

## **The Virtuous Vacation** By Tom Bolt

Michael Szabados, Chief Operating Officer of NetScout Systems Inc., a leading provider of integrated network solutions for Fortune 500 companies, stood sweating in the St. Thomas noon-day sun as he hoisted another piece of lumber to the leader of his worldwide sales team. Szabados had selected “America’s Paradise”, the U.S. Virgin Islands, as the destination for NetScout’s annual corporate sales meeting, but wanted his team to contribute to the island community during their visit.

Like most companies, NetScout recognizes the outstanding contributions and accomplishments of its top sales performers at an annual outing. At their recognition celebration, the company, its employees and their guests set out to make a difference on St. Thomas. Szabados led more than 40 NetScout volunteers to a Habitat for Humanity worksite to build a 100-foot ramp down a steep slope, making the home for two children handicapped accessible. NetScout also made a \$10,000 donation to Habitat for Humanity of the Virgin Islands.

The desire to “give back” is a driving force behind a new movement called “voluntourism”, a novel term for an old concept. One dictionary somewhat awkwardly defines it as “the practice of taking a holiday which combines leisure and sightseeing with the opportunity to work for a charity or other worthwhile cause”. Basically, it’s what your parents told you to do when visiting a friend’s house—lend a hand with the dishes after dinner. Help out where you can.

According to Voluntourism.org, “volunteer tourism seeks to provide resources that are directed toward the community and the needs they have identified as important to their development. But, volunteer tourism is not just ideas, values and aspirations for a better world in a broad sense. In many circumstances it concerns itself with how tourism in destination areas can be used to support and enhance the local community.”

Led by 15-year-old environmentalist Sean LaPlace, who has made it his personal mission to clean up St. Thomas’ illegal dumpsites, hundreds of illegally dumped tires were pulled out of the brush behind two local resorts. A crew of volunteers working with the Environmental Association of St. Thomas eliminated the eyesore which also posed a serious health risk as breeding grounds for disease-carrying mosquitoes.

National interest in voluntourism spiked after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In the wake of these disasters, vacationers wanted more than to sip a cuba libre under a palm tree. They wanted to help rebuild their favorite vacation spots and, in doing so, become a part of them.

In a recent Travel Industry Association survey one quarter of travelers confirmed that they are interested in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation. Travelocity reported that the number of people planning to spend time doing volunteer work while on vacation almost doubled from six percent in 2006 to eleven percent in 2007.

Addressing the membership of the St. Thomas-St. John Chamber of Commerce on “generational marketing”, Berkeley Young of Young Strategies noted the fact that age is a major determining factor in

time available for volunteering. 29% of Gen Xers opt for one week trips, while only 23% of Baby Boomers elect for a week stay. Generation Y opts for multi-week or multi-month trips. "It is easy to understand," Young notes, "many Generation Y'ers are in college with time to spare, while retirees have fewer work commitments than working Boomers or Gen X'ers."

The fun lasts all week with Habitat's Collegiate Challenge Project. The St. Thomas based agency hosts seven to ten-day forays to the islands, including weed-pulling adventures and painting walls. During college spring break and over the summer, the group completed work on Habitat's inaugural home on Adele Gade on St. Thomas.

Judi Nagelberg of Island Meetings & Incentives, a St. Thomas destination management company, has facilitated a number of corporate meetings that include an island voluntourism experience. "This is one of the most rewarding experiences we offer our guests," Nagelberg noted. "It provides the opportunity for visitors to give back to the community – to become a part of the island."

Helping out is a relatively easy sell in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where the view from most work sites is phenomenal and the undertaking itself renders so much value to those in need in the islands. U.S. Virgin Islands Governor John P. deJongh has consistently cited the need for public private partnerships in our islands, "notes Beverly Nicholson-Doty, Commissioner of Tourism. Governor deJongh has consistently promoted public private partnership in industry such as the recent collaboration with Diageo (See: XXX Article), but now we are expanding these partnership opportunities to the voluntourism experience. Voluntourism is an expanding sector of our vacation experience that we hope to grow even more."

Governor deJongh and his family have set an example for the U.S. Virgin Islands in volunteering their time both on-island and abroad. The Governor can routinely be found serving Thanksgiving meals at The Salvation Army, while First Lady Cecile deJongh, led a group of high school students to Rawanda where they repaired orphanages and returned to share their experience. Not to be outdone, first daughter Renee has travelled to the Dominican Republic to build homes, accompanied her mother to Rawanda and has her sights on a building project in Ecuador this year.

Building ramps, painting homes and moving concrete block can be grueling work, to be sure, but volunteers have the satisfaction of knowing that they've given a gift to the island community that will be remembered long after the crew has gone home. After a grunt-filled day of drilling post holes, hammering boards into place and serving meals, volunteers often enjoy nearby Magens Bay, one of the ten most beautiful beaches in the world according to National Geographic or partake of one of the many other U.S. Virgin Islands attractions.

By no means does Habitat for Humanity have the market cornered on voluntourism; there's plenty of work (read that as fun) to be found throughout the Territory. Island Meetings & Incentives has organized workdays with its clients at Catholic Charities' Bethlehem House and the Family Resource Center's shelters, as well as the Nana Baby Home which provides offers a shelter to island children in need. Volunteers spend their days painting, serving meals and simply sharing a smile with children and other residents.

While many “voluntour” adventures require a degree of physical fitness, many do not. A quick inquiry to most any U.S. Virgin Islands non-profit organization will result in an onslaught of options: folding newsletters, filing and even painting murals. You can pitch in for a day or a week, depending on your interest, time or stamina. Given the outstanding breadth of voluntour activities, there’s really no excuse not to get involved while on vacation.

“I still remember this time as one of the best in my life,” says Amy Fischer, about her Collegiate Challenge experience with Habitat for Humanity of the Virgin Islands. “I learned so much—not only about construction, but also about personal things. The work in teams and with others in the island gives you a wonderful perspective on life, and on what really matters.”

Voluntourist are likely be asked to do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do—lug lumber and old tires, paint entire homes, or clean beaches. As a result, voluntourists may experience moments of feeling like a superhero, having given back to America’s Paradise, a place you love. All that, and they’ll still go home with a wonderful tan and a unique experience to brag about.

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