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Hands up to help!

Working as a volunteer abroad lets you adventure into someone else's world, and feeds the feel good side of us, finds **Belinda Jackson**.

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Hands up to help!

Working as a volunteer abroad lets you adventure into someone else's world, and feeds the feel good side of us, finds Belinda Jackson.

Every morning for two weeks, Iris McLaren wakes up and takes her Thai elephant down to the river for a joyous wash and scrub. It's a lifetime away from her regular job as a nurse in Queensland.

Not only is she an elephant washer – at 62, Iris is also a trendsetter: one of the hottest travel trends is the rise of 'voluntourists', travellers volunteering their time and energy across the spectrum of the Third World.

Usually seen as the preserve of 20-something gap year kids, voluntourism has captured the imagination of mature travellers who are finding themselves caring for pandas in western China, helping build houses in Costa Rica or teaching English in a monastery in Nepal. This is travel slowed down, and the experience intensified.

'Older people have got the life experience'

"I never had much contact with the local people as an independent traveller when I travelled with my daughter through India and Nepal," says Iris. "This time, I got to see how people actually live."

Iris (right, with hat) is one of a growing number of travellers who've used a travel placement company to find a project to which they can contribute their time and skills for a few weeks or a few months.

Her trip, organised by Australian volunteer travel company i-to-i, saw her teamed up with other travellers and based in a small village in Thailand's Surin Province, seven hours by bus from Bangkok. Each volunteer was assigned an elephant and its mahout (elephant handler). They helped build elephant shelters and fences, cut feed for the animals and, of course, rode them into the rivers for a cooling scrub. It's all part of the Take Me Home project, a venture supported by the Thai Government to stop mahouts begging with their elephants in the cities to repatriate the animals to the forests.

"We worked pretty hard," Iris says. "Sure you're paying money to work, but your money goes toward the

project, and it was all made so easy – all accommodation and meals paid for – you knew how much you had to spend." The third week of her trip was pure tourism, going whitewater rafting and day trekking, using local guides.

Matt Chester, general manager of i-to-i, says there's a definite trend in older travellers volunteering abroad, particularly amongst single women. His company, a voluntourism veteran in Australia, has helped travellers perform work such as conservation on the Galapagos Islands and archaeology jobs in Lima.

"It's a chance for people to use their skills and experience in what is a very

For a more glamorous touch, you could care for Kylie Minogue's cub – a baby lion the singer recently adopted – in a lion park near Johannesburg, South Africa, where i-to-i organises two to four week stints that let volunteers help care for the cubs in the research and conservation centre. Otherwise, there's the chance to travel off the beaten path, such as Zambia or India, all with a support network behind you. By far the most common route to working overseas has been as English teachers: TEFL certificates now cost as little as \$200 for a 40-hour online course.



cheap way to travel," he says. Prices start from \$1300 for two weeks and the longer the placement, the cheaper it gets. The fees charged by most volunteer placement agencies include accommodation, meals, transfers and emergency support. They exclude flights and insurance.

According to Matt, the most popular country for their travellers is Cambodia, while working in Vietnam's orphanages is also on the rise. "It can be quite emotional working in these confronting situations, as there's little medical treatment in such places," he says. "But older people have got the life experience to deal with it. They've watched their own kids grow up, and they often have more time on their hands to contribute."

For Iris it was the lure of not working as a nurse that saw her sign up to the elephant conservation camp: it's a chance to step out of your own life and live another life for a few weeks. However, Iris' nursing background came in handy when one of her travel mates fell off her elephant ('nothing serious!').

Her all-girl co-volunteers included a couple of 18-year-old Brits, a few other Aussies and herself, at 62 the oldest in the group. "I first thought, 'Look at these kids, do they think I'm past it?' But we all had the same mindset, so maybe that's why we all got on together."

[@] Visit: www.i-to-i.com or tel: 1300 881 590 for more information.