

How Trip Funds Are Spent

This page explains what goes into an Encountour trip behind the scenes in order to give you a better idea of how trip funds are spent. As part of our responsible travel policy, we strive to keep a significant portion of funds in the local community. During the 2008-2009 academic year, approximately 75% of all trip funds were spent in Central America.

Selection of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Our trip preparation begins with the selection of the quality non-profit organizations with whom we partner. This involves meeting dozens of NGOs; conducting numerous interviews, meetings, and site visits; and speaking with local community members to get an additional perspective. We then narrow down our list to just a few non-profit organizations that are making truly meaningful contributions to their local community, and who are properly structured and sufficiently organized to enable a productive volunteer experience for you during your time in-country.

Although there are many non-profit organizations doing great work, many worthy organizations are too understaffed and disorganized to effectively utilize volunteer assistance. This often results in lots of frustration between volunteers and the host. Additionally, lines of communication between volunteers and NGOs that may exist prior to departure often times fall to the wayside once the group arrives, and this leaves volunteers without appropriate guidance. Encountour works diligently to prevent these types of situations, and we actively collaborate with NGO administrators to make sure that volunteer time is utilized effectively once the group arrives. This ensures that each group can make the most of its experience.

In addition, once we decide to work with a NGO, we work closely with their staff and often conduct numerous site visits throughout the year in order to stay up-to-date with any changing circumstances.

Homestays/Lodging

Most volunteers stay with a local host family for the majority of their time in country. Our comprehensive screening process for homestays is similar to that for NGOs, involving a thorough interview process and reference checking with community leaders. We work diligently to find outstanding host families who will help make the volunteer experience as meaningful as possible.

Although setting up homestay opportunities involves much more behind the scenes work than simply making a hotel reservation, we believe that the homestay experience adds a great deal to the overall volunteer trip, so that it is worth the extra effort. In addition, utilizing homestays allows us to promote local community development, and therefore supports our responsible travel policy by injecting money directly into local communities.

Volunteer Activities and Materials

The trip fee covers all costs associated with your volunteer work. For example, if your project is building a house, we pay for approximately 85% of all building materials and salaries of professional laborers. The reason we pay 85% is because the local NGO with whom we work has requested that we allow the family to pay the remaining 15% over the course of two years so that they feel a greater sense of ownership in their new home.

Volunteer Coordinator

Encountour assigns a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator to each of our groups. This Coordinator will be with your group during all scheduled activities, and will be available to assist you 24/7. Your Volunteer Coordinator has been specially trained to function as both a linguistic translator and as a cultural interpreter, and to support your group throughout the volunteer experience.

Private Ground Transportation

For your safety and comfort, Encountour utilizes private vehicles for all in-country transportation. Although this is more expensive than public transportation or shared vans, it is safer and much more reliable. Transportation includes airport pick-up, driving to your volunteer site (where applicable), and return to the airport.

Organizing Trip Logistics

Organizing trip logistics is extremely difficult and time consuming, especially when multiple parties are involved. Suppliers often make commitments that they cannot keep and do not follow-through as promised. Encountour therefore spends a great deal of effort finding trustworthy suppliers to support the logistics of our trips, and we make multiple calls to confirm each aspect of the itinerary. A lot of work goes in behind the scenes to produce a smooth and effortless logistical experience during your trip so that you can focus on what you came to do—enjoy a meaningful volunteer experience.

Emergency Preparation

Encountour has also invested considerable resources to develop comprehensive safety protocols and emergency plans. This work is all carried out behind the scenes, but is of utmost importance. As part of our emergency planning, Encountour sets aside a portion of all trip fees for emergency use to ensure that we are prepared for all contingencies. In addition, while volunteers can always call their Volunteer Coordinators 24/7, Encountour also maintains a 24/7 emergency number to ensure that we are available to support you at anytime of the day or night.

Promotion

We at Encountour are passionate about the volunteer travel experiences that we offer, so we feel that it is important to raise awareness about these opportunities. While our promotion is costly and represents a significant portion of our budget, we feel that it is justified because the money that we spend on promotion directly correlates with more college students having potentially life-changing experiences.

Our promotion efforts begin by finding Student Outreach Directors (SOD) on college campuses throughout the United States and Canada; SOD receive a heavily subsidized or free trip in exchange for their vital efforts in organizing and leading the volunteer trip.

Overhead

Encountour's overhead expenses include:

- Staff salaries
- Office rent, equipment, supplies, and utilities
- Professional legal and accounting services
- Insurance
- Vehicle maintenance
- Compliance with local governmental regulation and taxation
- Domestic and international communication
- Domestic and international travel

Relative to the industry, Encountour operates with an extremely low overhead, and we aggressively seek further opportunities to lower our overhead costs whenever possible. The overhead costs that we do maintain have been judged to be completely necessary for the healthy functioning of our organization.

Encountour currently has one very modest office in New Haven Connecticut and another basic office in Central America. The vast majority of our company's office work is performed in Guatemala, which helps us dramatically reduce our overhead. In addition, our Central America office enables us to maintain a permanent local presence, which affords us in-depth local knowledge and enables us to constantly remain in-tune with any changes in the situation on the ground.

We hope that this document gives you a better sense for the extensive behind the scenes aspects that go into organizing a successful volunteer experience and helps you to understand how your money is spent. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us.