

Photo courtesy of Lisa Callaway



On the Road

Making a Difference

How to volunteer and satisfy your travel itch at the same time

BY JANET REYNOLDS

▲ **LISA CALLAWAY** (right), a Road Scholar volunteer, with a teacher at a Navajo reservation school.

Many empty nesters and retirees assume their interests in travel and volunteering are mutually exclusive, that helping others is just something they do after they unpack their carry-on luggage from

their latest trip. The reality, however, is that people can satisfy both desires at the same time through programs the travel industry calls *voluntourism*. As its name implies, these programs combine people's interest in expe-

riencing new cultures and worlds with the needs of these communities for assistance with everything from business expertise to conservation and teaching English.

Lisa Callaway of Illinois knows firsthand how life-changing voluntourism can be. A lawyer in transition — as she likes to call this stage of her life — she has participated in Road Scholar's Navajo reservation volunteer program three times in the last four years, and was considering adding a fourth when we spoke.

"I'm lucky. I get to go to a lot of different places," the 61-year-old says of her traditional travels. "What do we want when we travel? You want a lasting experience. I feel like a situation of being able to help a child or connect to somebody in some way, that's a difficult thing to get most of the time in the traditional travel that we do."

Callaway, who also volunteers at her local food pantry, has always been drawn to the Southwest and Native American culture. Volunteering as part of the Road Scholar program satisfied that cultural itch while also giving her the chance to make a difference. On a typical day, she can do anything from reading with children to doing art projects with them. It depends on what the teachers need, she says. "To be able to be with the people and understand their experience, you're only going to get that if you work with them and volunteer and are helpful."

The Road Scholar service programs also include cultural events for the volunteers. "Someone might come in and

speak about traditional jewelry making or about culture and politics," Callaway says. "You get a good idea of what it's like to live on the reservation."

Callaway says the experience has changed how she thinks about travel generally. "I would like to have some other experiences. Seeing the kids when they get something because they got one-on-one help, seeing the lightbulb go off — that kind of thing is very gratifying."

The variety of voluntourism programs available to people 50+ is vast and varied. Organizations dedicated to this demographic recognize that older people have the time, money, life experiences and skill sets that can make them valued in whatever community they visit. Options range from animal conservation to teaching English and more. Length of time is variable, too, with programs that last from one week to months at a time.

"As a not-for-profit organization with an educational mission, we believe strongly in the educational impact that service can have," Meghan Flynn, assistant vice president of program strategy and management at Road Scholar, wrote in an email. "We've seen service experiences be truly life-changing for both our participants and the communities involved."

Although interest in Road Scholar programs recently dropped off a bit, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization remains committed to retaining a core group of offerings, she wrote. Service Learning, as they call their programs, include opportunities to maintain the USS



Missouri, teach on a Navajo reservation and practice conservation on Chincoteague Island. The organization also launched programs in Guatemala and Trinidad that blend service experiences with local learning.

But Road Scholar is just one option for seniors interested in traveling and making a difference. If you're interested in volunteering while traveling, the list below offers some other organizations focused on helping people 50+ realize their voluntourism dreams. ■

GoOverseas

[*gooverseas.com/about*](https://gooverseas.com/about)

This website is a composite of various volunteering programs and a good place to start if you just want to get more information about voluntourism.

GVI

[*gviusa.com/over-50s-volunteering/*](https://gviusa.com/over-50s-volunteering/)

GVI is a Boston-based nonprofit focused on environmental and nature conservation volunteer opportunities. It has locations in the U.S. and around the world and options specifically for people 50+. Go for a week or six months.

Projects Abroad

[*projects-abroad.org/trip-format/grown-up-specials/*](https://projects-abroad.org/trip-format/grown-up-specials/)

For over 30 years, this organization has been helping people volunteer around the world. The organization has set itineraries and volunteers live with host families. Projects Abroad has plenty of projects for people 50+, including conservation work in Ecuador and rhino conservation work in Nepal.

International Volunteering HQ

[*volunteerhq.org/senior-volunteers/*](https://volunteerhq.org/senior-volunteers/)

This nonprofit has programs in over 50 locations that last anywhere from one to 40 weeks with flexible start dates. Programs are all-inclusive, including airport pickup, meals, etc. Opportunities include conservation, teaching, community support and more.

Global Volunteers

[*globalvolunteers.org/senior-volunteers/*](https://globalvolunteers.org/senior-volunteers/)

This organization unites interested seniors with countries and people needing help for various community projects. Its vision is "peace through international understanding." Lodging, meals and in-country transportation is provided.