

Traveling For A Cause

I love to travel and I wanted to help families in developing countries. In the past I've considered (albeit briefly) joining the Peace Corps. More recently, I've looked at the opportunities offered by Habitats for Humanity and other humanitarian organizations. Each time, my need for at least a basic level of comfort and a realistic assessment of my physical capabilities (which don't include swinging a hammer) have kept me at home. Instead of hands-on helping, I resigned myself — like many — to writing checks.

That changed, however, when I met American Airlines flight attendant Nancy Rivard when she was in La Jolla visiting her mother. In 1992, while on a trip to Croatia, Rivard delivered a suitcase full of hotel toiletries to a shelter for abused Bosnian refugees. That modest gesture, fueled by the enthusiasm of colleagues and the support of the airline, resulted in the founding of Airline Ambassadors International (AAI). Initially, donated goods carried in excess cargo space were delivered by flight crews utilizing their pass privileges, but today, 60 percent of the 6,000 AAI members are "civilian" individuals, families, retirees, teachers, and medical personnel. (www.airlineamb.org)

Nancy 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 medicine, hygiene products, school supplies, shoes, and soccer balls.

Volunteers pay their own way, stay at hotels, and have fun putting on parties at orphanages, making improvements to schools, and helping at clinics. Grateful government officials go out of their way to make sure 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. Local arrangements are facilitated through a liaison with the minister of foreign affairs.

"We visit one orphanage a day," Rivard tells me. "The kids love the piñata parties and the goodies we pass out, and they really appreciate the hugs and attention of visitors." »

Trekkers in Nepal, photo by Dave Douglas

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« While American was the first airline to provide support, several others have come onboard, enabling AAI to reach a total of 52 countries. In September, with the cooperation of South African Airways, a group of Airline Ambassador volunteers will travel to Cape Town and the Zulu area of Natal Province. Trip leaders Anne and Brian Kidwell are well acquainted with these areas and have arranged for Airline Ambassadors to attend the ten-year anniversary ceremony of the opening of the Robben Island Museum where Nelson Mandela was held. Afterwards, a former prisoner will conduct a private tour.

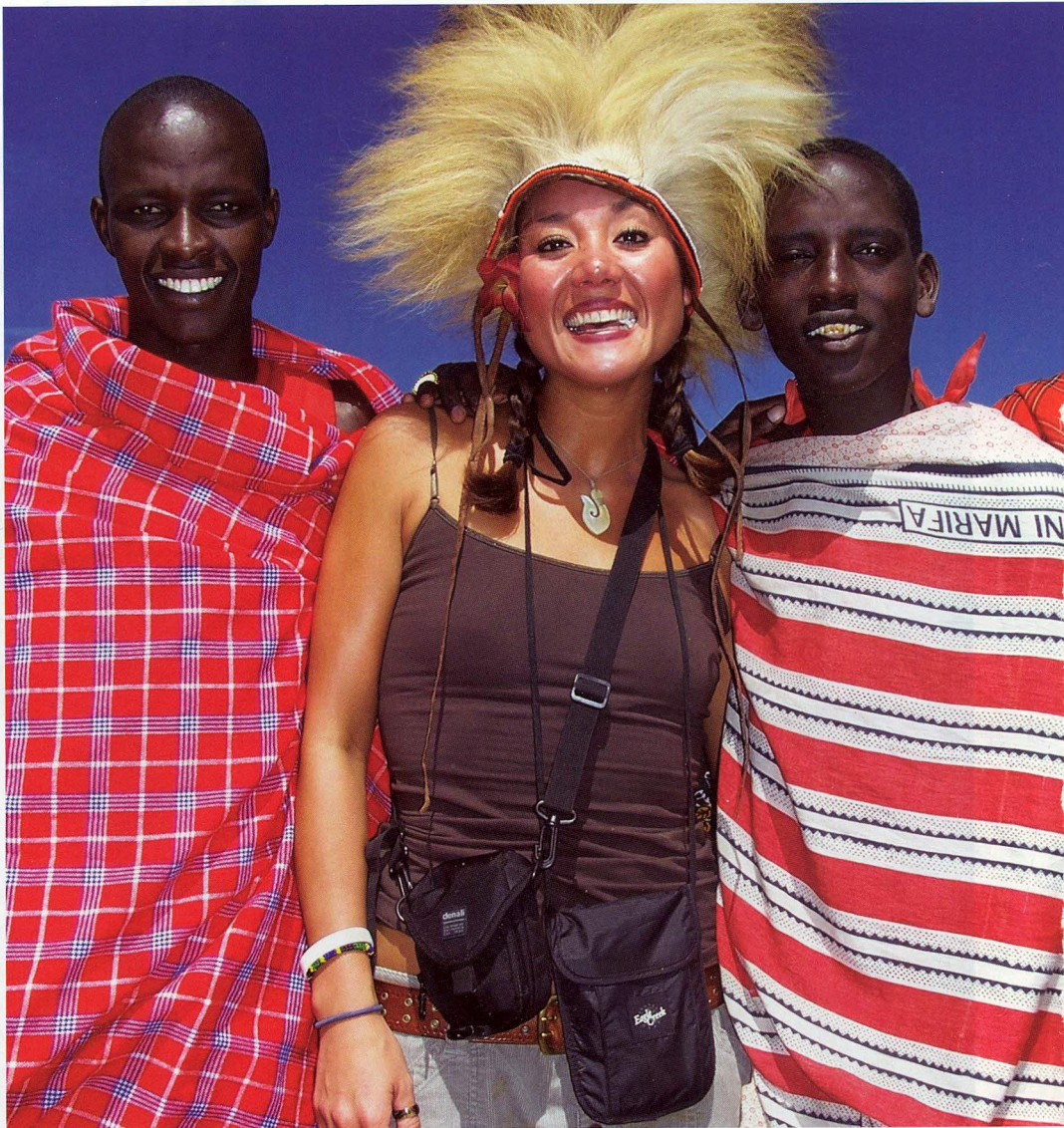
AAI
volunteer
Michelle
Campbell
with Watusi
warriors in
Zambia, photo
by Leanne
Hansen

The Victoria & Alfred will be the host hotel. This historic four-star property on the waterfront is also where U.S. diplomats stay. Brian formerly worked for the U.N. and is now with the U.S. State Department. Anne, who volunteers in the White House, says the hotel is “just lovely.” She’s also made arrangements for dinner at Two Oceans Restaurant at the Cape of Good Hope. (www.vahotel.co.za)

After Cape Town, the group will fly to Richards Bay in Natal Province. Here, Hluhluwe River Lodge will provide a base for volunteers to do some light work at a “crèche” (daycare center) in the Zulu village of Nkundusi and learn firsthand about the challenges of HIV, unemployment, and access to food and water. (www.hluhluwe.co.za)

“The food at the Lodge is great and the scenery looks like *Out of Africa*,” Anne assures me. “We’ll also have time for morning and afternoon game drives. In the past I’ve seen elephants, white rhinos, lions, cape buffalo, zebras, and giraffes. And we’ll go on a sunset river cruise to see hippos and crocs. We can also stop at the St. Lucia Wetlands native market to shop for baskets, jewelry, wood carvings, and Zulu art.”

In October and November, AAI director



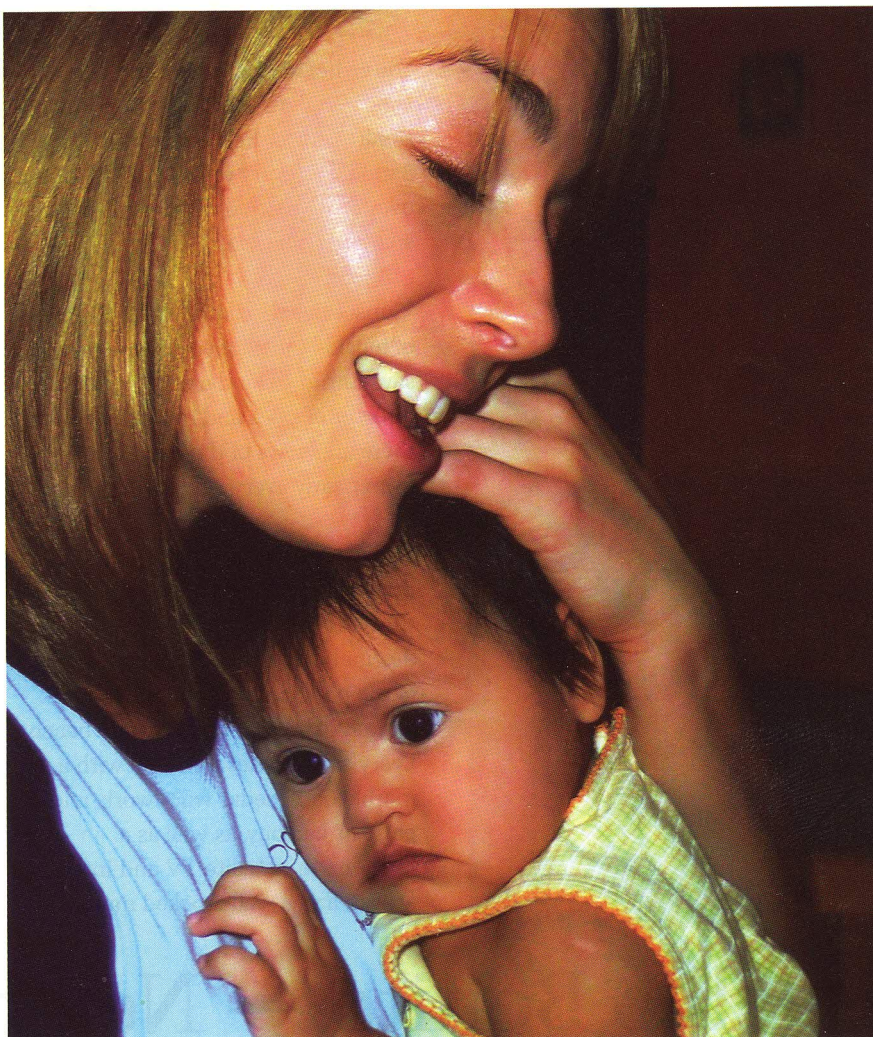
of operations Dave Douglas will lead trips to the Annapurna region of Nepal. "I retired at age 40 when I decided I'd rather travel the world than acquire more stuff," Douglas tells me. Since then he's been to Nepal 15 times, including trips he organized for Off-the-Rails, a San Francisco-based travel company he founded. (www.off-the-rails.com)

His AAI trips will visit an orphanage, check in with micro-credit borrowers, deliver aid to a remote school, and visit a community radio station. Because of the trekking involved, this trip is graded "active," but Douglas assures me Sherpas "will carry the heavy stuff." Lodging will be at four-star hotels and inns.

"I first went to Nepal to see the Himalayas and visit the highest mountain in the world. While I was there, I found it was the people of Nepal, their traditions, and culture that make the place so special," Douglas says, adding "It's hard to forget the smile that comes across the face of local Nepalis when I lend a helping hand."

Airline Ambassadors is the only international aid organization leveraging the capabilities of the airline industry, however they aren't alone in offering a hands-on way to help while traveling. Ambassadors For Children (AFC), founded by Sally Brown, is currently offering trips to Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Malawi, India, Nepal, Jordan, Guatemala, Serbia, Jamaica, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. Of these, Jordan and Serbia sound the most exciting to me. (www.ambassadorsforchildren.org)

In Amman, volunteers stay at The Radisson and deliver school supplies and conduct enrichment programs for students in a Palestine refugee camp. The group also spends time at Queen Rania's Center for Abused Children. Touring highlights include an overnight stop in a traditional Jordanian village,



Airline Ambassador International volunteer with baby Lupita in El Salvador, photo by Nancy Rivard

plenty of time to explore the ancient city of Petra, and an opportunity to float in the salty water of the Dead Sea. (www.amman.radissonsas.com)

Judy O'Bannon, former first lady of Indiana, loves AFC and has already signed up for the Serbia trip, which includes tea with His Royal Highness Prince Alexander and Her Royal Highness Princess Katherine in the Royal Palace. Volunteers will also teach English, help with arts and crafts projects, play games, cuddle babies, and generally make themselves useful at children's hospitals, shelters, and orphanages in and around Belgrade. (www.royalfamily.org)

Volunteering while abroad is so popular these days that even some for-profit companies like Country Walkers are

jumping on the bandwagon. Their Women's Adventures incorporate a philanthropic component. (www.countrywalkers.com)

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, which doesn't offer a structured program, but invites guests to visit the local village. Once there, folks pound maize, teach whatever skills they have, and contribute to the school founded by Mvuu employees. Back at the Lodge, guests stay in luxurious tents with en suite bathrooms and go on game drives. (www.wilderness-safaris.com)

Sounds perfect to me. — Elizabeth Hansen