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Volunteering in Latin America

Motivated by a desire to go beyond tourism and make a difference to their host country, language travel students are increasingly choosing to combine their language course in Latin America with a volunteer placement.

Travellers are no longer satisfied with studying abroad and doing [tourist activities]," asserts Rafaela Rolim at World Study, which offers volunteer projects in Brazil. "They want to get closer to the community visited and 'make a difference' as individuals," she relates.

Inge Weiser Carvalho, Marketing Director at Idioma – Escola de Português in Brazil, agrees with Romil. She says, "I think it is important for a serious language school to give its students a realistic view of Brazilian life, to show them a Brazil that they can't experience [by] being a normal tourist, and allowing them to be in contact with local people without the borders of social classes."

Linguistically, too, volunteer placements can be invaluable as they enable students to put into practice in very real situations what they have learnt in the classroom. As Ken Ingraham from Latin Immersion, which organises programmes in Argentina and Chile, says, "[Volunteer

placements are] a great way to immerse yourself in the local culture and also to leave Latin America having given more than you've taken."

Volunteer programmes in Latin America generally fall into one of two categories: they are either social programmes that help the people of the country, for example, working in an orphanage, with street children, or in a care home or school; or they centre on environmental and conservation work. Most schools and placement agencies offer a wide variety of projects. For example, Quito Spanish Institute in Ecuador, which launched its first volunteer programme last year, organises placements in schools, hospitals or with plant conservation and agro forestry organisations in the Amazon Rainforest, Andes Mountain region, coastal lowlands and the Galapagos Islands.

Such projects certainly appeal to the adventurous, with most volunteer placement organisations reporting strong demand from Northern Europe, the USA and Canada. Tabitha Symonds, UK Director of Global Vision International, says that the UK and USA are their biggest markets, followed by Europe and Australasia. "Both the UK and North American markets have grown a lot over the last five years," she adds.

While volunteer programmes have traditionally been the preserve of university and college gap year students, there is a fanning out of demand to older students. Enrique Torres at Ordex Cultural Exchange in Ecuador notes, "Originally – and even now – the biggest group is young people in their gap year from 18-to-24 [years old] but recently there has been an increase in people [aged] 45-plus taking part [in] these trips."

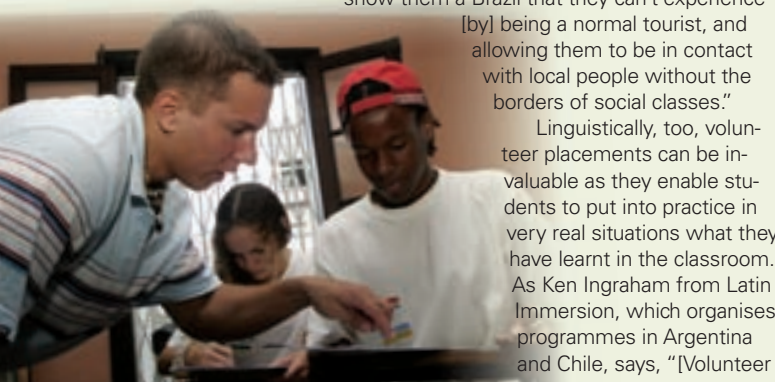
Not all schools require volunteer participants to take a language course prior to their placement but most do stipulate a certain level of proficiency in the host country's language. At Global Vision International, volunteers already proficient in Spanish can go straight into their volunteer placement, while those who are not take a basic Spanish course. At Idioma, meanwhile, language course attendance is compulsory. Students there either take a general language course of at least two weeks until their language competence reaches intermediate level, or if their language skills are sufficient, they can undertake a placement in the afternoons, while attending language classes in the mornings.

At other schools like Nueva Lengua in Colombia, the Spanish language component is an integrated part of the whole volunteering package, as Juan David Medina at the school explains. "Spanish and volunteering is a Spanish course plus a volunteer job at an orphanage, hospital, charity or at the university. The course includes 15 hours of Spanish lessons, 12 hours of volunteer work at a recognised charity and five hours of cultural activities."

At Ordex, however, there is more emphasis put upon the volunteer placement. "[Volunteer placements are] definitely not a niche market for language learning but a sector on [their] own as almost all our participants take one or two weeks of Spanish and an average of six weeks' placement on a project."

Academia Latino Americana de Español has schools in Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia and started offering volunteer programmes 14 years ago. It was part of their vision to have social programmes where students could interact with local people and Diego Del Coral at the school is keen to stress their good relationship with organisations eager for volunteers. "The social needs are so deep [here]," he says, "that many volunteer organisations come to us to request help, and we support them in every way."

Demand for volunteer programmes is certainly growing. According to Symonds, Global Vision sent 500 volunteers overseas in 2003, and this has skyrocketed to 2,000 today. Meanwhile, Medina at Nueva Lengua says their volunteer programme is one of their most popular.



Selection of programmes available

Programme location	Organisation name	Min. no. weeks of programme	Minimum age	Lang. level required for placement	Language tuition	Min. no. weeks of language tuition	Type of placements
Argentina	Ibero Spanish Argentina	1	16	i	v	3	ch, e, ed, m, s
Argentina, Brazil, Chile	Bridge Linguatéc	2	18	n	v	1	ch, e, ed, m, o
Argentina, Chile	Latin Immersion	4	17	i	c	4	ch, o, s
Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru	Academia Latinoamericana de Español	4	18	i	v		ch, e, m
Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru	Youth Int'l (Experience the World)	12	18	n	c	1	e, ed, o
Brazil	CI - Central de Intercambio	4	18	n	-		e, o, s
Brazil	Idioma - Escola de Português	4	18	i	c	2	ch, s
Brazil	PUC Minas	16	-	-	v		various
Brazil	World Study	8	18	b	v		ch, ed, s, o
Colombia	Escuela de Español Nueva Lengua	4	18	i	c	4	ch
Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico	Academia Columbus	8	18	i	c	2	m, o, s
Ecuador	Galapagos Spanish School	2	15	n	c	1	ch, s
Ecuador	Ordex Cultural Exchange	2	18	b	v		e, ed, s
Ecuador	Quito SI Spanish Institute	6	10	b	c	2	ch, e, m, s
Ecuador	Yanapuma Spanish School	2	n	e	v		ch, e, ed, s
Guatemala	Travellers Worldwide	2	17	n	v		ed
Honduras	Centro Internacional de Idiomas	2	17	n	v		ch, e, ed, m, o
Honduras, Ecuador, Peru	Global Vision International	4	18	i	v		ed

b beginner c compulsory ch children e environmental/conservation ed education i intermediate m medical n none o other s social v voluntary - information not supplied