as long as you like (there are always plenty of chores to be done at the orphanage!),



Quality time with the kids

but when you are hoping to take a little break from your volunteering work, the exciting island of Phuket is nearby. While the orphanage is slightly off the beaten track, popular holiday destinations such as Phi Phi Island (where *The Beach* was filmed), the Similan Islands, Koh Surin National Park and Khao Sok National Park are just a short boat ride away. Volunteers typically have two days off per each week they have signed up for, but the schedule is flexible and you're welcome to arrange them as you see fit.

Volunteer weeks begin every week on a Monday (except for the period between March 18th – April 28th 2013), and you can volunteer for anything from one to four weeks. One week of volunteering costs Dhs2,865, while each additional week costs Dhs550. This cost includes clean and comfortable furnished accommodation (with two volunteers per room), all meals and your donation to the orphanage, although it doesn't include flights, visas, travel insurance or any personal spending.

We can't think of a more rewarding way to visit Thailand's beautiful islands, and to give something back to people whose lives were turned upside down from one of the most terrible natural disasters in recent history.

Want to know more? Visit [www.podvolunteer.org](http://www.podvolunteer.org) for more details. →



Explore the islands



## 2 HELP CONSERVE THE ENVIRONMENT

Preserving the gorgeous green Earth we live in is one of the greatest gifts we can give to future generations. But with pollution, climate change and other natural and man-made environmental factors destroying everything from ancient buildings to beautiful landscapes all around the world, if we don't take action today, our grandchildren may never be able to experience the beauty we take for granted.

Which is why we think volunteering for a conservation holiday with UK-based company The Conservation Volunteers is such an excellent opportunity to help do your part to save the planet. The organisation—which has been running since 1959—works hard to protect the country's many green places from being lost or degraded through reclamation projects and community-led groups of activists that want to help preserve the environment.

Whether it's planting trees (in collaboration with The Big Tree Plant, Defra and the UK Forestry Commission, The Conservation Volunteers aims to plant 150,000 trees across England in the next three years), transforming local estates into green community spaces, building green gyms, reclaiming parks



**“The Conservation Volunteers and its collaborators aim to plant 150,000 trees across England in the next three years”**

and other green spaces, to hedge-laying and green wood-working, the centre has done some amazing things and there are plenty of ways to get involved. And the best part? There are so many different activities there's literally something to suit everyone, regardless of how old you are or what your specific skill set is. Visit [www.tcv.org.uk](http://www.tcv.org.uk) to learn more.



## 3 PROTECT THE COMMUNITIES OF KERALA

Deep in the backwaters of Kerala, there's a lush green world of rivers awash with houseboats, unique wildlife and warm and friendly people. And while you can certainly book yourself in for a relaxing vacation on a luxury boat or in an elegant hotel, and simply wile away the hours soaking in the beauty of this gem of India, there's a much more rewarding way to tour the area: by taking a volunteering holiday that helps boost the community.

While you will have the opportunity to enjoy the area's amazing scenery and experience living on a traditional houseboat, as you cruise along the backwaters, volunteers will have the chance to visit and help out in various means along the way. Here, you'll be able to visit an elephant camp where you'll help feed and care for the animals, and learn about what goes into running one of these sanctuaries. Volunteers will also visit special needs centres, where they'll be able to spend time with and help care for children and young adults with

learning disabilities. You'll also have the chance to explore some delicious fiery-hot Kerala cuisine, fish with some of the locals, have an old hand show you around the historic city of Kochi, and visit the Athirapally waterfalls.

There's plenty of free time for you to kick back and relax, too—volunteer working hours are from 9:30am to 3:30pm from Monday to Friday, so you'll have every afternoon and weekend to soak in the sun, read a book, get to know other volunteers or even head off exploring on your own. The project requires a minimum commitment of two weeks, giving you plenty of time to settle in to your peaceful and responsible new Kerala lifestyle. The cost of a volunteer trip starts from around Dhs2,130 depending on which time of the year you go, and includes a shared twin room, all meals, airport pickup (including a return transfer at the end of your trip), and in-country orientation as part of your training. It doesn't include flights, insurance, visas, local transport or personal spending. Visit [www.i-to-i.com](http://www.i-to-i.com) for more details.



Study and learn about wildlife

## 4 PRESERVE THE WILDLIFE OF THE ARABIAN DESERT

While jetting around the world with philanthropic intentions is a truly worthwhile way to spend your vacation time, we can't forget that there's still a need for conservation right here in the Middle East. With stunning and unique desert animals such as the Arabian oryx, Gordon's wildcat and Macqueen's bustard trying to recover from the threat of potential extinction, project scientists spend their days studying the animals to better understand their habits in the hopes of providing them with a safe environment in which they can thrive.

By volunteering with this non-profit organisation, you'll have the chance to learn about Arabian wildlife like no other: you'll experience a traditional way of life by being based in a comfortable oasis field camp out in the desert, sleeping in a one-to two-person dome with a Bedu mess tent and a kitchen tent within easy access. Volunteers will join a team of up to 12 members, which will be led by a local biologist and expedition leader, with experts from the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve to help guide you.

While this isn't a trip for the faint-hearted—it will involve plenty of time in the sandy Arabian desert, with up to ten hours spent in the sunshine per day—

anyone can take part, and there are no age limits nor requirements or any special or scientific qualifications. And you don't even need to be especially fit either—the programme is run when temperatures are cooler (you can expect the weather to be in the 20s°C) but as long as you can stand a bit of heat and walk five to eight kilometres per day, you'll be able to take part. Daily responsibilities can also be tailored to suit your fitness level, so you needn't be afraid of bootcamp-level activity if that's not your speed.

Each day, you'll head out in expedition Land Rovers and on foot to study the animals' behaviours and social structures. You'll help camera- and live-trap the animals, and learn to use radio and GPS telemetry to study the animals and their habits. The information gleaned from your research expeditions will be used to help create a sustainable environment for the animals, helping to conserve the wildlife and their habitats and maintain a sustainable biosphere. Whether you're a wildlife enthusiast, nature lover or simply the outdoorsy type who's looking to help preserve the beauty and diversity of the Arabian desert, this is one trip that you won't soon forget. Participation costs vary based on where you're coming from, and typically require an eight-day commitment. Visit [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com) for more details. ■

See the desert through new eyes



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