

Adventure Travel with a Moral Compass

Americans consume roughly 33 percent of the world's materials and leave the largest ecological footprint of any country by far, yet support only 4.5 percent of the world's population. With that kind of reputation, how can we show our global neighbors that we do care about them and protecting the world's natural resources?

One way to make a global difference is by taking a socially and environmentally conscious vacation. The new green buzzword, "ecotourism," is defined as responsible travel to a natural area that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.

"We believe in giving back to the locals in the places we play," explains Jodi Nelson, 33, founder of St. Paul-based PLAY it Forward Adventures, offering eco-friendly tours to Guatemala, Peru, Tanzania (Kilimanjaro) and Argentina that merge outdoor adventure with humanitarian efforts. "Responsible travel involves getting to know the local people, culture, and tradi-

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tions when visiting their country, and combining outdoor adventure with volunteer service is a great way to see all aspects of a country in a way that is mutually beneficial to everyone involved."

By participating in conservation and preservation projects, travelers educate themselves on environmental issues while raising awareness.

Nelson, a tour leader who is a certified wilderness first responder, grew up in Blaine, graduated from the University of Minnesota, worked in the film and TV industry, then launched her adventure travel company in 2007.

"Ever since I was a child I've been fascinated by other cultures," she says. "And after traveling to various parts of the world for leisure, adventures, and volunteering,



Above: PLAY it Forward Adventures founder Jodi Nelson, center, with Mayan women during a stove building ceremony. The larger photo depicts a tour group in Guatemala having the time of their lives.

I decided I wanted to design and provide safe, all-encompassing travel experiences for others who wanted to see the world."

The company is environmentally-friendly in that they encourage the travelers (limited to groups of 12) to pack lightly, abide by the Leave No Trace philosophy, stay at locally-owned and operated hotels, hire local guides, purchase goods from local craftsmen, and provide "open-air" adventures on foot, on bikes, and in boats.

"We aim to keep our travelers within the environment so they can have spontaneous interactions and avoid seeing the country

from the back of a vehicle," Nelson says.

The trips cost between \$1,950 - \$4,600 (not including airfare) and attract an audience ranging in age from 23 - 60. Each tour has a rating scale of one to five (one is light and five is challenging) when it comes to level of activity, culture shock, and comfort. Activities include canoeing a flooded forest, habituating wildlife back into the jungle, and experiencing a ceremony by a native shaman in the Amazon Jungle; adventure-trekking in the Andes Mountains and building school desks and book shelves for children in the local Andes community; a safari in Tanzania, working with AIDS orphans, and a seven-day climb up Kilimanjaro; and trekking, sea kayaking, glacier walking, and camping in Patagonia.

Nelson is hoping to add personal development trips, family adventures, singles' trips, and educational, medical, and gourmet adventures in the future. Additional tours to Vietnam, Nepal, Romania, and Nicaragua will be launched in 2010.

Past travelers have called these tours life-changing experiences.

According to Nelson, "Many people change their perspective after learning to live with less, infusing service and activity into their daily lives, and connecting with their loved ones."

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