



## The pursuit of goodness

Volunteering your time, energy and effort to a cause while on holiday is one way to expand your horizons, and you can do this virtually too.

By **MIZAN KAMALINA JUMMAT**  
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SELINA Ng went on a hiking trip to Nepal, and fell in love with the country. When Nepal experienced a major earthquake in 2015 that claimed many lives, she decided that she would do "something" the next time she visits.

That something turned out to be volunteer work, specifically with an international disaster volunteering programme called All Hands Volunteers (now known

as All Hands And Hearts).

Ng, from Selangor, joined the programme but felt that she needed to do a lot more to help. So, in 2018, she started her own project called Right To Loo, which aims to create a more conducive schooling environment for children by building better sanitation facilities in schools. This in turn would give the children a better chance at proper education.

Ng sees voluntourism as a chance to make a positive change in someone's life, and perhaps, the world, while still

enjoying her travels.

"I enjoy doing volunteer work when I travel because I know that my efforts will bring about a meaningful difference to the community. It is addictive," said Ng, 32.

Prior to Nepal, she was involved in a programme in Pulau Perhentian, Terengganu to raise awareness on the conservation of turtles and coral reefs.

Voluntourism (a portmanteau of volunteer and tourism) is becoming more popular among today's travellers. Voluntourists

take some time out of their holiday to share skills, energy, effort and even money for a cause at the destination they visit. By doing this, they hope to make a positive change in communities around the world.

Voluntourism also presents participants with the opportunity to better understand local lifestyles and cultures, which means that travellers would get an all-encompassing holiday experience.

> TURN TO PAGE 2

Photo: MARTA ORTIGOSA/Pexels

### WHAT'S IN STARLIFESTYLE

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&gt;FROM PAGE 1

**Staying kind, virtually**

Unfortunately, Covid-19 has badly affected the global tourism industry, putting many voluntourism efforts on hold. Organisations have had to adjust their programmes accordingly, to ensure that their projects remain sustainable, and volunteers are safe.

For Liyana Amira Salleh, 28, this means joining voluntourism programmes online. “We can volunteer virtually now but it is not the same as actually being there to do the work. I look forward to the day when we can do all that again,” said Liyana, who hails from Sarawak.

She has a soft spot for environmental causes and has been collaborating with Fuze Ecoteer on The Perhentian Turtle Project. Fuze Ecoteer is an accredited social enterprise that supports many conservation projects in Malaysia.

The Perhentian Turtle Project, which is based in Pulau Perhentian, has taught Liyana many important things about sea turtles including how to protect them and the dangers that they face.

Of course she prefers to be on the island doing all the physical work, and possibly seeing live turtles, but for now, Liyana is content with helping out virtually, and is “shopping around” for more online volunteer programmes to take part in.

It seems like she isn't alone in doing this, too. Research by Curtin University in Perth, Australia shows that people have become more interested in helping others during the pandemic. This, according to the research, could potentially contribute to a boom in virtual volunteering.

This is good news for organisations and social enterprises that are undoubtedly affected by the pandemic. Many are facing the same problem these days – rapidly declining resources, whether it is money or manpower. Some, like Fuze Ecoteer, have successfully managed to move their programmes and activities online, quickly adapting to the new normal of pivoting to the digital world.

Fuze Ecoteer general manager and co-founder Daniel Quilter, 38, said that they have adjusted their activity models to include more virtual voluntourism work.

In February, they hosted virtual ocean plastic workshops for a school in Singapore to expose students to sustainable development goals for underwater life.

“Other than searching for alternative sources to keep us afloat for 2021 from donations and corporate funding such as matching grants, we had to cut down on our manpower. But I believe with the adoption of new norms and the progress of the ‘immunisation passport’, the industry will shine brighter,” Quilter noted.

Meanwhile, Ng said that building and maintaining meaningful connections across the globe is possible with technology.

“Despite the outbreak, my Right To Loo projects are still ongoing as my local friends in Nepal are able to continue with the toilet building work while I focus on online fundraising in Malaysia,” she said.

**Soldiering on**

For Animal Projects & Environmental Education (APE) project director Mazrul Mahadzir, 39, the survival of voluntourism now hinges on the ability to travel again.

“The future of voluntourism will depend heavily on the reopening of the tourism industry and the lifting of travel restrictions.

“As programme providers, we

# Good times and goodwill



Fuze Ecoteer volunteers observing turtles nesting at Pulau Perhentian in Terengganu. — DANIEL QUILTER



Liyana has a soft spot for voluntourism programmes related to the environment and animal conservation. — LIYANA SALLEH



Ng says that voluntourism allows us to gain insights into other people's lives and cultures. — SELINA NG



Mazrul says voluntourism is a good option for those who want to challenge themselves while on holiday. — MAZRUL MAHAZDIR

need to ensure that people feel safe to volunteer and travel again. The SOPs need to be followed strictly by everybody involved,” Mazrul shared.

APE, an accredited social enterprise, anchors its work in sustainable conservation projects involving the environment, wildlife and local communities. One of its projects is a collaboration with the Sun Bear Conservation Centre in Sandakan, Sabah.

Unfortunately, most of the volunteers who sign up for this are from overseas; the group now has limited manpower working on the project.

They shifted their forest restoration project online recently, which allows people to donate and plant a tree at a designated site from the comfort of their homes.

An e-certificate with GPS coordinates of their plant, together with a photo, will be given to the do-gooders.

These social enterprises are hoping that they can restart their voluntourism programmes soon. They expect many health and safety protocols to be in place, beyond just physical distancing and wellness awareness strategies. However,

they also welcome the move, as safety is always a priority for them.

**Plan wisely**

In the meantime, during this downtime, those interested in becoming voluntourists should equip themselves with the right knowledge.

Ng said one should always research the companies or organisations they intend to volunteer with. At the same time, check if their projects actually benefit the community.

“My top tip is to consider the impact on beneficiaries when joining the project and to be proactive along the way,” Ng said.

She also highlighted the importance of gauging whether voluntourism impacts a community in the long term.

“Make sure the programme providers are credible and that they organise legitimate programmes that are welcomed by the community and in accordance with local rules and laws,” she shared.

Liyana said proper research goes a long way when it comes to voluntourism.

“Learn if they are transparent in

everything they do. Don't be afraid to contact the organisation directly and ask relevant questions,” she said.

Liyana added that reading reviews about a project from past volunteers helps too.

“This way, you can understand what you need to do, what is expected of you, the way the project works and if it is a sustainable initiative,” she explained, adding that managing both parties' expectations is an important aspect of the project execution.

Ng said voluntourists should also think about whether or not help is truly required at that point of time.

“Can the locals actually do the job themselves instead of bringing in foreign volunteers? Will the locals benefit more if they are paid to carry out the job and earn an income?” she said.

When choosing a project or planning it out, Ng said voluntourists should join responsible, sustainable and tangible projects. Apart from that, make sure that the charity partners work with local workers to ensure that you are not taking away jobs from the communities.

**Check these out**

**Fuze Ecoteer** [fuze-ecoteer.com/](https://fuze-ecoteer.com/)  
**Right To Loo** [facebook.com/RightToLoo/](https://facebook.com/RightToLoo/)  
**Animal Projects & Environmental Education** <https://apemalaysia.com/>  
**Tropical Research And Conservation Centre** <https://tracc.org/>  
**Kemaman River Terrapin Conservation Project** [turtleconservationsociety.org.my/](https://turtleconservationsociety.org.my/)  
 Register as a voluntourist with the **Tourism, Arts and Culture Tourism** <http://voluntourism.motac.gov.my/register>

**Be good**

Despite the best of intentions, voluntourism is not without its faults. Some criticisms levied against it include donations misuses, short-term and unsustainable solutions, draining local resources and a publicity stunt.

However, Ng said you can silence detractors by being a good voluntourist yourself.

“Be genuine in your intentions. As a voluntourist, our purpose is to serve the cause we signed up for. We will learn and experience many things along the way, but our intention should not deviate,” she said.

Ng added that voluntourists should enjoy the local culture and environment too.

“Work hard but also soak it all in! Enjoy the journey, learn as much as we can and build meaningful connections with the locals,” she said.

Liyana noted that philanthropic travellers should also respect the people and culture of the community they are helping out.

At the end of the day, it's all about making a positive change, said Ng.

“Beyond the big or small impact my effort might have brought about in Nepal, what's most valuable is the warm interactions with the locals and unseen insights into their lives. If I had just been a mere tourist, all these would not have been possible,” Ng concluded.