Voluntourism as a trend – important aid or business model?

Darmstadt, June 7th, 2018 *** Traveling and doing good at the same time: more and more people discover volunteer tourism. According to TourismWatch, in Germany alone an estimated 25,000 people per year book experience-oriented volunteer assignments in the global South, often only for a few weeks and offered on a commercial basis. In principle, it is a good thing when travelers want to improve the social, ecological or economic situation at their destination instead of just having a relaxing holiday. However through the increasing demand in this way of traveling the tourism industry developed plenty of drawbacks damaging the reputation of voluntourism, as it is also called. Alleged aid projects can do a lot of damage, so it is important to take a close look. But there are still many positive examples of volunteering and green projects, as some Green Pearls® partners demonstrate.
Distinguishing “good volunteering” from “bad volunteering”

So-called orphanage tourism is an illustrative example of the dark side of volunteering: in his book “Das Gegenteil von gut ... ist gut gemeint“ the sociologist Daniel Rössler reports on orphanages in Ghana, where nine out of ten children have a family. In order to meet the increasing demand of volunteers from the global West, families were torn apart and children separated from their parents. This is not an isolated case: according to a study by Unicef, 85 percent of all “orphans” in Cambodian orphanages still have at least one living parent – a business practice that developed from an unreflecting volunteer tourism, offered in glossy brochures in combination with a safari or a beach vacation. It is just one example, why it is so important to examine the purpose and background of supposed aid projects very carefully.
Helping in the long term – with suitable skills

The initial question ought to be: which skills are useful on site? Of course, motivation is the basis for volunteering. However, without relevant skills, volunteering can cause negative effects. For example, nobody should teach children or help out with childcare without having suitable experience, and the same applies to the medical field. The reality is often quite different. Dubious travel agents communicate that it is sufficient to be motivated and show personal initiative. And especially with young people, a volunteer trip is advertised as a great opportunity to gain experience before entering professional life, to acquire new skills and to explore cultures and countries. This may also be true, but only as a positive side effect. Volunteering is not about self-discovery; it is about supporting where help is needed. A good volunteering organization can be identified by the fact that it carefully selects participants according to this rule preparing them by providing information and raising awareness.

What is the added value of my work?

Another characteristic of an aid organization that acts responsibly is that it organizes projects that have a lasting effect and help people to help themselves. This means that it is oriented towards the actual needs of the local people and involves them into its processes. It also means that volunteers should not take on jobs that local people could do themselves. In this case, too, it is important to take a closer look: Does a volunteer cause a local to be unemployed or does he have important skills that are wanted on site and that offer added value? Of course, there are also situations when
every helping hand is needed, for example in the wake of a natural disaster. However, this also calls for a consideration of the question what is more helpful: being present at the destination and at the same time causing further costs, or maybe making a donation that enables experts to be sent there.

Volunteers should question their own motivation and possibilities

Volunteering means work and not everyone can provide the needed time and energy. So it is particularly important for volunteers to reflect upon their own situation and motivation. “We recommend travelers and those interested in volunteering to prepare well for volunteer assignments, to question their own motivation and to stay at the destination as long as possible”, says Christine Plüss, executive director of “Arbeitskreis Tourismus und Entwicklung” (working group on tourism and development) and co-editor of the study “Vom Freiwilligendienst zum Voluntourismus” (“From Voluntary Service to Voluntourism”). “If there is not enough time for a well-prepared, long-term voluntary service, an encounter-oriented trip providing a look behind the scenes of tourism might be a better choice.”
Learning, helping and developing awareness

There are numerous opportunities for traveling sustainably and experience-oriented: the Peruvian NGO Inkaterra Asociación (ITA) provides extensive information on flora and fauna during rainforest tours and offers activities allowing visitors to support important nature conservation measures. In the Maldives, guests of Gili Lankanfushi can participate in the Coral Lines Project, assisting in the regeneration of coral reefs by attaching corals to ropes in collaboration with marine biologists. And Reethi Faru Resort is committed to raising awareness for the protection of flora and fauna, regularly organizing joint beach cleanups on “Reethi Day”. In Thailand, there are more and more community based tourism initiatives, involving travelers into the daily live of villagers and allowing them to learn a lot about cultural and natural activities such as fishing or vegetable cultivation. These projects enable locals to earn a living from tourism and at the same time to preserve their traditions and culture. In addition, personal relationships build bridges between tourists and locals, and tourists gain valuable, authentic experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the country and its people.

Returning from such a trip and acting as an ambassador for sustainable projects contributes to raising awareness and making it easier to distinguish good aid projects from allegedly good ones. So, there are many great opportunities for traveling consciously and making a difference. Green Pearls® provides further examples of green projects on its website and on the website of TourismWatch, there is a good range of quality criteria for reputable volunteer work.

The German Green Pearls® GmbH with place of business in Darmstadt, Germany unifies international tourism companies that support environmental protection and demonstrate social commitment. Thereby, Green Pearls® GmbH is the first holding company worldwide that consolidates sustainable hotels, destinations and restaurants in a global data source.

Among the criteria of admission to Green Pearls® GmbH are a sustainability plan on management level, sustainable architecture, comprehensive water, energy saving and waste recovery measures, the use of seasonal and regional ingredients in the kitchen, as well as a large commitment for the social balance in each of the vacation regions.

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