



Voluntourism

Destination of adventure,
nature and engagement



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GOVERNMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
Office for Cooperation with NGOs



Cross-Border
Programme
Croatia - Montenegro
www.cbccro-mne.org

This project is co-financed by the Croatian Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs. The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Office for Cooperation with NGOs of the Government of the Republic of Croatia.



bonsai UHPA

association of croatian
travel agencies



This project is funded by the European Union

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Association "MI" - Split and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.

Introduction

A large number of authors believe that volunteer tourism is a form of alternative tourism. In literature, the concept of alternative tourism is interpreted differently, but it is generally accepted that this form of tourism is one of the specific /selective/ forms of tourism where tourist activities are sustainable in terms of their character and scope, meaning they do not jeopardize the receptive capacity of the region and its natural and social environment. If we take the definition of alternative tourism, according to which this type of tourism “is in accordance with natural, cultural and social values and allows, both to the receptive community and guests, positive and useful interactions and shared experience” (Wearing, 2002: 32) as our starting point, then the voluntourist experience can be treated as an alternative to the experience of mass tourism.

It is important to emphasize that there is a significant difference when compared to the conventional experience where the consumer component (“consumer experience”) has less impact on the overall satisfaction of a tourist, while achieving the final goal of travelling (“top experience”) has a far greater, determining importance. Voluntourism is characterized not only as “benign” and ethical, but also as a noble way of tourist travel as it respects the standards of sustainability and serves as a catalyst of peace, understanding and cooperation among people. All dimensions of sustainability on the level of a tourist destination, such as socio-cultural, ecological and economic, are present in this form of tourism.

Voluntourist experience

Voluntourist experience (Wearing, 2002) consists of three components: ecotourism, international volunteering and “serious leisure”¹. Voluntourists expect an experience that is useful not only for them (contribution to their personal and spiritual development) but also for the receptive region – locals and their environment.

Volunteer work can be the core of a meaningful, creative and inspiring tourist visit, where one will be offered the possibility to directly interact with the members of the local community and with other voluntourists, a close encounter with the culture and way of life, making new friends, enrichment of knowledge, skills and experience. Around 2.000 new volunteer camps open their doors every year, the majority of them in Latin American countries. Although their stays last from two to four weeks, certain projects require considerably longer stays.

Above all, the idea of volunteering is basically an interactive and intercultural experience, acquired through contact between tourists and the local receptive community. Although this relationship is two-way, in discussions on volunteer tourism, far more attention is paid to the tourists and their needs, motives and experiences, than to the members of the local community. Some tourists actively and directly participate in the daily life of the local community, albeit for a limited time period, and their experience can be phenomenologically defined as experimental (Cohen, 1979).

Who are voluntourists

From the archetypal perspective, a voluntourist is one of the “newer type of tourists” who are willing to help others. The voluntourist emerged with the growth of civic consciousness and social movements in the 1960’s. The goal of this archetype is social, political and ecological transformation, always being aware of things that need to be changed in the world. We can describe this type of tourist as drivers of change, because they feel a special passion and excitement that is spontaneously activated when they see travel possibilities and means to help and make a difference in the world. This archetype of tourist is making every effort to improve the lives of other people, especially children, and endangered wildlife. Most voluntourists take to helping as a hobby, because they want to do something worthwhile, something that will make them feel better and more complete.

The most common patterns of behavior and main features of voluntourists:

- Natural interest in social, political and environmental problems
- Feeling the need to make a change in the world
- Individual’s wish to do something worthwhile with his/her life
- Wish to fix what is wrong with society
- Individual’s urge to act when he/she sees or hears about the mistreatment of humans, animals or the environment
- Interest in problems of a certain group or specific humanitarian purposes
- Speaking out against discrimination and oppression
- Wishing something more from life other than material success.

Initially, voluntourists were mostly middle-aged individuals and younger retirees who wanted to “contribute to society” (by investing their time, energy and money). Today, more and more young people are getting involved right after school or studies.

More and more volunteers are looking not only for authenticity, but also for impressions and experiences. Here the local community plays a key role by choosing what it wants from, and how it wants to be included in, a voluntourist project. When the local community does not agree with the way an issue that concerns them is interpreted or presented, resisting a voluntourism proposal and causing an effect of lacking synergy – a frequent objection is a complete lack of authenticity and communication becomes “stingy”, sterile, full of formalities and facts, etc.

By combining voluntourism products with special interest tourism, a platform for the creation of voluntourism products and projects is developed. It will reflect, with its interpretation and presentation, the collective memory of the destination, achieve the feeling of pride, self-respect and self-awareness of all, raising the level of collective self-discovery. It will enable progress and innovation in the area locally, but also at the wider national and European level.

Voluntourism as a form of social and altruistic tourism

In this context, voluntourism is viewed as a tourism for the “welfare of the poor”, not only of those who are travelling but also of those who are providing services. In scientific and professional literature, this is all tourism that can generate a network of benefits for the poor, i.e. in economic terms, socio-cultural benefits

¹ The concept of „serious leisure“ (*serious leisure*) was defined by Stebbins (acc.to: Mckercher, du Cros, 2002:142) as „systematic dealing with an amateur, hobby or volunteer activity that is so important to the participant and interesting by its nature, that he/she finds interest in the same, acquiring special skills, knowledges and experiences“. Such activity also brings a range of personal and social “prizes”, such as self-actualization, self-expression, fulfillment, contribution to sustainability and development of a group, pride, etc.

and environmental benefits. In practice, it is the type of tourism which can eliminate or at least decrease poverty and increase prosperity.

When talking about social tourism, it is important to emphasize that the development of social tourism can result in numerous benefits both for the users of tourism products and services, as well as for the receptive areas (tourist destinations) and tourism companies that provide these types of products and services. Some of the main benefits for users of tourism products and services in the field of social tourism include the possibility of equal participation in tourism activities and realization of fundamental human rights to rest and leisure, to escape everyday stress, improving the overall quality of life and enabling personal development. It reinforces the need to learn about new cultures and customs, with opportunities for learning and spiritual growth and development through social interaction and social inclusion.

On the other hand, the main benefits for tourist destinations and tourism companies can include the sociodemographic and economic revitalization of passive and underdeveloped regions, opportunities for employment, self-employment and the development of social entrepreneurship, the possibility of agricultural product placement, the decrease of seasonality and the increase of the overall living standard of the domicile population.

Intercultural communication in voluntourism

It can be concluded that intercultural communication is the most beautiful and most significant thing students and young people return with from volunteering journeys, judging by their comments and experiences on

social networks and blogs. For that reason, the people who experience this, i.e. intercultural communication and interaction with other peoples and nations - rate it highly, and are eager to relive it many times in the near future. Most of them consider this experience as the most beautiful experience in their lives so far. Positive experiences, changed attitudes and opinions about tourism and the lessons learned from the intercultural communication of people who participated in various voluntourism projects and journeys encourage others to travel and gain similar experiences. At the same time, they travel and meet with friends from their various voluntourist trips and projects, scattered throughout the world, independently influencing and adding to not just tourism in general, but also educational tourism and the entire annual development of world tourism. They understand, apply and spread the anthropological thesis that it is not important where you are going, but who you meet on that path.

The power of partnership – volunteering and the family of mankind

Volunteering as a form of transmodern tourism leads to a completely new pattern in the economy, in which it is necessary to redesign the flow of money and capital so that it begins acting in accordance with externalities. This is what we call a co-creative eco-centric system (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2016). It involves a continuous reinvestment of money from the financial sector into non-financial forms of capital creation, i.e. in natural, human, social and cultural-creative capital (especially required in tourism). This type of economy, accompanied by a new wave of technology centered on people and life, will be based on empowering the individual and collective human experience.

For Croatia and Montenegro this means the possibility of moving beyond the theory of economic growth alone, opening the way for alternative views on how individuals or groups work to advance themselves as active factors by introducing a spiritual dimension that enables their personal growth and development. Through the paradigm

of revitalization and through alternative forms of transformational tourism, including voluntourism, only the tourist activity meeting the needs and customs of the local community can contain the creative and inspiring impulse that will then be recognized by the voluntourists who will feel welcome and integrated there.



Location: **Vela Luka, Croatia**

Date: **from August 30 to September 10**

Description of activities:

1. By using procured tools and materials, the Mareta Mountaineering Association (which has been cleaning, maintaining and marking over 20 kilometres of hiking trails in the vicinity of the village) started the development of a circular hiking trail to the neighbouring village of Blato, connecting a series of historical and natural attractions of the western part of the island of Korčula. As part of the activity, the overgrown vegetation on old field paths and roads have been removed. (Dates of activities: September 2 and September 9).
2. The materials provided have enabled the association "Likovno stvaralaštvo Vela Luka" to continue their work on the project "Luka mozaika" (Mosaic harbour), which is being carried out in a workshop arranged in the premises of the former tin can factory. Members of the association have been leading interested members of the public through every step of the stone mosaic process. Simplicity and easy learning of that technique enables anyone to participate in the work, express themselves creatively in a medium already present for thousands of years in this area. Placing the finished mosaics along the Vela Luka coast has been foreseen, to adorn the public areas of the village. (Date of activity: from August 30 onwards).



Location: **Vranjina, Montenegro**

Date: **August 16, 2016**

No. of participants: **47**

Activity description: Organized in cooperation with the National Parks of Montenegro, the fourth voluntourists' excursion to Vranjina took place on August 16th, 2017. The participants, 47 in total, came to the location foreseen for

the activity at 10 a.m. The representatives of the Montenegro NP welcomed them in front of the Expo space, where they were given instructions for work. The participants were divided into two groups - one group worked on painting the benches and the other on painting the steps of the Expo space.

Results: Much of the rough work was prepared in advance because it required special skills and machines, so the participants of the activity did the painting work. The groups participated in various fun activities, such as kayaking and visits to the National Park Visitor Center, for which the tickets were provided by the Montenegro NP. After the activity at Vranjina, all the participants went to lunch at Virpazar, where they continued socializing until 3 p.m. and received souvenirs as a memory of the action.



Location: **Lastva Grbaljska, Montenegro**

Date: **August 12, 2017**

No. of participants: **26**

Activity description: The second voluntourists' excursion to Lastva Grbaljska was held on August 12th, 2017, organized by the Maslinarsko društvo Boka (Boka's Olive Growing Society).

The participants arrived for the activity at the foreseen place in the early morning hours. Executive Director of Maslinarsko društvo Boka, Vesna Đukić, welcomed them and explained what kind of olive grove it was, what kind of plants they used, where they were grown and listed what kind of olive grove works were scheduled for that

day. After the introduction, refreshments and snacks, the participants were assigned to their tasks.

Results: Since a part of the olive grove was already mowed, the participants of this voluntourist activity took part in raking, cropping plants and collecting large materials, i.e., separating material to be burned. Some of the participants still gave mowing a try, tidying the grove up even more. After the completion of their tasks, the participants visited the Podlastva monastery, where a group of kind nuns welcomed them. After breakfast at the monastery, the head of the monastery talked about some of the most significant events in the monastery's history, also giving them information about the present monastery life. Before leaving, she showed them the accommodation that is currently under construction and the rest of the monastery.



Location: **Orjen, Montenegro**

Date: **August 13, 2017**

No. of participants: **38**

Activity description: A group of around 40 voluntourists and local residents worked on the drywall construction. The group had the opportunity to learn about the basics of this

type of construction, typical for the Montenegrin landscape. The participants were also introduced to the importance of stone for the Montenegrin people throughout history and the ways in which men have learned to live in harmony with nature and to use the materials that nature has given them.

Results: After working on the drywall construction, a snack while socializing at the Mountaineering House was organized. There, the participants were presented souvenirs that will, along with the acquired knowledge, remind them of this voluntourist excursion.

Location: **Cetinje, Montenegro**

Date: **August 10, 2017**

No. of participants: **36**

Activity description: In cooperation with DZZŽ (Animal Protection Association) "Feniks" from Cetinje, the first volunteer trip to Cetinje was organized on August 10, 2017. As part of the excursion, a group of 36 voluntourists visited the Castle of King Nikola, Biljarda and Cetinje Monastery. After that, they helped in building

doghouses for abandoned dogs, feeding, cleaning and combing abandoned dogs. The activity included pleasant socializing of voluntourists and local residents with lunch and souvenir sharing.

Results: Through the common efforts of the voluntourists and the local population the following was accomplished: 4 doghouses for abandoned dogs were built, 1 box was prepared, collars and leashes for 10 dogs were provided, 20 dogs were cleansed from internal parasites, 10 dogs were protected against external parasites, 60 kilograms of dog food was collected, as well as partial funds necessary for the building of a temporary shelter fence. A part of the participants planned a continuation of works on helping the abandoned dogs, which would include completing the prepared box and building both the fence and more doghouses. People were curiously stopping by, talking with the participants of the activity and as well as about the concept of voluntourism, and many of them expressed the wish to socialize and meet tourists in that way. Through this excursion, the participants had the opportunity to meet Cetinje through direct involvement in the daily work of the community, leaving a positive trace and bringing with them new knowledge and experience. They were witness to the fact that Montenegrin tourism is not just the mountains and the sea, but the entire life of all the inhabitants who are open to new acquaintances and joint work for a common good.



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