

EVENTS/CAUSES

Hotels must cater to voluntourists to stay on top

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Starwood Together As One campaign photo

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

Traveling is an increasingly popular way for people to give back, and hotel brands must stay on top of the trend to maintain their status as the best in the business.

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A [recent study by Tours.com](#) found that an astonishing 55 percent of America-based travelers partook in volunteer work during a vacation within the past two years, with almost three quarters calling their charitable donations or philanthropic endeavors “important,” “very important” or “extremely important.” As “voluntourism” becomes increasingly common, brands must show that they care equally and assist travelers in partaking in volunteer work or gifting to maintain status and image.

“More and more guests, B2B customers, associates and prospective associates are interested in opportunities to improve their communities whether at home or while traveling,” said Michelle Naggar, vice president of social responsibility at [Starwood](#). “For Starwood, volunteerism and enriching our communities is part of who we are.”

Voluntourism

Millennials’ volunteer hours are on average double those of the 55+ demographic, with

cash donations being triple and donations of supplies more than quadruple. Families also expressed an interest in increasing volunteer hours and getting their children involved in good will.

Perhaps most importantly for luxury brands, affluent, defined in the study as those with household incomes exceeding \$100,000, find it especially important to share their wealth.



Four Seasons volunteer tweet

These findings indicate that travel with philanthropic goals is here to stay, especially among high-income travelers, so luxury brands must find ways to contribute as well.

Some hotels have already found ways to join the fun. Four Seasons, for instance, marked its 50th anniversary with multiple volunteering options that allowed guests to give back to local communities while traveling ([see story](#)).

Also, the Ritz-Carlton's "Community Footprints" program has long given guests and locals a chance to give back since 2002 in the areas of "child well-being," "environmental responsibility" and "hunger and poverty relief." Community Footprints has now inspired "Lasting Contributions," which will get newlyweds off to a good start.

Kicking off in the chain's St. Thomas location, couples can choose from a number of philanthropic engagements, such as spending time with and assisting children at the Boys & Girls Club on the eve of their wedding. The report from Tours.com shows that volunteer experiences go a long way to making the trip memorable, so the offer should get couples off to a good start.



Ritz-Carlton St. Thomas

"We do see this as a trend in the travel industry as a whole, and the Caribbean is no exception," said Cliff Brutus, director of sales and marketing at [Ritz-Carlton](#), St. Thomas. "I think people want to get the true feel of a destination when they travel. We find that

hyperlocal, immersive and rewarding experiences are increasingly demand, and we want to provide experiences that show off our unique Caribbean culture.

"Here at The Ritz-Carlton, our goal is always to create indelible memories for our guests," he said. "Volunteering and our 'Lasting Contributions' program is one way we help to craft these valued memories."

Starwood Hotels & Resorts, meanwhile, has declared October "Global Volunteerism Month" and is bringing back last year's "Together As One" campaign, in which employees contribute tens of thousands of man hours raising funds for local charities across all the chain's locations.

"Many of our hotels, especially properties that are located in delicate ecosystems, offer programming where guests may play a role in protecting the environment and even helping it thrive," said Andrea Pinabell, vice president of sustainability at **Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide**. "Hands-on activities, like coral reef restoration at The Andaman, The Luxury Collection, engages guests to play a role in promoting and enhancing indigenous locations."

Patrons staying at the Andaman, Starwood's Luxury Collection Resort in Langkawi, Malaysia are invited to help clear the shore of dead coral detached from the Andaman Reef, still washing up in the aftermath of 2004's devastating tsunami. Those who are too impatient to wait for low tide can hurry to the "Coral Nursery," where they can start and transplant coral colonies in an effort to revitalize the Andaman Reef.



Andaman Reef, image courtesy Starwood Hotels

In this regard, luxury hotels are living up to their name by staying ahead of trends. However, voluntourism is unlikely to subside anytime soon, so brands will have to continue to find ways both to facilitate patrons' altruistic gestures and partake in their own.

Giving back

Brands in other sectors are also taking strides to make the world a better place.

Earlier this week, British automaker Jaguar Land Rover announced that it is furthering its work on global causes with a new water filtration project set to benefit 300,000 students in Africa.

For this five-year venture, Jaguar Land Rover is working with Climate Care and Vestergaard to install LifeStraw filtration systems in communities that feed into 375 schools in Bungoma County, Kenya. Launched in 2013, Jaguar Land Rover's global CSR program has a goal of impacting 12 million individuals by 2020 through initiatives centered on education, technology, health, well-being and the environment ([see story](#)).

As the luxury landscape continues to evolve and geopolitical turmoil affects emerging markets, the brands that will come out on top must be able to adapt to the resulting consumer behavior.

On Sept. 29 in New York, part of a 15-city world tour of sorts, Albatross Global Solutions shared insights from its annual research study "The Journey of the Luxury Consumer" to better understand motivators, the purchase journey and the consumer landscape on a global scale ([see story](#)).

For Ritz-Carlton, adapting to behavioral changes doesn't mean letting go of "luxury."

"I believe the desire for that exclusive, luxury travel experience hasn't changed," Ritz-Carlton's Mr. Brutus said. "We see that many guests want to feel more immersed in the local culture and make a lasting impact. By offering philanthropic activities in the local community, in addition to the finest services and facilities, they get the best of both worlds."

Starwood takes another approach, working to translate charitable gestures throughout its operations.

"It's less about offering volunteerism packages or gimmicks and more about ensuring that our hotels are operating in sustainable and responsible ways," Starwood's Ms. Pinabell said. "Guests then know that by staying at a Starwood hotel, they're supporting a positive impact on the local community, ecosystem and economy."

Final Take

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