

Katja Schluzy

Volunteer Tourism

*The Field for Product Innovations and a Platform for
new Alliances for Sustainable Development in Tourism*

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Acknowledgement

The idea for this master's thesis is based on an article, published 2005 in the UK edition of Newsweek, with the headline "Having fun doing good" which described the phenomenon of combining holiday and volunteer work as well as the increasing demand for this kind of holiday. My curiosity was aroused: what motivates people to take up volunteering while on holiday? Who would want to spend one's vacation time, or at least part of it, as well as money to travel someplace to do what most consider work?

The wide range of products offered and the diversity of players involved from tour operators to not-for-profit organizations motivated me to look behind the phrase volunteer tourism in order to understand not only the concept and potential but also the limitations of the concept as well as the structure of the market. Furthermore, I questioned why there is such diversity in volunteer products and players involved in this field in the UK and U.S and why combining volunteer work and travel is familiar with students in Germany but not very familiar beyond this target group. The complexity of this topic, the practical relevance as a growing niche segment as well as the interdisciplinary character of this relatively new research field was something I found challenging.

First of all, I would like to thank my advisors, Christina Heyniger and Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Strasdas, for their helpful suggestions starting with the initial thoughts on the topic, discussing it and helping to delve deeper into this topic. A special thanks to my advisor Christina Heyniger, Xola Consulting from the USA, who was willing and enthusiastic to support my thesis and gave me lots of inspiration and insights into the U.S volunteer tourism market despite the long distance. Her study on adventure tourism and volunteer tourism in collaboration with the George Washington University, U.S inspired me for my thesis.

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Introduction

“Voluntouring programs are incredible journeys through remarkable destinations, combining unique travel opportunities with meaningful volunteer work”

Source: AquilaTours, Canada, www.aquilatours.com

This statement, taken from the website of Aquila Tours, which is one of the first Canadian tour operators offering this kind of volunteer tourism, shows how this type of tourism is advertised and sold to the customer as a new kind of travel experience. This example illustrates how tour operators describe this kind of tourist experience using word games like “Voluntouring” in order to market this special form of tourism which combines leisure, volunteer work and travel. This way of spending meaningful holidays is gaining more and more popularity among vastly different demographic categories of people. To make a difference while on vacation is already very popular in the U.S, UK and Australia, but is also a concept that is getting more and more attention worldwide. The media has played an important role: from The Time Magazine to Forbes Magazine: articles have been devoted to the idea of blending tourism with community and environmental oriented work (The Time, 2007:49-51; Forbes, 2006:189-190). Lonely Planet published its first volunteer-travel guidebook in June 2007 called “Volunteer: A Traveler’s Guide to Making a Difference around the World” as reaction to the growing importance of this travel segment.

Newsweek International (2005) stated in its article: *“Having fun doing good: For some altruistic travelers vacation means more than just a day at the beach”*, furthermore describing the phenomenon as follows: *“It’s tourism with a conscience, undertaken by travelers who don’t want to experience another culture through the windows of a tour bus (...) “. People are prepared to pay to volunteer and they are even willing to devote holiday time in order to get actively involved and help in environmental conservation projects as well as social projects. In Germany, this new type of travel is slowly beginning to be considered as an emerging trend and was recognised by the press as early as end of 2006 and has been considerably strengthened since the end of 2007. This phenomenon of combining holidays with volunteer work has even developed a new term integrating both aspects: “Voluntourism”.¹ In addition, it has created an industry around this, the so-called “Voluntourism Industry”.*

The numbers of socially responsible tourists as well as the opportunities available to them are increasing. The desire to help is matched by an increasing range of volunteering

¹ Voluntourism.org (2007): A non-profit organization dedicated to the dissemination of information for travelers and suppliers. Voluntourism.org’s mission is to educate through its quarterly newsletter and global education opportunities, to empower destinations, operators, supplies and non-profits/NGOs through training

options. There are volunteer tourism experiences offered for singles, students, families and even retirees, as well as for people searching for a meaningful career break, the “career gappers”. But even companies are supporting their employees by sending them on corporate volunteering expeditions, known as Corporate Social Responsibility Travel, in order to help team building processes and to motivate employees.²

The diversity of products available reflects the needs of different target groups within this emerging market. Players in the market consist of for profit organisations ranging from small tour operators as well as “mainstream tour operators”, both of whom are integrating volunteer activities into their travel products. In March 2007, the holiday giant First Choice, UK bought I-to-I, one of the biggest companies specialised in what it calls “meaningful travel”, in order to enhance and diversify their product range. Nonprofit organizations and charities in the environmental or social sector are also becoming involved in the volunteer tourism sector by integrating tourists into their activities. This market dynamic is, as of yet, not evident in the German market: the concept is more and more in the media, but the market structure is not that diverse and has a limited perception of target groups for combining volunteering and holiday.

But the Volunteer Tourism industry and the volunteers are not only getting praise, they are also attracting criticism. *“Are Volunteer Vacations (...) merely overpriced guilt trips with an impact as fleeting as the feel good factor? “ Or do they offer individuals a real chance to change the world?”* asked The Times in 2007. The booming industry in pre-packaged volunteer programs is being criticized more and more. Taking into account the broad spectrum of issues referring to the concept of Volunteer Tourism, this master’s thesis has the following objectives.

Objectives

This master’s thesis aims to help understand the global phenomenon of “Volunteer Tourism” as well as the volunteer tourism market while including the aspect of supply and demand. For this purpose, the theoretical background as well as the research situation on this topic has to be reviewed. Although I will primarily focus on the supply side and the players involved, I will also briefly touch on the demand side as the two cannot be separated when one wishes to fully analyze the situation. The findings will then be used to analyze the potential of volunteer tourism in Germany.

Due to the complexity of this topic, this master’s thesis cannot provide a comprehensive coverage of the subject but rather will highlight important aspects and reflect on the

² www.trekforceworldwide.com

complexity of the issue. The following sub-research questions will be answered and discussed and will be a guide throughout this master's thesis on volunteer tourism.

- What is behind the phenomenon “voluntourism”?
- How do we define it and place it within other tourism segments?
- What are volunteer tourists looking for? What is their motivation?
- What is the motivation and desired benefit for tour operators and charities to get involved in this market?
- How can volunteering be incorporated into existing tourism products? How can new and innovative products be designed?
- How can uncontrolled growth and development in volunteer tourism be controlled to ensure sustainable business practices?
- What are the potentials of the concept as well as the limitations?
- Where does Germany stand and how will the volunteer tourism market develop there?
- What about the future of volunteer tourism in general? Will this become a global trend?

And finally: Does the concept of volunteer tourism provide a platform for product innovations as well as supporting new cross sector partnerships for sustainable development in tourism?

Structure of the work

The work is divided into four main parts. Part A focuses on the concept of volunteer tourism. It will introduce the concept by deconstructing this term and delivering definitions as well as categorizing this segment of travel within other tourism segments while also looking at the historical background of this phenomenon. This first part will provide the conceptual framework needed as a basis for the master's thesis and the following chapters. After setting the context and establishing the theoretical framework in Part A, I will turn my attention to the complex issue of understanding the volunteer tourism market.

The purpose of Part B is to investigate the volunteer tourism market. Though the focus will be on the supply side, the aspects of both supply and demand will be taken into account.

The question of volunteer tourism, its sustainability, the opportunities for product innovations as well as new cross sector partnerships will be discussed. To conclude Part B “Understanding the Volunteer Tourism Market” the main findings will be summarized and the research questions connected to this first part of the master’s thesis will be answered. before taking the German Market and its potential into account.

Part C will discuss the current role of volunteer tourism in Germany. From the analysis of the current situation in Germany, hypothesis will be developed in order to predict the future of volunteer tourism as a concept and a trend in Germany and how volunteer tourism is going to develop over time.

In Part D Experts, who cover the range of existing and potential players within the volunteer tourism industry, as well as stakeholders, are interviewed to further investigate the German market. As a result, a picture of volunteer tourism in Germany will be presented. In order to conclude the initial question “ Is the German market ready?” an outlook of the German market will be given on the basis of the hypothesis and the findings of the exploratory study conducted for the purpose of considering driving forces as well as barriers for the concept of volunteer tourism.

Finally an outlook on potentials of the concept of volunteer tourism as well as the limitations will be provided. Additionally suggestions as well as future research questions will be formulated due to the remaining gaps in the research in this field.

Methodology

Due to the broad nature of the volunteer tourism phenomenon, a multidisciplinary approach will be used in order to answer the research questions and to explore this phenomenon from different perspectives and disciplines including tourism and leisure studies, sociology and psychology as well as economic studies. In order to set the context and create an understanding of the concept of volunteer tourism from a theoretical perspective, an international literature review was done. Due to the popularity of this travel segment in the UK, U.S as well as Australia, the analysis will mainly be based on literature from and research conducted in these countries. Due to the fact that research sources on volunteer tourism have been very limited and fragmented and come mainly from the UK, US and Australia, this master’s is written in English. The choice of this language also takes into account the fact that volunteer tourism as well as its research community seems to be a global phenomenon.

Because of the fact that volunteer tourism is a very new research discipline, different methods of research are applied from secondary research to primary research. Web based research has had to be added, specifically in regards to the analysis of the supply aspect of

the volunteer tourism market. Travel literature as well as press coverage on the topic were an important research source as well. Due to the lack of empirical and theoretical exploration, there was the need to draw on broader tourism literature as well as literature and research on volunteerism. Various approaches have to be considered along with their practical applications. Secondary research on both, the supply and demand side, will be taken into consideration in order to get a complete picture of the volunteer tourism market. However, the main focus will be on exploring the supply side of this emerging market. Therefore, no consumer primary research will be provided.

For the German market, an exploratory study with expert interviews on the basis of semi-structured questionnaires was conducted in order to forecast the path of volunteer tourism. This kind of primary research was needed in order to conclude the initial question “Is the German market ready for the volunteer tourism Market?” This qualitative study aims to gain insight into the views and attitudes of experts and stakeholders on the new concept of volunteer tourism. On the basis of the findings of the exploratory study, conducted for the purpose of considering driving forces as well as barriers for the concept of volunteer tourism, an outlook on the German market will be given. This exploratory study aims to provide a data basis for further research to be conducted for the German market.

One has to take into consideration that this master’s thesis is not aiming to provide a global study on volunteer tourism. Nevertheless, in order to illustrate the diversity of products offered and organizations providing a volunteer tourism experience, international examples are used in order to illustrate its diversity as well as to bridge theory with practice.