

# HOLIDAYS FOR HUMANITY

You don't have to wear cheesecloth tunics or give up your day job to make a difference. Why not give yourself (and the planet) a feel-good boost with a volunteer holiday? *Marie Claire's* Eulogi Rheeder swapped her heels for trainers and tested the waters of 'responsible tourism'

I dabble in recycling, make the odd contribution to charity and give my Woolies cast-offs to the local hospice shop. Still, I'm sure there's more I can do to make the world a better place. Now, with the rise of 'responsible travel', I don't have to give up my nine-to-five job to walk in the footsteps of Saint Angelina. Travel companies are

beginning to offer meaningful breaks, enabling ordinary people to make a difference. With the help of Jo'burg-based group Voluntours, I set off for Plettenberg Bay to work as a volunteer at The Centre for Dolphin Studies (CDS) - a research project that monitors the behaviour, numbers and habitats of whales, dolphins and seals in the area.



## A WHALE OF A TIME

From top At the whale stranding at Buffels Bay, a local resident observes the animal; moving the dead whale to a secluded area for observation; Eulogi prepares to dissect; CDS volunteer coordinator Siria Harthoorn checks the whale's vital signs - sadly, it was already dead when the volunteers arrived.



## Day One

When I arrive at the CDS volunteers' cottage and laboratory after a serene drive from George airport, I'm greeted by chaos. News is just in that a whale has been beached in Buffels Bay, about 40 minutes away. I barely have a minute to pull on my trainers, meet Siria Harthoorn (the volunteer coordinator) and jump into her truck before we are making our way to the rescue. On the road Siria, a marine biology student, warns that most beachings don't have a happy ending. We arrive to find a crowd of people swarming around the hapless animal with Hannah, a volunteer from England, placed on crowd control.

Siria inspects the whale but sadly, it's already dead. I stand watching from the sidelines, not entirely sure what I should do. I volunteer to take photographs and measure the whale - and am instructed to do so from beak to blowhole, beak to dorsal fin, dorsal fin to tail fin and so on. I'm then told that the head and stomach need to be removed in order to help determine why the whale has beached itself and to aid CDS research into whale diets. Initially I decide to observe. I'm rather squeamish and the thought of cutting up an animal is daunting. To my surprise, however, the dissection fascinates me and soon I'm elbow-deep in whale, just like everyone else. It's tiring - and a little disturbing when we have to remove the head - but I channel my inner Meredith Grey and remind myself that it's all for the sake of scientific research.

## Day Two

The breakfast table is abuzz with last night's dramatic events and I am still stunned that I had the guts to help cut up a whale. At the CDS office we use the limited data and pictures taken at the stranding to speculate what type of whale it is and conclude it to be a True's beaked whale. I feel humbled and also a little smug that I've helped solve the 'Mystery of the Beached Whale'. I guess this is how Gil Grissom and his *CSI: Las Vegas* team must feel when they close a case.

It's time to move on to fin identification. While I can identify the name and designer label of just about any handbag from ten paces, this is a new challenge. I study a series of slides depicting the fins of different species of dolphin and by tracing their contours onto paper begin to train my eye to identify which is which.

In no time I find myself learning things like the fact that each dolphin's dorsal fin is unique in its markings - they're much like human fingerprints. Identifying each of the various fins photographed in the bay enables the research team to monitor the dolphin's activities as well as the effects of commercial fishing and tourist activities.

After lunch we make our way back to Buffels Bay to retrieve the whale carcass so that the research team can study the anatomy of this rare species. The animal is big and heavy, which makes it difficult to move. I'm told we will have to cut away blubber, meat and intestines to make it easier to manoeuvre. My earlier bravado vanishes as my squeamish self resurfaces. But when I see the other volunteers getting stuck in I realise this is an experience I can't pass up. Soon I have my gloves on (to protect me from parasites and bacteria living in the carcass) and am sharpening my knife to help. It takes longer than expected and we work until dark, before deciding to return later to finish the mammoth task.

## Day Three

After breakfast we go to Central Beach near Beacon Island to find out if we'll be able to head out to sea. As CDS is a non-profit research project it relies on the help of Ocean's Safaris (a commercial tourist boat company) to help the volunteers observe and monitor the aquatic mammals in the bay. On days when the boats aren't full of tourists, the seats are filled with CDS volunteers. This morning there's space for all six of us. We strap on our life jackets and head into the breakers. Forty minutes offshore the skipper spots several whales and slows the boat down. It's a breathtaking

experience, even more so because we're observing live whales for a change!

The local dolphins, humpback whales and seals seem accustomed to putting on a show for the tourists because they swim right up to the boat. As a volunteer my duties include more than just gawking, and I break into marine-biologist mode to take pictures of each dolphin's dorsal fin. I also assist in recording their location with the help of a GPRS, document their activities and establish what types of whales are surrounding our boat. I am directed to a nearby humpback whale and told to monitor its 'blowtimes' by using a stopwatch to time the intervals between blows. The observation routine is repeated when we spot two southern right whales cavorting nearby. Back in the office we attend to administrative work, then head home to the volunteer cottage where I watch the sunset, our spectacular morning encounter still vivid in my mind.

#### Day Four

We set off early and make for Robberg Nature Reserve. This morning's mission is to watch and record the activities of the local whales. They seem to be a no-show, but several hours and an obscene amount of hot chocolate later, two southern right whales appear. We make our observations, eat lunch and head back to Buffels Bay, determined to bring the whale carcass back to the lab.

One volunteer is assigned to crowd control and the rest of the team gloves up, sharpens knives and starts cutting. This time the thought of participating is more gripping than gory and it's amazing to see the anatomy of this incredible animal close up. Late in the afternoon we head home triumphant with our whale carcass in the trailer. I'm convinced none of my friends are going to believe what I've done, but I have the pictures to prove it.

#### Day Five

This morning each volunteer has to think of a question relating to marine life and assign it to someone else. We'll each be giving a three-minute presentation the next day on our research assignment - mine is bioluminescence in deep-sea

creatures. While I'm scouring the extensive library a call comes in that there's a dead seal on Robberg Beach. It's the duty of CDS to inspect it and bring its head and stomach back to the laboratory, but when we get there it seems the poor creature has been washed away.

At the laboratory it's time to dissect the whale head. Now hardened by days of coming face to face with grim reality, I marvel at the intricate functionality of it all. Maybe I've missed my calling - should I be considering a career in pathology?

#### Day Six

My last day at CDS and I'm genuinely sorry to be leaving. By now I fancy myself as something of an aspirant marine biologist and imagine there is very little anyone (except an actual marine biologist) could tell me about whales or dolphins. They say you learn something new every day, but I've learnt something new every minute this week.

My last activity with the group is driving down to Central Beach, where Siria demonstrates what to do in the case of a stranding using an inflatable dolphin named Dolly. The crowd that gathers around us seems amused by this bunch of mad volunteers saving a blow-up toy. After we save Dolly it's my turn to play the beached subject in order for the others to get a realistic feel for dealing with a live being. The volunteers manage to complete the task successfully, which involves me being thrown into the sea! After our rescue efforts the volunteers call it a day, and I call it a week.

Driving off I catch a glimpse of myself in the rear-view mirror and see a changed person. Not only have I helped preserve marine life in South Africa, I've also discovered so much about myself and what I can achieve if I put my mind to it. Plus, I've got a wicked sun-kissed tan - and not one inch of it is from a bottle. ■

**Volunteering at the Centre for Dolphin Studies is organised by Marnie Heim-Stafford and Jeremy Stafford from Volontours. Contact them on 011-315-4049 or visit [www.volontours.co.za](http://www.volontours.co.za).**

#### HELPING OUT

**Clockwise from top** Volunteers on the Napo River in the Ecuadorian rainforest; Sri Lankan elephants; assisting teachers is one of the tasks undertaken by Russia Community Projects volunteers; the gentle giant panda is the focus of Panda Conservation in China; volunteers in Ecuador help with conservation education for the local community.



#### MORE FEEL-GOOD WAYS TO SPEND YOUR HOLIDAYS...

- ✳️ **Pre-school Teaching Support in an Ndebele Village**  
Located in a traditional Ndebele village 40km outside Pretoria. Volunteers stay in the village lodge and assist at the local crèche. Duties include educate activities, accompanying children on special outings, feeding and bathing, working in the food garden and general maintenance of the crèche. From R6 580 per person for one week.
- ✳️ **Working with animals at a Hand Rearing Sanctuary**  
This non-profit zoo in Midrand is home to a collection of endangered, exotic and indigenous animals that were rescued, confiscated, orphaned or abandoned. Tasks include assistance in rehabilitation of animals, cleaning of cages and enclosures, feeding, hand-rearing juvenile animals and assisting with educational projects. From R7 760 per person for one week.
- ✳️ **Helping to Build a House in a week** With housing projects based in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, Build a House volunteers help a non-profit organization build or rehabilitate homes for needy families in five days. Duties consist of laying bricks, helping with electrical and plumbing installation, and roof-tiling (all with full supervision and training by on-site professionals). From R7 600 per person for one week.

**For more information on these and other local projects contact Volontours on 011-315-4049, [www.volontours.co.za](http://www.volontours.co.za).**



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#### QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ASK YOUR SPECIALIST TOUR OPERATOR

- ✳️ **Personal safety and security** It's essential to know that your health, and in some instances life, will not be compromised in any way. Investigate the credibility of the tour operator, and do some research about the region you will be visiting. Will you need vaccines? Malaria tablets? Also ask about the accommodation, food and facilities.
- ✳️ **Aims and objectives of the project you plan to visit** Ask the tour operator if it is a charity, a non-profit-organisation or a limited company. What are their policies on ecotourism and responsible travelling?
- ✳️ **The selection criteria and processes** Ask how volunteers are selected. What is the average age of volunteers, and will you need a criminal-record clearance if you'll be working with vulnerable children and adults?
- ✳️ **Cost** How much of the money you are spending is allocated to the volunteer programme? Ask for a breakdown of where the rest of your money goes.
- ✳️ **Orientation** How will you be briefed, trained and orientated about the project before departure; does the organisation run an introduction?
- ✳️ **The programme** How do you know that you will be part of a sustainable project that is needed by the local community; how do you know that you won't be taking a paid job or skills-training opportunity from a local person?
- ✳️ **After the experience** Ask if there is a support and debriefing procedure when you get home; and how you can stay in touch with the organisation.

#### VOLUNTEER PROJECTS FOR GUILT-FREE OVERSEAS TRAVEL

##### ✳️ Panda Conservation in China

Located near Xi-an in the majestic surroundings at the foot of the Qingling Mountains, volunteers help with the preservation of giant pandas and golden monkeys. Duties include research and data collection, designing pamphlets for foreign tourists and cleaning the animal enclosures. From approximately R16 000 per person for two weeks. For more information, visit [www.i-to-i.com](http://www.i-to-i.com).

##### ✳️ Rainforest Conservation and Community Development in Ecuador

Set in the heart of the Ecuadorian rainforest, this project gives volunteers the chance to help conserve the fragile ecosystem of the region. Duties entail scientific research on conservation, identifying and cataloguing local bird, animal and plant species, helping with conservation education in the local

community, ecotourism and sustainable agriculture. From R17 000 for five weeks. For more information visit [www.gvi.co.uk](http://www.gvi.co.uk).

##### ✳️ Elephant Research and Conservation in Sri Lanka

This project offers volunteers the rare chance to get involved in the preservation of the endangered Sri Lankan elephants. Duties include conducting surveys of the elephants in their various habitats and assisting in human-elephant conflict resolution. From R10 000 for two weeks. For more information, visit [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com).

##### ✳️ Russia Community Projects

Situated in Yaroslavl, northeast of Moscow, this volunteer programme involves working with infants and children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Tasks consist of caregiving, assisting teachers and community development. From around R12 000 for one week. For more information, visit [www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com).