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# When 22,000 'like' you, you know you're doing well

While volunteer tourism is a small aspect of global tourism, it's growing fast, with social media such as Facebook making a huge difference to the volunteer's ability to spot the good guys from the rogues. Here's one of the good guys...

**F**ired by a disappointing stint as a student volunteer, Richard Walton did what any self-respecting responsible traveller would do – he set up his own volunteering organisation.

His first effort was to help victims of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras in 1998. Thirteen years later that organisation Global Vision International (GVI) is now one of the biggest and best-respected in its sector, helping more than 3,500 volunteers from 60 countries to support projects in around 40 countries this year alone.

It provides support and services to international charities, non-profit and government agencies, through volunteering opportunities, internship programmes, training and direct funding. Trips can last for anything from one week to one year.

Volunteer contributions fund all GVI's programmes, and on an annual turnover of £6million, typically 60-70 per cent is spent on running the field operations.

To the volunteer it offers safe, responsible travel experiences, exceptional training and career development opportunities, and enables people to make a real difference. GVI volunteers fill a critical void in the fields of environmental

research, conservation, education and community development. International partners include the South African National Parks Board, Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, Jane Goodall Institute, Rainforest Concern and Kenyan Wildlife Service.

Among its achievements one figure stands out: GVI is now teaching more than 10,000 children and adults every year, in indigenous communities across six continents, amounting to 24,000 hours of tuition.

The measures of success and impact are, of course, different with every programme, says operations director Andy Woods-Ballard. 'But seeing many formerly illiterate and/or innumerate children in Guatemala hitting 80-100 per cent in national exams when the Guatemalan average is 45 per cent is pretty special. And every stove we build in someone's house is a success in its own right and due to the reduction of indoor air pollution can add many years to the average life expectancy.'

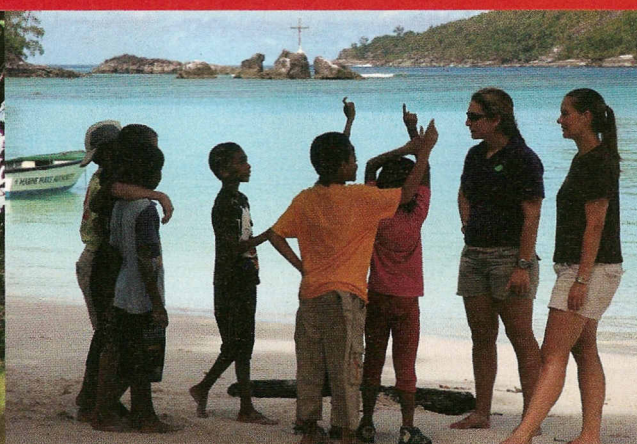
If GVI has come a long way, so, too, says Andy, has the volunteering sector overall. 'There are still some pretty bad ones out there, but they are losing market share rapidly to those that do it well. In my mind there was a switch around two or three years ago, when



social media (essentially Facebook), word of mouth, blogs and review sites became more important than pay per click advertising. This opened the way for those like us that had always focussed on the programmes rather than pumping huge percentages into marketing to grow through the great feedback and the fact that the average consumer is better educated about their choices having researched more heavily. We now have a lively and exciting Facebook fan base of almost 22,000 people talking about volunteering and the good it can do.'

To further weed out the rogues, Andy would like to see a single auditing and accrediting body that effectively offers a stamp of approval that is removed if organisations fail to meet certain standards. 'At present there are too many separate bodies with their own






codes, some of which are essentially membership organisations with no real teeth to their seal of approval.'

Despite the size of GVI's operation it has managed to avoid volunteers and projects being lost in the numbers. 'Every volunteer develops a relationship with their coordinator early on in the process,' says Andy, 'and this will typically be someone who knows the programme they are going to intimately and may even be an ex-volunteer or staff member. This ensures expectations are set correctly and the volunteers are well prepared to get into the field. The field staff then look after them as part of the GVI family and following their trip we support them through our alumni services. We believe that the good a volunteer does, continues after they return home as we see them

approach their lives in a totally different way.'

Is there ever a point at which big becomes too big? Andy concedes that there most probably is. 'However, we have not reached it. Essentially, each of our country operations runs in the same way as a small to medium-sized country specialist. Our challenge is then to ensure each country team is on the same page through excellent communication.'

'We have always been driven by the belief in what we are doing at all levels of the organisation. What we have done is to try to define the culture within our organisation that makes us so strong and ensure that we keep to our core values, across the many countries where our field and office teams work, in everything we do.'

 [www.gvi.co.uk](http://www.gvi.co.uk)

### The volunteer experience

'Working on the stoves at Santa Maria de Jesus in Guatemala was brilliant. We were sieving sand, mixing concrete, bricklaying and plastering, but we quickly felt as if we were contributing. The families we were building stoves for were so warm and welcoming. I'd never experienced such poverty before – and it made me ashamed to think of how extravagant and materialistic we are at home in our throwaway society. It was a privilege to be able to contribute to improving the health and lifestyle of the family, and to help to reduce the amount of wood needed to fuel their cooking.'

**Tom Heron, East Lothian,  
United Kingdom**

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