



Letters to the Editor



Dear Editors,

When I try to think of how to best describe my experience in Musanze, Rwanda, I am tempted to talk about the inspirational rebirth of a troubled country or the incredible students I taught at a genocide survivors' orphanage. But, in reality, there is only one story that really sums up my cultural experience — cooking fajitas. I know... this might seem trivial, but until you have bartered for a live cow in an open-air market, you simply haven't lived.

The story begins when I was not so happily put in charge of making fajitas for 20 houseguests. Now you may be thinking, “no big deal!” But, take the grocery store, electric oven, and pretty much every modern-day convenience out of your imaginary picture. Prepackaged tortillas do not exist in Rwanda, and beef does not come in a package.

I visited the only market in Musanze four times in order to check on the progress of my frustratingly still-alive dinner before finally being able to barter for my meat. After shoving a number of pushy Rwandans out of my way and haggling for the leanest cuts of meat, I realized that after two months of isolation, I had officially become a local.

Needless to say, fajitas were a hit, and all of my guests were blissfully unaware of the preparation involved. But, the next time you enter your local supermarket, kiss the floor in thanks.

Sarah Rogala
Musanze, Rwanda 2009



Dear Editors,

As with many trends of the millennial generation, “voluntourism” has gained sudden popularity, peaked perhaps prematurely, and finally endured the inevitable

backlash from an opinionated Internet populace. With headlines like, “You’re Better Off Backpacking...” and rhetoric accusing these opportunities of being “expensive ego boosters,” articles and blogs lambaste the voluntourism trend as self-serving, unsustainable, and ultimately counterproductive to its own altruistic mission.

While I don’t entirely disagree with these criticisms, I think it’s just as dangerous to generalize a movement that could, with the right approach, fulfill its ambitious potential. A trip to Belize my sophomore year of university embodied voluntourism done well, as it considered and removed the two biggest obstacles to the movement’s success: facelessness and sustainability. As a group of 20 college students poured the concrete foundations for new classrooms and built bus stops in the jungle to protect children from scorching weather conditions, we worked alongside a local company (ProBelize) that connected us with Belizeans who assisted in our projects. We also met with the children who studied at the schools; they enjoyed helping us mix and smooth the cement, as well as challenging us to soccer games during breaks.

These interactions put a face to the work we were doing, taking any ego out of what was already fairly unglamorous, arduous, humbling labor. In addition, by teaching the locals the methods and involving them in the process, ProBelize creates sustainability in the event of further need. As they embrace communities and involve local people in their work, the volunteers are equal parts of an altruistic, sustainable process. They and their egos are no longer the focus.

Alex Heald
San Ignacio, Belize 2009

At its core, True North is about stories. Letters to the editor provides an opportunity for our readers to share their voluntourism experiences. Whether your letter is informational, editorial, humorous, or heartfelt we want to hear from you.

To submit, [send a letter](#) of no more than 300 words and any relevant photos to letters@truenorth.com.