

**SO YOU THINK YOU MAY WANT TO VOLUNTEER  
FOR RELIEF WORK SOMEWHERE  
SOME TIME SOME PLACE**

**Things you might want to know when you are asked to go somewhere  
and certainly before you go!**

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**Notes based on experience culled during 40 years in:**

Malaysia 1957 [2 years]  
Nepal 1959 [3 months]  
Thailand & Kampuchea 1980 [6 months]  
Sudan & Ethiopia 1985 [3 months]  
Samoa 1994 [1 month]  
China 1994 [1 month]  
Afghanistan 2002 [1 month]  
Ethiopia 2003 [1 month]

**Some of these trips have been to extremely primitive situations so that these  
recommendations reflect my need to be pretty well independent. In many places  
now there are shops, even internet cafes etc so it is a good idea to ask about  
probable facilities before you go**

## **I. Before you accept the assignment and certainly before you leave**

1. Ask the NGO [Non-government Organization] why they are sending a team and exactly what the mission is expected to be.
2. What is the expected duration of service?
3. What are their recommendations for clothing, bedding, personal safety etc?
4. Things will be totally different for an acute crisis such as an earthquake compared to a longer term crisis such as famine [Are you familiar with extreme nutritional problems? Might you be expected to do ANY emergency surgery?]
5. What is the agency's entry, and specially their exit, strategy [in the event of a crisis for the team]
6. What other agencies are in the area and what are their missions
7. What is the expected duration?
8. Consider whether you might want to make some changes in the return flights if you might want to take advantage of being somewhere exotic! Ask the NGO to help arrange this.
9. Discuss hostage possibilities and appropriate behavior with the NGO
9. Get on the web and read about what is going on in the country, and get a short history of the region [ Lonely Planet??].
10. If you are ANY good with languages, try and get a local person to give you an hour or two on the critical personal and medical vocabulary. [I make a drawing on sturdy paper of a human body and have all of the important things shown with the local words and key questions such as ?Diarrhoea? Fever? Pain? Cough? Vomiting? Blood? Where? How long? Pregnant? Worms? Etc]
11. **Photography:** Take Lots of photos when you first arrive within the first 2 weeks when everything looks new and different. After a short time the unusual becomes the norm and you may lose your eye for interesting pictures.
13. If you read this whole list, it looks pretty formidable. There are lots of miniature things now available in places such as travel shops and I grew up and worked overseas in places where there literally were no resources. Thus this list reflects my biases to travel with almost everything. Many prefer to travel as minimalists rather than the comprehensive lists given as a guide below. You will make your own judgement about how self-sufficient you will want to be, but everything on this list has been useful if not critical at some stage of my adventures.

## **II. Health Issues**

1. **Insurance: Emergency Health Insurance is mandatory covering emergencies, evacuation etc.** What arrangements does the NGO have for emergency evacuation for medical reasons. There are several companies from which you can purchase insurance only for the time you are away. Your NGO may pay for this. They include:
  - a. SOS International. 1-800 523-8662 or [www.internationalsos.com](http://www.internationalsos.com)
  - b. Access America. Richmond, VA. 1-800 955-4002
  - c. Health Care Abroad. Middleburg VA. 1-800 237-6615
  - d, Travel; Assistance International, Washington DC. 1-800 821-2828
  - e, Travel Guard International Stevens Pt WI. 1-800 782-5151
  - f, Travmed, Baltimore MD. 1-800 732-5309
  - g, US Assist, Washington DC. 1-800 756-5900
2. Does the agency carry any life insurance for you?

3. You may want to check with your own life insurance agents since they may not cover you in a “war” zone.

4. Ditto with your malpractice cover; This is rarely an issue in the developing world during crises.

**2. Immunizations: Make sure that you are up to date on all required for your region.** [Check with CDC as well as the local Travel Clinic].

**3. Medications:** Know what medications are available in the team kit and remember all personal medications. Often medications are available locally but they may not be fully potent and can be outdated or deteriorated from poor storage etc

1, Also take Meds for pain, [ASA/NSAIDS] [make sure you have a few really strong painkillers[eg Demerol or equivalent], in case of serious problem either for someone in the team or for a patient],

2, Coughs, cold, sore throats etc,

3, Diarrhoea, Nausea/vomiting, constipation hemorrhoids and indigestion,

4, Antibiotics [though these are usually available from the team supplies],

5, Skin disorders [cortisone, local anaesthetic, antibiotic ointments etc], small and big bandaids, ? Athlete’s foot?

6, Consider an Epipen, something for allergies

7, I consider Sleeping pills are essential

8. Don’t be surprised if you catch Scabies! [I don’t usually take meds for this]

### **III. Social/Mental Issues.**

1. If you have not been overseas much, or even if you consider yourself a seasoned traveler, little can prepare you for some of the things you may encounter.

2. Culture shock is usual on arriving, You will be filled with high expectations of exciting work and may get lucky but all too often there are long delays and multiple [lame] excuses.

3. **Cultural differences:** Be careful not to impose your value systems onto those of the host country; expect delays, prevarication AS A WAY OF LIFE and don’t be surprised if baksheesh does not work far better than argument! Remember daily life issues such as Foods, Religion, Male dominance practices, Drug use, Clothing, “Personal space”, [eg: in Thailand NEVER point at anything with your foot!], Greetings, Bargaining for shopping etc.

4. Expect risks of thievery, bag snatching, pick pocketing etc

5. Enjoy what you are able to achieve and be thankful that you have been able to touch a few lives outside of your regular purview.

6. You may face beds full of dying infants and the necessity of instant triaging of people to live or die, Death rates of 3-5/1000 per day, people with heartrending stories of torture, neglect, disease, no food, no money and no hope of any kind.

7. A recent phenomenon is to be approached by a fine young person with a story about getting on in life and needing only a little cash to get them into the right educational place. What I have done with this is to give some money **directly to the educational facility** [eg: computer training store] and NEVER to the individual

8. Nutritional bankruptcy of a whole population,

9. Tropical diseases that you may have read about in Med School but even your teachers had never seen.

11. Diagnosing exclusively by using only your eyes, hands and ears [This is what really turns me on!]

12. Don't expect ANY kind of lab support [You might get lucky though]
11. Working conditions where there is no running water.
13. Squatting toilets where you can be seen by the passing crowds! Sleeping and living conditions little better than the refugees.
14. Expect to give your local staff something extra when you leave and expect to be importuned by your local staff for help getting out of their country
15. Expect to be pestered by beggars - learn to harden your heart or it will be broken!
16. **On your return:** Expect another dose of culture shock. People will ostensibly be interested in knowing that you were away and a few may even be genuinely interested to hear more BUT -
17. Don't expect much from the rest who are far more preoccupied with their daily picayune details of life in this affluent US.
18. Do NOT be surprised if you suffer from a re-entry problem, depression, disconnection, sleep problems, memories, interpersonal relations etc. many people actually require some professional help on returning
19. Do not be surprised to have lost quite a bit of weight when you return. It almost always comes roaring back within a month. If it doesn't, you need to check out both physical and mental health.

#### **IV. Things to take**

##### **1. Luggage**

**Remember that you may well have to carry all of your own things and also may have to be transported in a small vehicle.**

1. Best is a rolling backpack big enough for all these things to roll or carry.
2. A Rollaboard suitcase is less useful in that most terrain is very poor
3. An additional small backpack is **critical** for day-to-day carrying of all of your essential daily things.
4. I like fanny packs but they can be cut off you in a busy market.
5. I like to take an additional old duffle bag in case I want to bring back bulky objects
6. A hidden pouch for cash and essential documents is **essential**
7. Use vacuum packing bags for compressible things; they can reduce the volume [but not the weight!], by up to 70%

##### **2. Clothes.**

Obviously depends on expected weather and terrain

Use layers for warmth

Use clothes that you can wash and don't mind being ruined

Expect to leave most of them when you return

Ask about expected housing and local customs [eg: head scarves for women in Islamic countries]

Any extra space? Consider things you would like to leave when you return, Clothes, toys, pens, gadgets. [I had a smash hit with some Halloween masks]

- 1, Boots are usually better than shoes even if you don't expect to have to trek to distant locales], spare pair of shoes.

- 2, Decent walking socks,
- 3, Undies, T shirts,
- 4, Jersey, vest, anorak, poncho,
- 5, Hat, shorts, sox,
- 6, Photo vest [or something with lots of pockets, these are very light, I like a bush jacket [eg from Eddie Bauer or TravelSmith that has lots of pockets]
- 7, Pants, OR pants and shirts are usually a good idea,
- 8, Scarf [I use one cut from a long towel that can serve as a towel, hankie and scarf!], towels,
- 9, Thongs [or shoes for indoors],
- 10, Long Johns, gloves, ear muffs or headband, boot cleats [for snow] as indicated

### 3. Personal Items

#### A Water sterilizers:

Iodine and/or chlorine for H<sub>2</sub>O.

Some people use mechanical filters which are also good but weigh more

#### B. Food:

1. This is very personal
2. Portable wrapped bars for meals on the go [Granola, Power etc]
3. Lots of chocolate! But wrapped or M&Ms in the tropics!
4. Hard candy, Chewing gum
5. Coffee & tea bags [Nescafe & creamer] Sugar is available everywhere
6. Waterbottle. I usually fill mine with Scotch, or other liquor since it takes up room anyway!

#### C. Cleaners

- 1, Soaps and shampoo, Liquid hand cleaners and/or towelettes, Laundry detergent,
- 2, Tooth brushes and tooth paste.

#### D. More personal things

1. **Sleeping:** Sleeping bag and inner sheet, and ? pad. Ask NGO if these are needed before you go. Pillow case 1 or 2 [can be used for lots of purposes]. Ask also if mosquito nets are needed for the area - will they be provided?

Antibug spray, Alarm clock, Ear plugs and eye covers for sleep, sleeping pills

2, **Electric:** 1, Radio, Tape recorder or CD player for music books on tape etc and possibly for recording thoughts.

- a, All chargers that you might need for your electric gadgets [You hope!]
- b, Batteries - get all gear fitted with new batteries before leaving
- c, 1 or 2 Cameras, Film, discs, installation CD for camera & film bag[ I expect to take at least 300 pictures in the first two weeks] etc
- d. Portable cup water heater for tea, etc
- e. 110/220 Volt power converter.

**E. Other:** 1, Local language phrase book, Books for reading,

- 2, Playing cards,
- 3, Writing stuff, carbon paper etc [but fax and email is available in almost every town], Padded envelopes, spare pens & pencils for kids etc, Address book, some US stamps[ in case someone is leaving the group and willing to post mail when they return]

- 4, At least \$40 in singles [for tipping, bribes etc],
- 5, Enough **cash** to cover all likely expenses including mementos, extra travel etc
- 6, Ziploc bags [very useful for food, clothes etc],

- 7, Sewing kit, safety pins
- 8, Sun glasses, Spare eye glasses and glasses repair kit  
, Music makers if you can play something portable, [I always take my mouth organ!],
- 9, Whistle, Flashlight, Matches, A candle,
- 10. **Repair kits:** “Swiss” army knife and/or a Letterman tool, Glue [instant and/or epoxy], Rubber bands, Duct and/or electric tape [useful for repairs, splinting, packing, securing lots of things!], 10-30 Feet strong string, [for bags that break, and lots of things!].

## **V. Medical supplies**

### **Plan to leave most of these things when you leave**

- 1. BP and stethoscope, Oto/eye-scope
- 2. Tape measure and growth charts [if possible get some from UNICEF for your special region but even US charts are very worthwhile]
- 3. Magnifying glass [for skins],
- 4. Some urine test strips might be very handy
- 5. Any spare surgical instruments, ?stitching kits?, [rubber gloves and masks should be available from the team supplies]. Ask your local hospitals for anything small of use.
- 6. Medical Textbooks [Tropical diseases, UNICEF nutrition protocol book, Nutritional handbooks, Public health advisory and texts re camp hygiene]. One of the best for rural places is “**Where there is no Doctor**” by David Werner[\$25].

## **VI. Useful web sites and contacts**

If you have a yen for a particular area, consider contacting the relevant embassies for info. Start with something like [Yahoo.com/Health/Medicine/organizations](http://Yahoo.com/Health/Medicine/organizations)

- 1. [www.internationalhealthvolunteers.org](http://www.internationalhealthvolunteers.org) [looks good]
- 2. [www.medexinternational.org](http://www.medexinternational.org) [looks good]
- 3 [www.ama-assn.org](http://www.ama-assn.org) [The AMA site [intmed] volunteer opportunities overseas]
- 4. International Medical Volunteer Association
- 5. [dmoz.org](http://dmoz.org) [opens sites for Mds, nurses etc; enter volunteer medical organizations]
- 6. [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) [looks good]
- 7. [www.CDC.gov/travel](http://www.CDC.gov/travel) for disease prevalence, personal advice etc
- 8. UNICEF for demographics, current crises, travelers advice etc
- 9. Northwest Medical Teams International [Portland OR], 503 624-1000
- 10. Mediciens Sans Frontiere [MSF] [usually for at least one year]
- 11. International Rescue Committee [New York]
- 12. Save the Children Fund