

# Taking flight on a mission

'VOLUNTOURISM' NETWORKS OFFER A WEALTH OF WAYS TO DELIVER GOODWILL.

BY ELIZABETH HANSEN / CONTRIBUTOR

I love to travel, and I'd like to help families in developing countries. Recently, I looked at the opportunities offered by Habitat for Humanity and other humanitarian organizations. Each time, though, my needs for at least a basic level of comfort and a realistic assessment of my physical capabilities (which don't include swinging a hammer) kept me at home.

So, instead of hands-on helping, I resigned myself to writing checks. That changed, however, when I met American Airlines flight attendant Nancy Rivard.

While on a trip to Croatia, Ms. Rivard delivered a suitcase full of hotel toiletries to a shelter for abused Bosnian refugees. The modest gesture – plus the enthusiasm of colleagues and the support of the airline – resulted in the founding of Airline Ambassadors International (AAI) ([www.airlineamb.org](http://www.airlineamb.org)).

Initially, donated goods carried in excess cargo space were delivered by flight crews using their pass privileges, but today more than 60 percent of the 6,000 AAI members are “civilian” individuals, families, retirees, teachers, and medical personnel.

Rivard calls it “voluntourism” – a combination of volunteering and touring that results in memorable travel experiences. Every AAI mission includes time for enjoying the destination as well as delivering items such as medicine, hygiene products, school supplies, shoes, and soccer balls.

Volunteers pay their own way and stay at good hotels. They have fun putting on parties at orphanages, making improvements to schools, and helping at clinics. Grateful officials go out of their way to make sure that things go smoothly.

Because American Airlines has an extensive network of flights to Central America, that area was among the first to be visited by AAI. In fact, the monthly, five-day, four-night missions to El Salvador still sell out to new and returning volunteers. On these trips, participants have time to go to the beach, explore Mayan ruins, and shop for handicrafts.

“We visit one orphanage a day,” Rivard says. “The kids love the piñata parties and the goodies we pass out, and they really appreciate the hugs and attention of visitors.”

While American was the first airline to provide support, several others now also help, enabling AAI to reach a total of 52

countries.

Ambassadors for Children (AFC) ([www.ambassadorsforchildren.org](http://www.ambassadorsforchildren.org)) is another organization that offers overseas travelers a hands-on way to help. AFC's humanitarian trips currently visit Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Malawi, India, Nepal, Jordan, Guatemala, Serbia, Jamaica, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

In Amman, Jordan, volunteers stay at the Golden Tulip Grand Palace hotel and deliver school supplies. They may also conduct enrichment programs in a Palestinian refugee camp or volunteer at a school within the Madrasati initiative.

The group also spends time at the Queen Rania Family and Child Center

Alexander and Princess Katherine in the royal palace. Volunteers taught English, helped with arts and crafts projects, played games, cuddled babies, and generally made themselves useful at children's hospitals, shelters, and orphanages in and around Belgrade.

If “voluntourism” appeals to you, but you aren't a group traveler, you can always go to a developing country and dive in where you see a need.

A colleague of mine stayed at Mvuu Wilderness Lodge in Malawi's Liwonde National Park ([www.wilderness-safaris.com](http://www.wilderness-safaris.com)), which doesn't offer a structured program, but invites guests to visit the local village. Once there, folks pound



COURTESY OF AIRLINE AMBASSADORS

A volunteer from AAI (center) shares a moment with local children at the Zulu village of Nkundusi, in South Africa. Ambassadors deliver aid and take part in development projects.

of the Jordan River Foundation. Touring highlights include time to explore the ancient city of Petra and an opportunity to float in the salty water of the Dead Sea.

Judy O'Bannon, former first lady of Indiana, participated in an AFC trip to Serbia, which included tea with Prince

maize, teach whatever skills they have, and contribute to a school founded by Mvuu employees.

Back at the lodge, guests stay in luxurious tents with en suite bathrooms and go on game drives.

Sounds perfect to me. ■