



Becoming an International Volunteer :

A Comprehensive Journey to
Ethical Volunteerism

by MEDLIFE



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This guide is your first step to an exciting journey abroad. We've put together all the key info, tools, and tips you need for a great time volunteering in another country. You'll find out how to set your goals, get ready for your trip, connect with local communities, and use what you learn to grow yourself and your future career.

Whether it's your first time volunteering or you're looking to do even more good on your next trip, this guide is here to help you make a real difference and have fun along the way. Let's start this awesome adventure together!

MODULE 1

Welcome to International Volunteering 101!

In this module, we're going to explore what international volunteering is all about—its purpose, history, and how it makes a difference. We'll build a strong base for your volunteer work, highlighting how it helps both you and the communities you serve, what challenges you might face, and the different opportunities you can take part in. We'll also look at how organizations like MEDLIFE are making big changes in the lives of people in need around the world.



What is International Volunteering?

International volunteering is when people go to help out in other countries, doing things like teaching English, helping save wildlife, or providing medical care where it's really needed. It's not just about the work you do; it's also about learning from each other and experiencing new cultures. This exchange enriches everyone involved, making the experience much more than just offering help.



Benefits and Challenges of Volunteering Abroad

Benefits:	Challenges:
 Personal Growth: Volunteering abroad can be a powerful way to grow personally. You'll gain new perspectives and deepen your understanding of global issues.  Cultural Exchange: Working in a community that's different from your own helps you appreciate diverse cultures and promotes mutual understanding.  Skill Development: You'll have the chance to improve various skills, from speaking a new language to leading a team, all of which are valuable both personally and professionally.	 Cultural Shock: Adjusting to a new culture can be tough. It requires you to be open and sensitive to lifestyles that are different from your own.  Emotional Strain: Encountering situations like poverty and illness can be emotionally challenging. It's important to be resilient and have strong support to cope.  Logistical Issues: Organizing an international trip involves complex planning, from managing travel logistics like visas to ensuring your safety.

Volunteerism vs. Voluntourism



Volunteerism is all about creating real, positive changes in communities. It means truly getting involved with and addressing what these communities genuinely need. This includes working on projects that last and genuinely empower the local people. Volunteers work closely with the community, understand their challenges deeply, and help come up with long-term solutions. Real impact is made when we don't come in as the

white savior but instead work within the system, filling in the gaps in collaboration with local community leaders.

Voluntourism, on the other hand, often focuses more on the volunteer's travel experience than on the actual needs of the communities. This approach can lead to projects that don't last and don't truly help the local people. Worse, it can even support

businesses that profit from the community's struggles instead of helping to solve them.

True volunteerism is about committing to serve responsibly and ethically. It means respecting and lifting up the local system and culture, contributing to real progress, and ensuring that the positive effects last even after the volunteers leave.

Did You Know?

MEDLIFE was started to fix the problems with voluntourism and to really redefine volunteering. It focuses on sustainable projects like mobile clinics and development initiatives. MEDLIFE volunteers prioritize real community needs over travel experiences, helping to provide equal access to healthcare, education, and safe housing. This approach turns short-term aid into long-term benefits.

Preparing for Your Volunteer Experience

Getting ready for a volunteer trip means planning ahead and knowing what to expect. This section will help you pick the right program, understand what you're signing up for, and handle all the details of planning your trip.



Choosing the Right Volunteer Program

Finding a program that matches your interests, skills, and values is key to a great experience. Here's what to think about:



Impact and Sustainability

Choose programs that make a lasting difference and work closely with local people like community leaders and healthcare workers.



Safety and Support

Make sure the program has strong safety rules and people in the country to help you.

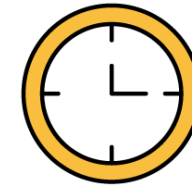


Cultural Experience

Look for programs that encourage you to experience the local culture and interact meaningfully with the community.

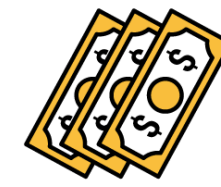
Understanding the Commitments

Volunteering abroad comes with commitments. Here's what to prepare for:



Time

Know how long you'll be volunteering and make sure it fits with your schedule at home, school, or work. Avoid scheduling your volunteer trip too close to exams or other important commitments, as unexpected delays due to weather or other factors could change your plans. It's better to travel with peace of mind, knowing your schedule is clear and can accommodate any unforeseen changes.



Money

Ethical volunteering often comes with costs that help maintain sustainable practices, like paying fair wages to local staff and using local resources responsibly. When you invest in your volunteer trip, you're not just helping the people and regions you visit; you're also contributing to the long-term success and sustainability of the projects.



Logistics

Make sure to handle all your travel details like visas, vaccinations, and insurance well ahead of your trip. We will delve into these important aspects in more detail in the upcoming modules.



Planning Your Finances

How you pay for your volunteer trip is an important part of your planning:



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Fundraising

Share why you're volunteering with friends and family, use online platforms to raise money, or go out to crowded public spaces and ask for donations to help empower those most in need.

Scholarships and Grants

Look for financial help through scholarships or grants that support volunteers.

Budgeting

Make a detailed list of all your expenses to avoid surprises and find ways to save money without sacrificing safety or quality. Tools like MEDLIFE's travel budget planner can help keep you organized.

MEDLIFE stands out because it's all about creating a balanced place where volunteers can learn, experience new things, and make a positive impact. MEDLIFE's SLTs are designed to make sure volunteering is done right: projects are led by the community and keep going long after volunteers leave. Also, MEDLIFE takes care of its volunteers by including medical insurance, so everyone can feel safe and secure.

When you sign up for an SLT, you can also fundraise to help cover your trip costs using MEDLIFE's platform.

Here's an idea of what you could say to potential donors:



Hi, my name is [insert your name here], and I'm with MEDLIFE at [insert your university name here]. MEDLIFE is a non-profit that works closely with communities in Latin America and Africa to improve their access to medicine, education, and safe housing. I'm raising funds for my upcoming Service Learning Trip to [insert place] during [insert dates]. On this trip, we'll work alongside local doctors and community members on important health and development projects. These trips keep MEDLIFE's work going all year, so every donation helps continue our efforts to support communities in need. Could you help us make a difference by donating? [insert link]

Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness

When you volunteer in new places, it's important to be culturally sensitive. This module will help you learn how to respectfully understand and navigate different cultures. You'll learn about cultural intelligence, how to

avoid stereotypes, pick up basic language skills for communication, and follow ethical guidelines. All of this will help make sure that your help is not only useful but also respectful and sustainable.

What is Cultural Intelligence?

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is knowing how to relate to and work effectively with people from different cultures. It includes:

- **Cognitive CQ**
Understanding the different norms, practices, and rules of other societies.
- **Behavioral CQ**
Changing your behavior to fit cultural norms.
- **Motivational CQ**
Being eager and willing to adapt to new cultural environments.
- **Metacognitive CQ**
Being aware of your own cultural assumptions and adjusting how you see things.

Growing your cultural intelligence is an ongoing effort that involves learning, watching, and thinking. It helps volunteers connect better and more positively with the communities they help.



How to Handle Cultural Differences and Avoid Stereotypes

It's key to understand and respect cultural differences to get along well with others. Here are some tips:

1. Research	2. Listen and Observe	3. Ask Questions
Learn about the culture of the place you're visiting before you go.	Watch how locals act and interact to learn from them directly.	If you're unsure about something, ask politely and show you're interested in learning.
4. Avoid Assumptions		
Don't fall back on stereotypes or broad generalizations about a culture. Appreciate that people within a community can be very different.		

Language and Communication for Volunteers

While you might not become fluent, learning a few basic words and phrases can be incredibly helpful. Try to pick up common greetings and courtesies such as how to say hi, please, thank you, and goodbye in the local language. Also, learn key questions and phrases that will help you ask for directions, inquire about prices, and handle other everyday interactions. Additionally, paying attention to non-verbal cues like body language and facial expressions is crucial, as these can be just as important as verbal communication in many cultures.

Being an Ethical Volunteer

As highlighted in the previous module about choosing the right volunteer program, being an ethical volunteer starts with selecting the appropriate program. It's essential to understand how your actions impact others. Always ensure that your volunteering efforts do not harm the community or the environment. Focus on the actual needs and desires of the community, rather than assumptions made by outsiders. Engage in projects that are designed to continue benefiting the community long after your involvement ends. By choosing a program that aligns with these ethical principles, you contribute to sustainable and community-driven initiatives, truly embodying the role of an ethical volunteer.

Health and Safety Abroad

In this module, we'll learn how to take care of your health and stay safe during your volunteer trip. We'll cover what you need to do before you leave and what to keep in mind while you're there, from health precautions to handling emergencies.



Health Precautions and Vaccinations

Before you go, make sure you know about any health risks of your destination and get the right vaccinations, for example Yellow Fever or Malaria Prophylaxis. It's also a good idea to check in with a travel health specialist for a pre-travel health check. Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for more information.

Safety Tips for Traveling Abroad

Your safety starts with planning. Make sure to go through this checklist to be ready!

- Make digital copies of important documents like your passport. NEVER take your passport around. ONLY take it with you if your activity requires your original passport. Otherwise, take a digital copy with you instead!
- Learn the safest ways to travel and stay in your destination. Find out if services like Uber are available, or which taxi apps are commonly used there.
- Investigate how safe and reliable public transportation options are before using them.
- Understand the local dress codes and norms to ensure respectful attire.
- Get yourself a belt or hidden pouch to secure your cash.
- Familiarize yourself with the local laws and customs to avoid any issues.



Dealing with Emergencies

Prepare for unexpected situations by:



- **ALWAYS** informing someone trustworthy about your whereabouts and plans.



- Having a list of emergency contacts, including family and local staff.



- Knowing local emergency numbers and the location of your country's nearest embassy.



- Learning signs of common health emergencies and where to find medical help if needed.

Coping with Culture Shock

Adjusting to a new culture can be tough. Here are the stages you might go through:

- **Honeymoon Phase:** Everything seems exciting.
- **Frustration:** The differences start to feel overwhelming.
- **Adjustment:** You begin to get used to the new culture.
- **Acceptance:** You start to feel comfortable.

To handle these changes, stay in touch with friends and family back home, take time for yourself, and know where to get help if you're feeling really down. BetterHelp and Talkspace offer online counseling services, making it easier to access support from anywhere in the world.



MEDLIFE takes pride in ensuring its volunteers are safe and well-cared for. We always have local staff with volunteers to guide and protect them. We also carefully choose only the safest transportation companies and places to stay. All volunteers are part of a group chat to stay connected and informed. Make sure you always communicate with your MEDLIFE trip leader too.

Getting Ready for a Transformative Volunteer Experience

This module is all about preparing you for an amazing volunteer journey. You'll learn how to set realistic goals, connect deeply

with local communities, work on projects that last, and learn from past volunteer successes. We want to make sure your experience

is impactful, respectful, and rewarding.

Setting Realistic Goals and Expectations

- **Understand Your Limits**
Accept that it's okay not to be an expert in everything, such as painting or building.
- **Recognize Your Support Role**
Understand that you're there to assist, and it's okay if your tasks aren't the most visible or glamorous. Everything counts!
- **Focus on Impact, Not Numbers**
Remember that success isn't always about large numbers; even if only a few people show up at a mobile clinic, your effort can make a significant difference in someone's life. Appreciate the value of the impact you have, even if it seems small.
- **Use your skills where they're needed most**
If you're good at sports, you can take time at the end of your activities to teach children some sports. If you enjoy dancing, consider teaching some dance moves

Being Flexible and Open:

- Be ready for unexpected changes and see your journey as a chance to learn and grow.
- Stay patient, because real change takes time.
- Keep an open dialogue with your team and the locals to make sure everyone understands each other.

Would you want a student or someone without expertise to build your house? Probably not. At MEDLIFE, we carefully select volunteer projects that match our volunteers' skill sets while also ensuring they bring real benefits to the community. For example, if we are building a staircase, we might have professional architects and engineers, along with community

members, handle the actual construction.

Meanwhile, volunteers might assist by passing buckets of cement or planting trees. We're always open to hearing what volunteers expect from their experience, but we prioritize the quality of our projects and the benefits they bring to the community above all.

Post-Volunteering: Reflecting and Taking Action

After you return, don't just move on. Use what you've learned to keep growing and helping.

Write about your experiences in a journal or blog, share stories on social media, or give presentations

to spread the word and inspire others.

Stay connected with the community or organization through online volunteering or by following their updates.

Think about how the skills you've developed, like leadership and teamwork, can help you in your personal life and career. Mention your volunteer experience in job interviews and use it to build your network.

Stay Involved with MEDLIFE All Year Long

- Did you know that your journey with MEDLIFE doesn't have to end after your service trip? There are many ways you can keep helping and growing with MEDLIFE throughout the year. Whether you want to make a bigger impact or just stay connected, here are some cool options:
- **Join a MEDLIFE Chapter:** Get involved with a MEDLIFE chapter at your school or in your community. You can take part in local events, help raise awareness, and even plan more service trips.
 - **Organize Trips:** Why not share your passion for helping others? You can set up a MEDLIFE trip for your friends, family, or community members to get more people involved.
 - **Lead Fundraising Efforts:** Fundraising is super important for supporting MEDLIFE's work. You could organize events or campaigns to raise money for health, education, and development projects in underserved communities.
 - **Volunteer Year-Round:** Look for ways to keep volunteering with MEDLIFE after your trip. This could be remote work, joining awareness campaigns, or even interning with MEDLIFE to learn more about how a global non-profit operates.



Personal Volunteer Reflection & Planning Sheet

This section is a tool to help you think about why you want to volunteer and what you aim to achieve.

Answering these questions can help you prepare and make a real difference through your volunteering efforts.

Instructions:
Take some time to reflect and answer the following questions. This will help you understand your motivations and goals for volunteering.

1. Why do I want to volunteer?
 - Think about what motivates you to want to help others.
2. What impact do I hope to achieve?
 - Describe the kind of difference for others or yourself you want to make through your volunteering.
3. What skills do I bring to volunteering?
 - List the skills you already have that could be helpful in your volunteer work.
4. What new skills do I want to develop?
 - Mention any new skills you'd like to learn or improve during your volunteering.



Use your answers to guide your volunteering journey, and come back to them to make sure you're staying true to your goals and motivations. Remember, the real value of volunteering is in growing, learning, and making a difference.

Pre-Travel Checklist for Volunteers

This checklist will help you get ready for your volunteering trip. Make sure you take care of everything listed here well before you leave to ensure a smooth experience.

Documentation and Legal Requirements	Health and Safety
☐ Passport: Check that your passport is valid for at least 6 months after you plan to come back. ☐ Copy of Passport: Keep a copy and a photo of your passport on your phone. ☐ Visas: Look into whether you need a visa for your destination and apply early. ☐ Travel Insurance: Get travel insurance that covers trip cancellations and lost items. ☐ Cancel For Any Reason Insurance: Emergencies can happen at any time, so it's a good idea to consider getting "Cancel For Any Reason" insurance. MEDLIFE offers this type of insurance to help protect your donation goals in case you need to cancel your trip unexpectedly (*Not valid for NY Residents, Canadian or UK students, and MUST be purchased within 21 days after the deposit payment). ☐ Emergency Contacts: Write down important phone numbers, including local emergency services, your country's embassy, and family back home.	☐ Vaccinations: Talk to a travel health expert or check the CDC website to see what shots or treatments you need. ☐ Medical Kit: Pack a kit with your prescription medicines, pain relievers, band-aids, and antiseptic wipes. ☐ Health Insurance: Make sure your insurance covers you abroad; if not, you might need to buy extra. (MEDLIFE SLTs includes health insurance) Financial Preparation ☐ Budget Planning: Plan your spending with a detailed budget. You can use MEDLIFE's Budgeting Planning Document to help. Download Here  ☐ Notify Bank: Tell your bank when and where you'll be traveling so you can use your cards without issues. ☐ Emergency Fund: Have some cash in the local currency set aside for unexpected costs.

Communication	Cultural Preparation
☐ International Phone Plan: Check if your phone plan covers international calls, or consider getting an international plan. ☐ Important Addresses and Numbers: Keep a list of essential addresses and phone numbers like your place to stay, the volunteer organization, and emergency services.	☐ Cultural Research: Learn about the local customs, culture, and what's polite or rude in your destination. ☐ Language Basics: Try to learn some basic phrases if you're going to a country where they speak a different language.
Packing Essentials	Reflective and Goal-Setting Preparation
☐ Appropriate Clothing: Bring clothes that are right for the weather and respectful of local customs. Check MEDLIFE's packing checklist by destination for guidance. ☐ Power Adapter: Pack a universal adapter for your electronics. ☐ Reusable Water Bottle: Carry one to stay hydrated and reduce plastic use. MEDLIFE Provides one when you sign up for an SLT.	☐ Journal: Bring a journal to write down your experiences and thoughts. ☐ Personal Goals: Think about what you want to achieve during your trip, considering the skills you want to develop and the impact you want to have.
Final Checks	
☐ Itinerary Review: Double-check your travel plans, including flights and accommodation. ☐ Local Orientation: Know how to get from the airport to where you're staying and where you'll be working. (If you sign up for a MEDLIFE trip, you will be added to a WhatsApp group a week before your trip with all these details and pick-up times)	

By carefully following this checklist, you'll be well-prepared for your volunteer trip, equipped to handle challenges, and ready to make a positive impact.



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Contact Us

Call us at 1-844-633-5433 or visit <https://www.medlifemovement.org/>

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