

## Introducing VolunTourism: Unscripted, Unpredictable, & Unbelievably Fun

by Christina Heyniger

It's late September 2006, a few days before the great fasting of Ramadan is set to begin, and I'm in the Boumalne du Dades region of Morocco, an area known for its deep gorges and exotic, phantasmagorically carved rock faces. On another occasion I might have come here to go rock climbing; I know that the French have been climbing here for decades. But today I'm here for "work."

My client has led me through a rocky labyrinth of dirt trails in the hilly village of Tamlalt (which you won't find on any map) to meet with a local painter who has begun a children's painting "studio" in her home. Sitting on her patio, with the sound of the river rushing by below us, we discuss her program and how we will organize a group of 10 tourists to stay in the village, donate painting supplies and conduct a cross-cultural art class in the coming months.

Three days earlier I had been in the town of Tansihkt, not far from Morocco's southeastern border with Algeria, and only "52 Jours to Timbuktu" as the famous sign says. Imagine narrow, bumpy, two-lane blacktop roads, red-walled kasbahs, acres of palm trees, the dramatic undulations of the Anti Atlas mountains, long desert tracks leading erratically off the road into the sand, and you get the picture.

It was here we met with the educated and graceful town pharmacist in his home. As we gathered around a low, circular table bearing trays of fruit and cookies, he told us how he had organized a local "association" to encourage villagers to save money every month in a fund used to make improvements to village infrastructure. After the meeting, he invited us to a local wedding—where we wound up sitting on the dirt floor of an architecturally elaborate village home, sharing a wedding feast of dried goat meat, couscous and very fresh buttermilk (chilled,

even!) with the groom's family. The generosity and warmth of these people surprised me. When was the last time you invited your out-of-town business guests to your friend's lavish wedding at the last minute?

As we stood next to the pharmacist atop a steep hill next to the village's original kasbah the following day, we plotted a day's journey for my client's guests - arriving in the village around 10 am, they would make the not-too-strenuous and definitely dreamy hike through the palms to the site of a well. There they would work side-by-side with villagers to build a new irrigation system (think lots of PVC piping) for the palms. There'd be a picnic – dates (of course) and pomegranates plucked from the trees, meat, and homemade bread of the local specialty. In the evening they'd stay at a locally owned guest house, and probably take a long bath at the hemmam, or Turkish bath.

And because these guests would be part of a small group, and because they'd have spent the day working with the villagers, by the time dinner rolled around, they'd be like family. There is no other way to create the opportunity for such spontaneous, pure interaction than through what more and more people are beginning to call "VolunTourism."

On another project, in Rajasthan, India, I watched as a group of well-heeled equestrian tourists from the U.S. and Sweden tried to support a team of doctors brought together to provide eye exams and cataract surgery for rural villagers. On one level, this scene is pure chaos—scorching, sweaty heat, loads of dust, hundreds of villagers—colorfully veiled women, children, men in turbans—the cadre of tourists in their riding togs (think tall boots, lots of sunscreen), doctors with magnifying lenses worn on headbands, wielding flashlights

to peer into countless eyes. But on another level it makes perfect sense, because people are people regardless of where they come from, and when they have the desire, they know how to communicate, help one another and have fun.

These are just a couple snapshots – but you can see that there is a tremendous range of VolunTourism experiences available to travelers with a real yen for adventure. Pick your passion – art, children, medicine, community building – this list could go on and on. According to Marina Novelli<sup>1</sup>, the most popular destinations for Voluntourism are India, Ecuador and Costa Rica, but from what I've seen, there's not a country on the planet where a person couldn't go to mix adventure and service for the experience of a lifetime.

The cynics among you might say, "Well, yeah, but is it really possible to successfully blend adventure travel with volunteer service? Can a tour operator really develop enough of a competency in each of these very different areas to deliver on such a concept? And do people really want to labor with villagers on their vacation?"

My response: Yes, people DO want this kind of authentic connection with people from other cultures. And as to the feasibility of creating these programs - it's not only possible, it's advisable.

When you introduce volunteer components into your existing service you open the door for people to become emotionally connected - not only to you, your brand, and your service, but more importantly to other human beings, outside their usual realm of experience. The "awakening consumer" absolutely craves authentic, meaningful, one-of-a-kind experiences and they are willing to spend time and money in pursuit of them.

**Notes:**

1 Niche Tourism, Contemporary Issues, Trends & Cases; Marina Novelli; 2006