



Should I Stay or Should I go?

Things to Consider When Volunteering Abroad

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I know Covid-19 has really disrupted our ability to travel and experience other parts of the world; but volunteering abroad seems to be a right of passage for medical students. You've probably heard of students who have worked in a rural clinic in Kenya, supported preservation efforts in the Amazon rainforest, or volunteered in an orphanage in Ghana. While all these causes are extremely rewarding, it is also important to be aware of the effects we have on the local communities. Some organizations running these programs are run by incredibly honest, hard working and compassionate people. However, they are not all altruistic. There are many organizations run by people attempting to take advantage of these mission trips; leading to them being coined under the term **"voluntourism"**. There have been many organizations seeking donations for children that do not exist. Some real children that are not being taken care of properly despite having the resources or, even more horrifically, being kidnapped to fill an orphanage and reap the benefits of charitable donations. Even though organizations like this exist, I ensure you that this article is NOT an attempt to discourage you from travelling abroad or volunteering in another country. Instead I want to focus on empowering you to choose better when trying to go abroad. Here is a list of important questions that you should ask yourself before travelling:

Where do you plan to go?

How safe is it for you to travel to that country? We as Canadians are extremely lucky to live where we do. Do some research to determine the political climate or if there are high crime rates, especially against tourists. Are you going with a group or is it safe to travel alone? What about infectious diseases? Mid-pandemic nowhere is safe. But once the pandemic is over and it is safe to travel, what should you be concerned about? For example, malaria is a common disease in many areas along the equator. Be aware and seek out the necessary vaccinations and prophylactic measures!



What do you plan to do?

For example, do you want to work in a clinic or help build a school? Would you be willing to do these activities in your local community here in Canada? Why or why not? Do you have construction or medical type-skills that would be an asset or a completely new experience? While it is not wrong to learn construction in another country, make sure you are not thinking that these places are so desperate they will accept any labour no matter how unskilled.

What are your cultural assumptions or biases?

As humans, we **ALL** have our suitcase of biases. What do you know about the country? Language? Religion? Traditions? Beliefs? As a colloquial example, in Haiti, facial piercings are not openly accepted. You will see Haitians with facial piercings but as an outsider, you are held to different standards. Being respectful and wearing a small nose stud as opposed to a large glistening ring will help you be received more openly. Try to go into the experience with an open mind and be respectful, even if you do not necessarily agree with their practices. When you have taken all these things into account and have done proper research, there are many programs which can give you an amazing experience. Cultural exchanges and community engagement-type activities are great where you can live with a host family who can share their culture and life with you while you have an opportunity to share yours with them! Overall, I really emphasize to consider what **YOU** want to gain from going abroad and then finding an opportunity that fits that best. No matter your motives, be open to learning and toward new experiences! And, of course, make sure to have fun!

