



# Voluntourism

Catherine Woulfe is a dog lover. So when she was on vacation in Bali from her work as a cancer researcher in Australia, she was distressed to discover a “situation” with four dogs being kept in extremely cramped cages. Back at her hotel, she searched on the Internet for an animal welfare organization in Bali and found the nonprofit Bali Animal Welfare Association (BAWA). She emailed the founder, Janice Girardi, who quickly replied that the group’s 24-hour ambulance would respond to the situation—and did.

“I was so impressed with the prompt response and further information I read about BAWA that I vowed I would volunteer with this amazing organization,” Woulfe said.

When Woulfe returned to Bali six months later to spend three-and-a-half weeks volunteering with BAWA, she participated in an increasingly popular activity with travelers looking to do more on their vacation than lie on the beach—voluntourism. Voluntourists spend part or all of their vacation volunteering with community-based organizations in an experience that can be demanding at times but ultimately rewarding. For dog lovers, the opportunities to help dogs while on vacation run the gamut from volunteering with groups

Seeking a vacation experience with deeper meaning and lasting feel-good vibes? Look no further.

By Jen Reeder

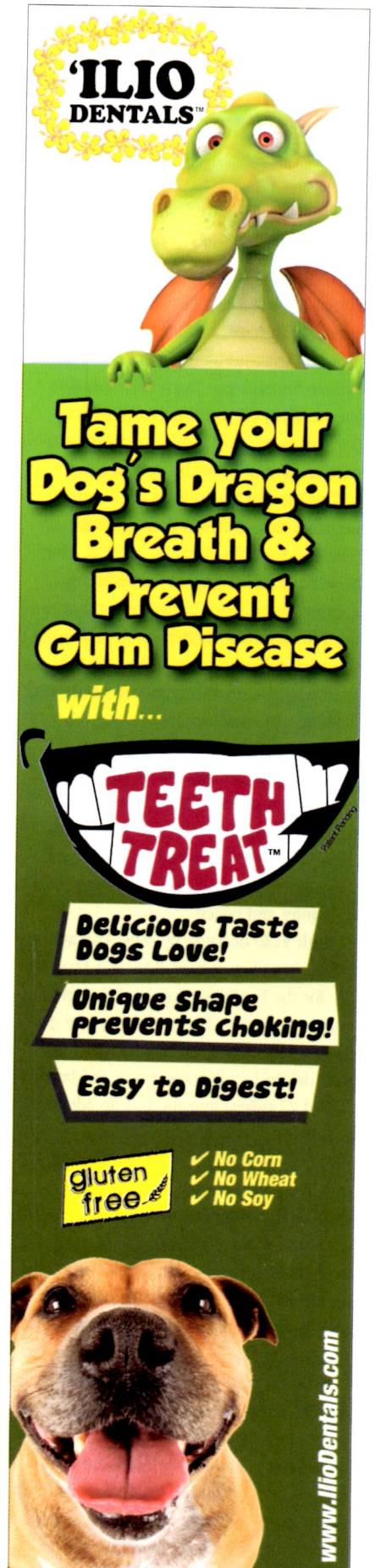
operating in tropical paradises like Bali and Mexico, destinations that allow participants to experience a different culture while clocking some feel-good canine time, to closer-to-home destinations like Utah that still provide the gorgeous scenery and warm weather many travelers seek in a getaway.

Woulfe is one of approximately 180 people who volunteer at BAWA each year. Founded in 2007 in Bali's town of Ubud, its mission is to relieve suffering, control the population, and improve the health of Bali's street dogs while educating the local population in animal welfare. Today the group offers 24-hour ambulance services, a clinic to rehabilitate abused, neglected or starving dogs and then adopt them out, and sterilization for street dogs (rather than poisoning, the preferred "culling" method on the island). They also educate children and adults about care for animals, and lobby the Indonesian government for enforceable animal welfare laws. On average, each month BAWA responds to over 600 calls to the ambulance hotline, receives 70 animals into the clinic, adopts out 50 dogs and spays or neuters over 170 animals.

Kim McCreanor, volunteer coordinator (a volunteer position) at BAWA, said volunteers are needed "every week of the year," typically to work in the animal clinic, which can house up to 100 dogs and cats each day.

"The most vital role our volunteers play is in socializing the animals," McCreanor said. "Every animal at our clinic has been through a trauma—and the power of love and time is a powerful healer for these animals. Our staff do not have the time to spend cuddling a sick puppy or sitting with a traumatized adult dog—that's where our volunteers come in ... we could not do the work that we do without the kindness of others."

Woulfe said her experience volunteering at BAWA was rewarding. Her jobs included cleaning, cooking, walking dogs, refilling water containers, helping with laundry, riding with the ambulance to rescue a puppy trapped in an underground drain, treating street dogs for skin conditions, and what she considered her most important job, working to instill or recover the dogs' trust in humans by simply spending time with them. ▶



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"I'm amazed at how dogs, some of whom have suffered terrible abuse at the hands of humans, can forget their fear and love and trust humans again," she said. "I believe humans can learn very valuable lessons from these animals ... I believe that loving animals render us more compassionate and better human beings."

Compassion for animals led Sunny Benedict to found Baja Animal Sanctuary (BAS) in Rosarito, Mexico, in 1997. The New York native moved to the beach community to work in real estate, but the need for a no-kill shelter in the region led to a very different career. She said the local pound euthanized pets 72 hours after arriving—by electrocuting them.

"It was important for me to have a no-kill shelter because all of the animals we picked up already had lived a very hard life trying to survive in the streets," Benedict said. "I believe that all living creatures have the right to live their lives in dignity and peace."

With \$180 donated by other concerned locals, Benedict opened BAS as a sanctuary for the homeless dogs and cats of northern Mexico. The street dogs are given medical care, food, and socialization, then driven by volunteers over the border (about 22 miles) into the U.S. to adoption events in San Diego, CA every weekend. There are typically up to 350 dogs and 115 cats living at the sanctuary, which also spays and neuters animals, lobbies the government for more humane treatment of animals (dogs are no longer electrocuted thanks to their efforts), and works to educate local schoolchildren with tours of the sanctuary.

Benedict said volunteers are always needed at BAS to help clean cages, bathe animals—particularly in the summertime—and play with the dogs and cats. Additionally, veterinarians or vet techs can volunteer to help administer medications or vaccines at BAS. Volunteers are also



Volunteers with the Bali Animal Welfare Association (BAWA) give a dog a shot; Bawa volunteer Catherine Woulfe gives some love to a local dog.

needed across the border in San Diego to help with the weekly adoption events or to foster dogs.

"I can't thank my volunteers enough—they go the extra mile," Benedict said.

Judith Ann Sobel, program director at Baja Animal Sanctuary (a fulltime volunteer position she's held for four years), started volunteering 10 years ago at adop-

tion events after friends introduced her to Guinness, the Akita/yellow Lab mix they adopted from the sanctuary. She frequently drives to Mexico to visit BAS so she witnesses dogs transform from sickly and scared to healthy and often, adopted to good homes.

"I did a home visit on a dog yesterday, and to see the dog come in sick and

While volunteers at Baja Animal Sanctuary can relax at the beach in their downtime, as can volunteers at Bali Animal Welfare Association (which is also near a monkey sanctuary), volunteers at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Kanab, UT are treated to desert scenery.

skinny and covered in ticks go from there to a beautiful home, people loving it, getting kisses—how can it not be rewarding?” Sobel said. “That’s the miracle. That’s what keeps me going.”

While volunteers at Baja Animal Sanctuary can relax at the beach in their downtime, as can volunteers at Bali Animal Welfare Association (which is also near a monkey sanctuary), volunteers at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Kanab, UT are treated to desert scenery. Located in southern Utah and known as “Little Hollywood” because of the number of western movies and TV series filmed there, Best Friends is less than a two hour drive from the Grand Canyon, Bryce and Zion national parks, and Grand Staircase National Monument, and an hour from Lake Powell in Page, AZ. But volunteering at America’s largest no-kill shelter, which has the laudable mission of “no more homeless pets,” is the primary draw for the 6,300 people who volunteer at Best Friends every year.

“Volunteers are absolutely vital to the work of Best Friends Animal Sanctuary,” said Cindy Helms, manager of the volunteer department in the Volunteer and Visitor Experience Division of Best Friends Animal Society, which operates the sanctuary. “They do everything from help the animal caregivers with the day-to-day chores such as feeding, cleaning, and scooping poop to socializing and taking dogs on walks.”

Volunteers can request to work at Dogtown, where there are typically 400 to 450 dogs at any time among an average of 1700 animals, including horses, bunnies, cats, pigs, and parrots. In addition to committing to a three-hour shift, volunteers can opt to take dogs, cats or bunnies to their pet-friendly hotels or on-site sanctuary cottages for a sleepover to help with socializing.

“It not only is special for the animals and the volunteers, but these sleepovers provide invaluable information to the caregivers on how the animals are in a more home-like setting, which helps the adoption team match the right pet with the right family,” Helms said.

Best Friends Animal Society, which helped launch the no-kill movement 30 years ago in America, works to build no-kill ►

## How to Help at Home

Want to get involved at home?

There are lots of options, starting with volunteering at your local animal shelter or rescue group to walk dogs, take photos of animals up for adoption, or update their social media pages. Thanks to the Internet, it’s easy to make financial



donations to nonprofits like the Bali Animal Welfare Association, Baja Animal Sanctuary,

and Best Friends Animal

Sanctuary. And organizing

a fundraiser for a program

or sanctuary can be a fun

way to help. It could be a

local “mutt strut” or bake

sale—or even a major

undertaking. 67-year-old

Floyd Lampart of Lake

Clear, NY, decided to raise

money for Best Friends Animal

Society by bicycling

around the perimeter of the United

States—12,000 miles!—from

April to October 2013, an effort

that raised over \$50,000.

Finally, even if you don’t

have time to volunteer on

your vacation, you can check

to see if your destination is

listed with Pack for a Purpose

(packforapurpose.org). The nonprofit

lists supplies needed by charities around the

world supporting children and dogs. Look up your

destination, pack what’s needed in your luggage, and

drop off upon arrival. Bon voyage!

There are special opportunities for veterinarians,

vet techs, and students (and sometimes for dog

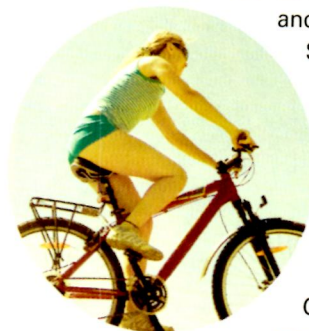
lovers without formal training) through World Vets,

a nonprofit organization that provides veterinary aid,

training and disaster relief around the world. Learn

about upcoming international field service projects at

worldvets.org.





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programs and partnerships around the country, such as the No Kill Los Angeles initiative aiming to make L.A. a no-kill city. Layne Dicker, a lawyer from Northridge, CA, started volunteering with his wife at a shelter Best Friends opened in Los Angeles, and within a few months decided to take a “vacation” to volunteer at the flagship sanctuary in Utah. They’ve now been three times and are actively planning more vacations there, including an upcoming trip with friends they made while volunteering at the sanctuary.

“While we have volunteered briefly in cats, parrots, horses—I think Sally did one session with bunnies—our focus is dogs,” Dicker said.

In one case, there was a puppy named Katelyn with a condition that makes her need to be held upright for 30 minutes after eating.

“Three times we’ve fed the little girl and just held her up for 30 minutes and played with her,” he said.

They also take dogs on sleepovers, like Jordie, an elderly dog who had terminal cancer. The couple took her to dinner on a patio and let her sleep on their bed. She passed away a few months later. Dicker said they were happy to have shared a special time with her before she died.

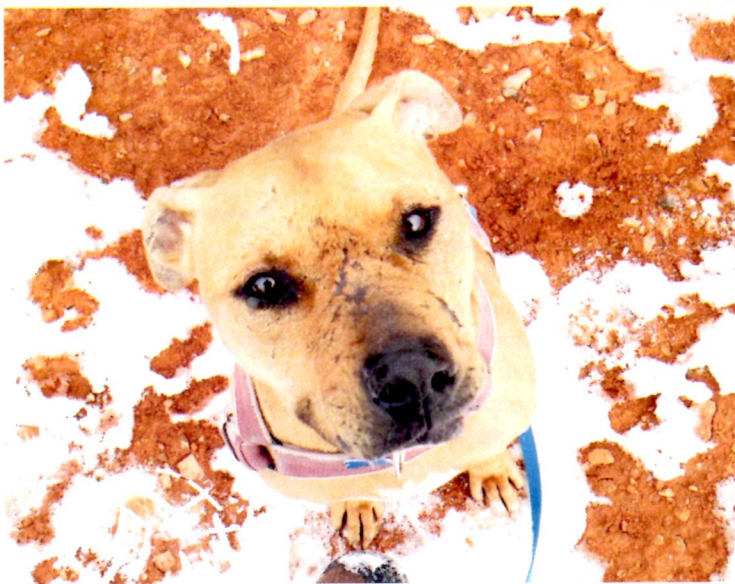
“The results of the things you do are so tangible and immediate—they relieve people who are dedicated and overworked and bring joy to animals that have not had the best lot in life so far,” he said.

He said the sanctuary, which covers nearly 3700 acres, is “off-the-charts, ridiculous gorgeous,” and that the food in the vegetarian café is terrific.

“It literally is the best \$5 you could ever spend. It’s five bucks and they’ve got a salad bar, a vegan or vegetarian hot dish and it’s just delicious,” Dicker said.

He said that planning a vacation is a personal matter, and he doesn’t judge how people choose to spend their downtime. But he said he and his wife prefer voluntourism to standard tourist fare.

“If someone wants to go and sit on a beach in Hawaii for two weeks and that recharges their batteries, if someone wants to go to Paris, that’s fine too,” Dicker said. “I really don’t do this just because it’s helpful. We do it because we enjoy it ... you do drive home thinking ‘I did something other than sit on a beach, shop and eat.’ It does feel better than doing those other vacations.” ■



From top: Baja Animal Sanctuary (BAS) founder Sunny Benedict with some of the BAS pack; Little Romeo loves to help Daniel Galvan feed the other dogs at the Baja Animal Sanctuary; One of the lovely dogs at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

➤ **Go!** For more information, check out [bawabali.com](http://bawabali.com), [bajaanimalsanctuary.org](http://bajaanimalsanctuary.org), and [bestfriends.org](http://bestfriends.org).