

# Holiday helpers

Over 100,000 Australians lent a hand to a developing community last year. Melissa Cunningham reports on volunteers in the Third World.

Robert Latimer says stumbling across an article in a boating magazine ignited his desire to make a change in his life.

The article told the tale of Australian yachtsmen taking volunteer medics to the remote islands of Vanuatu.

From that moment on, the 50-year-old Ringwood financial planner's dreams were filled with salty sea breezes and ships' sails.

"It seemed that everywhere I turned I kept running into Vanuatu," Latimer says. "I'd meet doctors who had come back from volunteering there or friends would go on vacation there."

Projects Abroad director Will Pashley says Latimer is one of an increasing number of people of all ages who are loading their backpacks and heading to faraway places in search of personal discovery and cultural enlightenment. Last year alone more than 10,000 Australians made the trek.

"You always get more out than you put in volunteering," Pashley says. "You experience first-hand life in a developing third-world country that has different cultural practices to your own." Connections are made with local people that would not be made on a safari or travel tour.

A few obstacles stood in Latimer's way. He did not own a boat, for a start, or a medical background. He didn't know anything about Vanuatu either.

After years of 'tyre kicking', Latimer and his brother Andrew purchased a 1984, 25tonne,

16metre steel cutter.

"The ship was ideal for the venture," he says. "From then on, the right things seemed to happen as we needed."

Latimer contacted Vanuatu Blindness Project founder Don Macraill and was on his way, sailing ships full of trained medics to the 65 remote and rural islands of Vanuatu, home to more than 230,00 people.

He established Medical Sailing Ministries, comprising volunteers from the North Ringwood Uniting Church.

Among them was Ringwood dentist Tony Burke, doctor Graeme Duke, his brother Andrew, and Latimer's 24-year-old son Matt, who joined the mission for a few weeks in July 2010.

Latimer spent a total of six months sailing the Pacific Ocean throughout 2009 and 2010.

What amazed him most were the simple changes volunteers could make in the islanders quality of life.

A woman in her sixties, crippled by Parkinsons disease, had not moved from bed in months.

Like many others who become ill in Vanuatu, she had been misdiagnosed.

Latimer, Matt and Dr Burke set to work creating a metal walking frame from an old set of bedside drawers.

"That was one of the most amazing things to see," Matt says.

"This woman had been bed ridden— but once she had been guided on how to use the frame she was able to slowly walk around and see her village for the first time in months."

After discovering women had a higher mortality rate in Vanuatu than men due to inhaling smoke while cooking over open fires, Latimer created a workshop to teach the men at every island how to build mud-brick stoves that would trap the smoke beneath the cooking pots.

"The men in the village would help me make the bricks with whatever materials we had on hand and assemble it.

"By simply using a stove instead of an open fire, it would dramatically reduce the amount of smoke inhaled by the women."

He recalls a heavily pregnant woman, named Linda who was on the brink of labour and in desperate need of a caesarean.

The medics organised for her to be airlifted to the closest hospital. A year later Mr Latimer returned and learnt the baby had died at birth.

"The first thing I asked one of the village boys when I arrived was 'how is Linda and the baby,'" he says. "He just shrugged and said 'baby die', as if it was one of those everyday things."

Extraordinarily, a few months later Linda's aunt gave birth to twins, and gave a baby to Linda to



Robert Latimer in Vanuatu

make up for the one she had lost.

"They have the mentality that a village raises a child," Latimer explained. "For them it's a happy ending."

But Pashley warns volunteering abroad isn't everybody's idea of a dream getaway.

"It's not for everyone. We offer briefings and give cultural advice, how to be respectful of certain cultures and most importantly where to go if you need help."

While some dream of grand gestures or curing AIDS and poverty during their trip, Pashley says helping one or two people is a great success.

"We manage people's expectations. We ask them what they hope to get out of the experience and give them realistic expectations.

"Usually they will stay between three weeks and six months and the work they do is more pastoral and emotional care."

Nicole Pratt's itch for travelling took her to Africa.

"As soon as I finished school I couldn't think of anything else but travel," she says. "I wanted to go somewhere where I could speak French and where I could do something that was worthwhile."

Ironically for the 19 year-old from Ferntree Gully, she was able to combine these two elements in the most unexpected of places. Senegal in West Africa was in dire need of volunteers and French is spoken widely there. The culture shock for Pratt began on arrival.

"I stayed with a host family and when I got to their house I realised there were rooms without roofs in their house," she says. "But this was very normal for African homes — the family I stayed with were wealthy in comparison to many."

Pratt remembers the morning she woke up to find a slaughtered lamb on the floor of the kitchen.

"I soon realised it was a religious holiday and this was going to be my lunch," she laughs.

The centre she worked at cared for hundreds of homeless children who were orphaned or abandoned.

"It changed the way I looked at everything. These kids had nothing and yet they were so grateful."

"There would be a dozens of them sleeping on the floor in the same room."

Children at the shelter are taught French, maths and English. Most are between four and 19 years.

Pratt's first day was spent learning the basics of first-aid. The next day she was applying the first

aid on her own.

"There was a three-year-old boy who had burnt his leg in boiling water...the wound had become infected so I began to visit the boy daily and he would scream when he saw us coming because he knew I was there to clean and dress his wounds."

Within a week the boy's leg had begun to heal. "I think that was my most rewarding moment," she says.

## Thinking of volunteering?

These organisations can help you get started:

**Projects Abroad:**  
projects-abroad.com.au or call  
1300 132 831

**Conservation Volunteers Australia:**  
realgap.com.au

**Taking a gap year:**  
youthcentral.vic.gov.au

**Volunteers Abroad Australia:**  
volunteers-abroad.com or call  
0845 130 4775

**UNICEF Australia:**  
unicef.org.au or call 02 9261 2811

**OXFAM Australia:**  
oxfam.org.au or call 1800 088 110

**WLS International, volunteer and gap year in Asia:**  
australia.gapyearinasia.com

**I to I Volunteering:**  
i-to-i.com or call 1300 881 590