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Travelfuture Promotes Voluntourism in Mexico

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Travelfuture's commissionable experiences for groups help travelers contribute to the community

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Mexico



Travelfuture volunteers might make pinatas with local children, who can then sell them to help

Travel agents selling Mexico wear many hats, organizing leisure travel, business trips and sometimes a bit of both. These days, voluntourism — especially in the corporate incentive and meetings sector — is more popular than ever and represents an emerging business opportunity for agents.

San Francisco-based Travelfuture specializes in connecting leisure and business travel groups with volunteer experiences in Mexico. The idea is to enrich the traveler's experience while giving back to the local community via a qualified non-profit organization. While volunteer options cover a wide swath of activities, those focusing on the natural world are always a big favorite.

support their families. // © 2014
Travelfuture

Feature image (above): Lending
a hand might mean helping
village women pick ingredients
for homemade tamales. // ©
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The Details

Travelfuture

www.travelfuture.com

Get Your Guide

www.getyourguide.com

Cancun Convention and
Visitors Bureau

www.cancun.travel

Flora, Fauna Y Cultura

www.florafauyacultura.org

“The most popular activities are those that support environmental conservation, like our Forest Nursery activity in which participants support reforestation,” said Yvonne Nader, Travelfuture’s Mexican activity representative.

“Our turtle release program is very popular, too,” said Pamela Duque from Flora, Fauna Y Cultura (FFYC), one of the non-profit organizations Travelfuture supports. “If a group involves families, the children love the experience.”

Travelfuture currently operates primarily in Cancun, with plans to expand operations to Los Cabos and Puerto Vallarta later this year.

TravelAge West spoke with Travelfuture president Kimberly Osmer about the company’s programs, what visitors can expect, and how travel agents can get involved.

Who is Travelfuture’s typical voluntourism client?

We specialize in activities for groups, corporate meetings and incentive travelers. These clients want trained guides to manage the experience. We’ve even dealt with wedding parties who wanted to do something different than a traditional rehearsal

dinner. Companies interested in team-building activities frequently come to us. Our customer is interested in working with locals who have a genuine need for help. They want to be immersed in the culture for maximum impact during their stay.

How do you work with travel agents and their clients? So many people are leery about “do gooder” organizations.

As a former American Express travel agent, I’m very diligent about who we work with. The organizations have to be in business for at least three years and are fiscally sound. We also work with CEMIFI (Centro Mexicano para la Filantropia), which is an association of leading Mexican nonprofits. We encourage membership and most of the Mexican nonprofits we work with are members. We share our proceeds with the local nonprofit involved, which gets both manpower and donations to realize their project goals.

What’s your commission structure?

We pay travel agents 15 percent for group bookings of 15-plus people. Unfortunately, we don’t accept individual bookings due to the nature of the work.

What can visitors expect from their experience?

We try to keep the activities varied. We’ve helped build bikes for the local community that people can

use personally or sell. We've had volunteers participate in a pinata making activity with economically and learning-disadvantaged youth. They then sell them in the town. These kids get both a social activity and help with their families. We ask the nonprofits what they need and cater to them. That might mean helping ladies make tamales that will be a volunteer's lunch later in the day!

Must volunteers work a lot of hours to make a difference?

Even if you have just one hour to spare, we can go to the Tulum rainforest, break the group up into teams and plant seedlings in compost. Once, our group planted over 900 seedlings in one hour, which is the equivalent of three days of labor. This gets people really excited to do more. We focus on educational, environmental, social and cultural knowledge. Whether you have a whole day to paint a church or just a few hours, we can work with you.

How do you ensure this is a safe experience for volunteers?

We carefully vet nonprofits in the region. Participants sign a contract with us that include health riders for activities. We handle this as professionally as any tour operator.

Are the locals used to volunteers coming in and helping? Does anyone keep in touch afterwards?

Most of the local nonprofits we work with are used to receiving local volunteers. They're excited to know they're receiving support and interacting with participants from other cities and countries. Many people, after they leave, continue to invest in the program they experienced with tax-deductible donations — either \$5 or \$10 or a lump sum, based on their preferences.

What's ahead for Travefuture?

We plan to expand our activities to Los Cabos in the fall and Puerto Vallarta later this year. We have requests for marine life work, including beach cleanings to help with turtle hatchlings during nesting season and whale protection.

What's the price range and booking window for this experience?

We can book excursions as close in as two weeks in advance. Prices range from \$75 to \$110 per person, depending on length of time your group wants to spend helping out. You can book with us and through Get Your Guide. You can also get more information from the Cancun Convention and Visitors Bureau. We work with them all!



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