

HIGHLY COMMENDED Volontours, South Africa

The village people



SOUTH AFRICA, 1952. Apartheid was at its height. The small community of Mapoch Ndebele Village was forcibly relocated after its 'home', on a farm in Pretoria, was declared a 'whites-only' area. They ended up on land about 40km north west of Pretoria. Today, it's a 45-minute drive from the city; in those days it was a three-day walk.

Later, when independent homelands were created for the different ethnic groups in South Africa, Mapoch found itself in the middle of Bophuthatswana (a homeland for the Tswana people), while the Ndebele were relocated to their designated homeland east of Pretoria. Mapoch was left isolated.

This poor, impoverished square peg in a round hole is now the location for an extraordinary example of a small but effective grassroots voluntourism enterprise – Volontours – run by dedicated husband and wife team Jeremy and Marnie Stafford.

The volunteers – and there have been just 28 in the two years the project has been running – stay in and volunteer either in the village itself or within the surrounding community, working in education, child care, building, music, sport, drama, arts and crafts, and small business developments.

The village has about 270 inhabitants. Most houses have electricity but no running water. Most get water from two communal taps; only a few have a tap in their own yard. Toilets are pit latrines.

Volontours co-founder Jeremy Stafford, recalls: 'We came in contact with the village in 2004 by researching a few old travel

guides. The village has an eight-roomed lodge and a multi-purpose centre that was built by the local government in 2002. However, no training and support had been provided and so the tourist facilities were largely unused. Volontours is their main tourist provider.

'When we met the chief and discussed the tourism partnership the main difficulty was trying to explain how volunteer tourism differed from regular tourism,' says Marnie. 'Our volunteers wanted to live and work in the community which was a bit of a mind-change. However, it works well now.'

'We started Volontours as a way of combining my and Marnie's passions,' adds Jeremy. 'Marnie found her love doing tourism development in the townships of Soweto and Alexandria. I was involved in establishing a food security programme in Malawi in 1997/8 where I first fell in love with development work.

'We wanted to make responsible volunteering accessible to the average person. You do not have to work for an NGO or give two years of your life to UN Volunteers or Peace Corps to give something back into community development. Unfortunately, not all volunteer organisations share our bottom-up approach. We know of one that boasts of sending 700 volunteers a year. How can that be responsible?'

In response to these concerns, Volontours launched its *Code of Good Practice: Volunteering in South Africa* last year.

www.volontours.co.za

WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

'VOLONTOURS SHOWS what a small family-run business can contribute to the development of a marginalised and economically-poor community. By carefully harnessing the enthusiasm and skills of volunteers, they have enabled the Ndebele community at Mapoch to develop their nursery and school, and a bicycle project to improve their lives.'

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This award is particularly meaningful to us as we see sustainable volunteering as a way travellers can make a real and personal difference to local communities. We have received inspiring reports from our own Intrepid Volunteering programs, both from travellers and from the rural communities they are working in, so we know how powerful this cross-cultural work is.

Intrepid Travel is proud to be associated with companies who are involved in grassroots community development and we applaud their efforts in this field. It's important that as travellers and travel operators that we do all that we can to spread the word of sustainable tourism and actually follow through on the intent. The world is an amazing place and we hope to share it with many generations to come.

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