

## Frequently Asked Questions

At PEPY Empowering Youth and PEPY Tours, we frequently receive requests for interviews on the topic of responsible travel and the growing ‘voluntourism’ sector. While we would love to be able to respond to each one personally, unfortunately that just is not possible. However we still want to help if we can, so have put together a list of the questions we are most frequently asked...

### **PEPY Tours now offers development education tours rather than short-term volunteer trips. Can you tell me a bit more about why?**

PEPY Tours moved away from volunteering in an effort to foster a “learning first” approach to international development work. We believe that most volunteers are motivated by a genuine desire to have a positive impact on the world, and this is something that should be celebrated and supported, however, with the growth of volunteer tourism over the last decade, and the proliferation of different opportunities and providers, we saw that it was becoming harder and harder for volunteers to match their good intentions with a good impact. For example, the rise of a profit motive has accompanied a rise in volunteer work that is tokenistic (for example, painting a fence that no-one needs) or at worst damaging (for example, supporting and fuelling a corrupt project). The issue becomes even more complicated in the (common) case of volunteers wishing to work with vulnerable children, for example in orphanages. Visit [www.orphanages.no](http://www.orphanages.no) for more information about this. In some institutions, un-vetted and unqualified volunteers provide the bulk of the care and/or education for vulnerable children, and there is evidence of the detrimental impact that this conveyor belt of volunteers can have on children’s social and emotional development.

Although the negative impact of one poorly-planned volunteer project may not be much, tourist hotspots such as Siem Reap attract tens of thousands of volunteers. Many repeat the same mistakes over and over again, which can result in negative impacts that individuals there for a limited time can find it hard to see. For further reference, please read the following articles and interviews, featuring or written by Daniela, PEPY Empowering Youth and PEPY Tours founder:

- [BBC Radio 4: The Problem with Volunteering](#)
- [Viewpoint: Is gap year volunteering a bad thing?](#)
- [ABC Radio: Is ‘voluntourism’ the new colonialism?](#)
- [Lessons I Learned \(Daniela’s blog\)](#)
- [Is “Voluntourism” Itself Being Exploited?](#)
- [‘What’s wrong with volunteer travel?’ \(Daniela’s TEDx talk\)](#)

Here are some other interesting articles on the topic of volunteer travel that we recommend reading:

- [The dark side of volunteer tourism](#)
- [Avoiding voluntourist traps](#)
- [Does voluntourism do more harm than good?](#)
- [Beware the voluntourists doing good](#)
- [The exploitation of voluntourism](#)
- [In defense of voluntourists](#)

While we know that it is possible to offer volunteer travel opportunities that are educational and empowering for all, getting it right is tricky. For potential volunteers researching placements, it is nearly impossible to discern between providers that are striving to be ethical and responsible, and those that are not, from the marketing materials alone. Last year PEPY Tours launched Learning Service, an advocacy website full of resources designed to help reframe the conversation around volunteer travel, and provide potential volunteers with tips, guidance, and questions to help them put their good intentions to good use. For more information, please visit [www.learningservice.info](http://www.learningservice.info)

### **So what is PEPY Empowering Youth's/PEPY Tours' perception on 'voluntourism', and the recent increase in criticism surrounding it?**

Most of the marketing for volunteer travel places it within the sector of tourism (hence the term 'voluntourism'), where it can be judged as the most ethical and altruistic form of a field that has been associated with environmental and cultural destruction. We believe, however, that international volunteering must also be viewed within the field of development, and from that view, it is one of the smallest interventions within much wider and long-term initiatives.

Development work is both complicated and challenging. To create sustainable change, invested local people who fully understand the issues in their community need the right knowledge and skills to be and create the solutions they themselves have identified. In this scenario, it is very difficult (although certainly not impossible) for a short term voluntourism program to offer meaningful roles to inexperienced volunteers.

Our main criticism of voluntourism programs is that the wrong thing is emphasized. Rather than focusing on the contribution made by the volunteer, which creates an unequal relationship and is in some cases disempowering to local efforts, we aim to emphasize the learning that can be done as part of a mutual exchange. The best programs confront and explore the complexity of development, actively work to minimize negative impacts and maximize learning, and encourage a life-long commitment to positive change through our everyday actions.

Read this Huffington Post piece called ["Is "Voluntourism" Itself Being Exploited?"](#) for more thoughts on this issue.

### **What does PEPY Empowering Youth/PEPY Tours' think the local perception of the positive or negative impacts of volunteering might be? Has PEPY Empowering Youth/PEPY Tours heard anything from local community partners about this topic?**

At PEPY Empowering Youth our team is almost entirely Khmer, including a number of members who grew up in the main community with which we work. We work directly with community members on a daily basis through our education programs.

Community members do often feel that the international exchange of hosting foreign volunteers can be a great opportunity. When volunteers want to share their life experiences, build the capacity of locals through training, and maintain long term relationships with communities – that is often

regarded as a beneficial partnership. Volunteer experiences that support local solutions and initiatives can be empowering experiences for all involved.

We have had great experiences doing exchanges, especially when students of the same age have been able to spend time working on a project together. We have had junior high school students from around the world work in PEPY Empowering Youth's Creative Learning Space together to write a book we later published and other similar exchanges which have been highlight experiences for both parties involved.

**What are PEPY Empowering Youth's/PEPY Tours' suggestions for an individual looking to make a difference in the world?**

The answer we provide to this kind of question is: start with learning. For individuals, being open to learning and humbly exploring different perspectives is important before leaping in and taking action. Take time to build skills that you can contribute, but also remember to cultivate the attitudes you need to help you use those skills effectively and to remain in a learning mindset. For those with their heart set on volunteering internationally, do research on different providers and organizations, and try to ensure you find one that both aligns with your values and fits a community need. Remember that everyone everywhere has an impact on the world through their lifestyle choices and daily actions, and cumulatively this is even bigger than any contribution made through volunteering. We have a short video explaining these concepts further [here](#).

**Is there any particular reason for the shift that happened in 2007, when you went from one PEPY organization to PEPY Empowering Youth (a not-for-profit) and PEPY Tours (a social business)?**

When we started PEPY, we were an NGO focused on improving education in deprived areas of rural Siem Reap province. To engage new and existing supporters we decided to offer trips to Cambodia. They started out as volunteer trips, but as we evaluated and learned what our impact was and could be, we realized that the main thing missing from our model was a focus on learning. We wanted to offer a way in which travelers, especially those interested in and excited about helping the world, could learn about complex development issues and their own global citizenship. As the demand to run these trips increased, it made sense to split into two separate organizations which could focus independently on their missions of improving education and offering trips in Cambodia respectively.

Once we separated the two, roles and responsibilities became clearer for supporters and for our team, as well as making donations more transparent. We were able to ensure experts in education or tourism were allocated accordingly to our management and boards and to make our work more effective.

**Do PEPY Empowering Youth and/or PEPY Tours get a lot of requests from people who are interested in volunteering in the organizations directly, or who want you to organize a volunteer trip?**

Yes. Both PEPY Empowering Youth and PEPY Tours do work with volunteers in their offices, but these are usually for a minimum of six months and are for specific office based roles, generally in communications and fundraising. These are structured as internships, and we interview all volunteers to make sure they have the right skills, self-reflective and open attitudes, and a commitment to learning to be able to contribute positively to our team.

PEPY Tours does still get requests to run short-term volunteer trips, usually to either work with children or take part in a building project. As these kinds of trips are so hard to get right, and because we see value in exploring the complexity and pitfalls of these kind of volunteer projects and building up a more nuanced definition of how to do good in the world, we encourage those who contact us to consider a learning trip with us instead.

**Do you believe that the main purpose of PEPY Tours is to raise money for PEPY Empowering Youth, or is the aspect of mutual learning and engagement just as important? Do you think that participants bring about change or ‘make a difference’ whilst on the experience, or is it mainly through the funds they donate that change is achieved?**

PEPY Tours has two distinct social missions:

- 1) To raise awareness of and raise funds for PEPY Empowering Youth’s education programs in Cambodia. Money from PEPY Tours supports around 20% of the NGO’s annual budget and makes a big difference to the programs on the ground.
- 2) To provide learning adventures which explore Cambodia on a deeper level, encourage critical thinking and self-development, and inspire participants to live, travel, and give more responsibly.

We believe travelers can make a difference with the knowledge and critical thinking skills they gain through our tours, but that the impact they have isn’t limited to the time they spend with us traveling. Instead they explore ideas that will help them contribute in the future, such as how to travel responsibly, how best to support non-profit work, and how to be a change-maker in their own or global community. This learning experience is designed to create a wider impact beyond supporting PEPY Empowering Youth in Cambodia.

**What would PEPY Empowering Youth’s/PEPY Tours’ advice be to someone traveling to Cambodia who wanted to ‘make a difference’ in some way? How does PEPY Empowering Youth/PEPY Tours think tourists can have beneficial impacts whilst on holiday or traveling?**

#### *Responsible Giving*

Many travelers feel inclined to donate money when they are traveling in other countries where they perceive needs. Unfortunately, if they are not very discerning about where they give their money, this does not always have the positive impact that they intend, so it is important to think carefully about how you donate. Giving money to children begging in the street – for example – can keep children out of school and on the streets encouraging the idea that this is a useful way of earning money and therefore supporting the cycle of begging. Instead you might consider donating money to an

organization working with these children and their families or ones working to alter the root cause of these problems: education, rural community vocational training and income generating work, etc. We encourage travelers to do their research and donate their money to reputable organizations that are transparent in how they define their goals, and the extent to which this involves the community they aim to assist. It is also important to understand how and where the organization spends its money, and whether you would be happy for your money to be used in this way. So while we cannot give any hard and fast rules, we can recommend that you ask a lot of questions and ensure you are satisfied with the answers.

### *Responsible Volunteering*

We believe in the value of volunteering when both parties can learn from one another in the spirit of mutual exchange. This is best achieved when a volunteer can bring a humble and positive attitude to their placement. The impact of a volunteer is usually viewed through the lens of whether a volunteer has the right skills and experience for a role. Although we acknowledge this is important, our experience has been that attitudes are as important as skills in terms of the eventual success of a placement abroad.

In addition, we recommend that rather than ‘doing’ a role, the volunteer learns from and supports local staff. This may be in the form of an intern or assistant for less experienced volunteers, or as mentors or trainers in the case of more experienced volunteers. This builds capacity and creates a more sustainable impact. For more tips and tools about responsible volunteering, please visit [www.learningservice.info](http://www.learningservice.info)

### *Responsible Visiting*

We strongly recommend not visiting orphanages, or supporting businesses that use children as an attraction for tourism. In Cambodia, for example, recent studies show that as few as 25% (Alternative Care Report, 2008) of the children living in orphanages are actually orphans. Tourists’ interest in visiting orphanages has directly resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers of ‘orphans’ and orphanages, as shrewd entrepreneurs convince disadvantaged families to sell or give up their children to live in orphanages. These children are often purposefully kept in squalid conditions as a method of attracting more money from tourists, or made to learn dance routines and perform for tourists night after night. It’s also important to remember that any organization with a decent child protection policy would never allow un-vetted strangers to ‘visit’ children in their care. For more information, please see the [‘Orphanage Tourism’ video](#) on the Learning Service website.

We similarly recommend not visiting local schools whilst traveling. Schools should be places of learning, not tourist attractions or photo opportunities. Visiting or offering a short stint of teaching in a school can be disruptive to the children’s learning. PEPY Tours used to offer these experiences regularly during the first years of our existence and we are now much more discerning about where/how/by whom student’s routines are disrupted. As described above, we believe in the power of exchanges – with students meeting and working with students – but feel that tourist visits for photo shoots and other offerings are misguided. Ask yourself if tourists are allowed to enter schools in your own country, and what the reason is for your answer. If you would like to support education in a country you are traveling in, research reputable organizations working alongside government schools.

### *Lifelong Learning*

Often tourism is about seeing and observing, rather than engaging and understanding. Taking the time to ask questions and start conversations will lead not only to a deeper appreciation of the country and culture in which you are traveling, but also may help to inform your future choices and actions. Doing some research before you leave home will also help you to ensure you behave in a way that is respectful and culturally sensitive. You can look at guidebooks, online forums, or blogs for guidance on cultural expectations (e.g. how to dress), as well as common scams and how to avoid inadvertently supporting corruption.

Watch this [video](#) for tips on responsible travel in South East Asia.

### **Does PEPY Empowering Youth/PEPY Tours believe that tourism is a cause of social issues or contributes to problems like poverty?**

Tourism can have many positive impacts on a country: income security, wildlife and natural resource protection, increase in cultural pride... and in some cases it can have the opposite effect. Giving money or gifts to begging children can often maintain poverty. When it is easy for a child to ‘earn’ money by selling trinkets or asking tourists for spare change, there is little incentive for them or their parents to champion school attendance, thereby depriving them of the chance to make a better future through increased education.

Tourism which is set up with the intention of observing poverty, (often dubbed “poverty tourism”) – for example, visiting an orphanage, touring a slum community, or watching people scavenging at a dump site, can also maintain poverty. These were activities we unintentionally became involved in during our initial years of PEPY Tours, and are now staunch advocates for moving away from poverty tourism. While it may be difficult to believe, if tourists show an interest in viewing poverty, then those conditions will be maintained to continue to generate money. In many cases, this money will not benefit those being observed.

If you want a tourist experience that aims at positively impacting local communities and the environment, you could look at ‘ecotourism’ options. Although some programs are better than others, and you still need to do your research, many ecotourism offerings try to ensure your money reaches the people and causes you interact with on your trip.

### **Why did PEPY decide that volunteering was not the most effective way to raise money?**

We didn’t decide this at all. In terms of raising money and engaging donors, volunteering can actually be very effective. People will often feel more connected to initiatives they have experienced first-hand, but this isn’t necessarily what is best for the project, the people working on it, or the community the project aims to serve.

We now connect donors to our work by educating them about development on a wider scale. We welcome people to visit our office and learn about our programs, however we do not offer tourist

visits to the schools we work in, or direct interaction with the students or their families.

**I am doing research on volunteering with children in Cambodia. What are PEPY Empowering Youth's/PEPY Tours' thoughts on the positive and negative impact of this? I'm also looking at the orphanage 'industry' in Cambodia which has been in the media recently, reportedly fuelled by tourism. Does PEPY Empowering Youth/PEPY Tours have any thoughts on this?**

There are many reports available about how many of Cambodia's orphanages are genuine. According to the Alternative Care Report (2008), 75% of children living in orphanages in Cambodia are not orphans. Although causation has not been proved, a correlation between the rise of the numbers of tourists and volunteers wishing to interact with vulnerable children, and the rise in the number of orphanages and children living in them has often been noted. Reports suggest that as outsiders continue to pump money into the orphanage 'business', more and more fake facilities appear and discourage supporting children to find permanent family homes. As outlined above, we believe you should not support any organization that allows tourists to walk off the street and visit children, as this exposes children to potential exploitation.

Volunteering with children can have a similar impact. While giving up a week of your time might make you feel good and the children seem to have lots of fun too, imagine what it is like for children to repeatedly deal with bonding with and losing a new caregiver every week for years. Research suggests constant exposure to an endless stream of outsiders has a negative impact on children's social and emotional development (see, for example, the 2011 report 'With the Best Intentions – a study of attitudes towards residential care in Cambodia'). There are other research materials on orphanages.no that might be useful.

*If you have a burning question that isn't on this list please let us know, and we'll endeavor to include it in the future. You can contact PEPY Empowering Youth via [contact@pepyempoweringyouth.org](mailto:contact@pepyempoweringyouth.org), and PEPY Tours via [info@pepytours.com](mailto:info@pepytours.com).*