

Giving Building a Better World While Touring It



Nadine Rubin; Jennie Gordon/GoPhilanthropic

GOOD WILL Bryce Rubin, left, delivers supplies to a school near Hoi An, Vietnam, during a trip arranged by GoPhilanthropic. Scott Gordon says a visit to an elephant refuge in Thailand has inspired him and his wife to help the center.

By HILLARY HOWARD
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NADINE RUBIN wanted to give her daughter the trip of a lifetime for her 21st birthday. They were planning to visit Hong Kong because her daughter was interested in fashion. "But I wanted to do something else," Ms. Rubin said. "I'd heard Vietnam was beautiful, but I had mixed feelings about it because I knew people involved with the war."

The effects of the financial crisis on philanthropy, and other articles about charity and giving.

But then Ms. Rubin, who lives in Westport, Conn., talked with Lydia Dean, president of GoPhilanthropic (www.gophilanthropic.com), a philanthropic travel company formed about a year ago. "I caught the bug," Ms. Rubin said.

Ms. Rubin and her daughter, Bryce, decided to experience Vietnam through the lens of the Global Village Foundation, a nonprofit organization run by a humanitarian, Le Ly Hayslip, that distributes portable libraries — wooden boxes with shelving and room for 250 books — to Vietnamese communities. Ms. Rubin and her daughter bought and delivered a library to a village and met the students who would benefit from the books. “Going there and seeing those kids, to say I bawled my eyes out is an understatement,” Nadine Rubin said.

Philanthropic travel — which introduces tourists to local outfits working to better their communities — is on the rise. Companies like GoPhilanthropic are forming, and entrepreneurs like [Stephen M. Case](#), a co-founder of [AOL](#), are creating eco-friendly luxury resorts that give back to the community (www.revolution.com). The United Nations Foundation recently formed the Partnership for Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (www.sustainabletourismcriteria.org), which issued guidelines for tourism companies.

“Travel philanthropy is now core to sustainability,” said David Krantz, program director for the Center on Ecotourism and Sustainable Development (www.ecotourismcesd.org). “In terms of responsible practices, originally companies were following more of a charity model. It was a lot of, ‘I give a check, take a picture and walk away.’ ”

The 2008 Travelers’ Philanthropy Conference, organized by the center, will take place next month in Tanzania. Between 200 and 250 participants are expected, up from the 80 people who attended the first conference at [Stanford University](#) in 2004.

“We realized that it was a bit of an ivory tower exercise,” Mr. Krantz said. “The choir was there, and the preachers too, but this time we wanted to make it take place where travelers’ philanthropy happens, where there are local communities receiving support, as well as a large safari industry.”

How philanthropic travel companies handle donations can vary. While GoPhilanthropic advises clients to write checks directly to its

nonprofit partners for tangible objects like wells or portable libraries, Exquisite Safaris Philanthropic Travel (www.exquisitesafaris.com), a two-and-a-half-year-old company, donates \$250 per trip participant to its nonprofit partner in question.

“Philanthropic travel is about traveling with an intention, with an open heart,” said David Chamberlain, president of Exquisite Safaris. “We need people to visit, connect at the heart and go home and talk about it and try to raise money. That’s philanthropic travel.”

Exquisite Safaris is organizing its first tour in the United States this spring, when it will take participants to observe the effects of the coal mining practice of mountaintop removal in Appalachia.

Though not a tourism outfit, the American Jewish World Service (www.ajws.org), which is dedicated to alleviating poverty in the developing world, has recently become more serious about its “study tours.”

“People who travel with us see the country in a way that no other American tourist can,” said [Ruth W. Messinger](#), president of the organization. “If we take you into a township, we’ll introduce you to a woman who’s started an organization to fight H.I.V. and to other women who are starting microfinance businesses.” American Jewish World Service provides financing to all groups visited on its study tours.

Susan Raanan of New York went to South Africa two years ago on one study tour. “In each location, we visited mostly mom-and-pop social service organizations that had grown to become important in their communities,” she said. “It was such a privilege to meet these women who had done very heroic things with very little.” Ms. Raanan is now a volunteer with the group.

Scott Gordon of Washington was also inspired after a trip he and his wife took with GoPhilanthropic. The couple visited the Elephant Nature Foundation in Thailand, where abandoned elephants are

tended by a Thai woman who has acquired a tract of land. "My goal is to help the organization acquire more land," Mr. Gordon said. "Our dream is to have our own animal rescue center."

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