





Voluntourism
combines travel
with doing good.
But do you help
or just assuage
your guilt?

Vincent Crump
finds out

The rainforest clearing is scattered with a scruff of tumbledown barns and mud huts. Piles of broken bricks and mounds of sand surround a half-finished breeze-block building, its upper storey only a skeleton. There is also a tatty volleyball net, a climbing frame made from moped tyres, and a big roll of wire with a two-year-old sitting on it. He is wearing a drool-coated bib and no underpants, and has yellowish powder on his cheeks – not sand, but the face paint of the Karen tribespeople, who live in the mountains of the Thai-Burmese border.

It looks like a building site, but it's the Baan Dada orphanage (www.baandada.org), located seven hours northwest of Bangkok, beyond the bridge over the River Kwai, where the Death Railway was blasted through the hills to Burma.

The orphanage is run by Dada, a neohumanist missionary from Manila, and is home to 52 children, refugees of the bloodshed between the Burmese military and oppressed Karen villagers.

Some, like Nongdee, a beaming eight-year-old in shocking-pink shorts, saw their fathers murdered in front of

them by soldiers. Others trekked miles across the viper-stalked malarial mountains to reach Thailand,

their siblings perishing on the way. I'm here with Hands Up Holidays, pioneer of a new kind of travel experience that blends upmarket sightseeing with volunteer work. The company was started by Chris Hill, a lapsed financier who

went to Guatemala to teach English, loved it and thought other busy professionals might fancy something similar.

"Our trips are two-thirds holiday, one-third volunteering, and completely hotel-based," he says. "But you'll get to

interact with locals in ways not possible for ordinary tourists."

It's an appealing idea, and with other tour operators catching on fast, it now has a name: voluntourism. But can just a few days' mucking in really help? Ethically, that's a

vexed question. As Hands Up's first volunteer at Baan Dada, I'm here to find out.

The children don't pay much attention to my arrival. They're far too busy digging in the sandpit, falling in the stream, poking sticks into sleeping

dogs, skinning snakes and

playing Beatles riffs on a battered Yamaha organ.

After a bit, Dada returns from the market. "Is it possible for me to help," I ask, "in such a short stay here?" Dada's answer is disconcerting. "Unless you're here for at least a month, you're a visitor not a volunteer. You will probably just play with the children..."

That's a challenge. In three days I'm off to my luxurious Kanchanaburi riverside resort for a week of temple excursions and Thai massage. If I'm going to "make a difference", I'd better get weaving.

Except that I'm no good at weaving. Nor teaching. Nor DIY. I remember what Chris said earlier: "It doesn't matter if you have no specific skills, so long as you're proactive. The children are pretty self-sufficient, but there are always jobs if you look for them."

Baan Dada's main work in progress is a girls' dormitory, which is being built from adobe bricks made with earth, water and rice husks, all trodden together like grapes. So I set about mixing concrete to support the building's frame – shovelling cement, lugging pails, pausing occasionally to make a sand castle with the little ones. We're at it for four hours, our work party swollen

by the teenage lads from the home; even Ali Baba, the boy

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in the bib, drags out a hose to water the mix.

Night comes, and we're still going, labouring in the Dante-esque glow of two flickering flashlights. By now, I'm drenched to the waist and barefoot, my sandals discarded, a waterfall of sweat threatening to wash away my spectacles.

But we get the job finished — and later, back at my hotel on the romantic lakeside at Sangkhla Buri, I enjoy the most meaningful shower I've had in years. I'm blowing concrete out of my nose, excavating it from my ears. And I feel great.

The next day, improbably, the work gets harder. Dada has decreed that we're going to hand-dredge boulders from the stream to build steps. After two hours of lifting and laying, it feels as if the mortar has seeped through my skin and solidified in my forearms. The soft pads under my fingers are no longer blisters, they're just circles of flesh. I'm so weary that I start using the snake holes in the river bank as footholds.

After lunch, though, I'm saved by Nongdee, the girl in the pink bloomers, whom I discover arranging alphabet cards on a kitchen workbench. We spend half an hour spelling out our names, a gaggle of yellow-faced youngsters gathering around us. They win jellybeans from my rucksack for their intelligence; I win an afternoon teaching English to the "kindie kids" in their mud-hut classroom.

By day three, I'm on first-name terms with at least a dozen of the older children, and dangling a toddler off every fingertip. Some are even catching snakes just for me — one has a full-grown toad inside it. I'd trade any number of riverboat cruises and five-star suppers in Kanchanaburi to spend a few more days here.

But it's time to go. On balance, I reckon I've got more out of my stay than the Baan Dada orphans. But I will

definitely do more volunteering — and Chris later confides that, with short-term volunteers, that's secretly the point.

Dada's goodbye handshake is quite a bit firmer than his welcome one. But it's nothing compared with Nongdee running over, grinning, to high-five my blisters.

Travel details: a 14-day trip to Thailand (0800 783 3554, www.handsupholidays.com), with three days at Baan Dada, four nights in Bangkok and two in Kanchanaburi, costs £1,685pp, B&B, including excursions and all transfers, but not flights. Options include Thai Airlines (0870 606 0911, www.thaiair.com) and Eva (020 7380 8300, www.evaair.com), both from Heathrow.

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Little helpers

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Home-farming in Sri Lanka

Explore (0844 499 0901, www.explore.co.uk) is launching 14 new volunteer tours for 2008, with destinations including Argentina, Cambodia and Morocco. Its two-week itinerary in Sri Lanka has you spending three days planting, irrigating and composting to help villagers develop sustainable food sources; you'll work and eat with the locals and maybe take part in guided meditation sessions. This is teamed with visits to tea plantations and the Udawalawe elephant orphanage. August and October departures cost £1,370pp, including flights from Heathrow and most meals.

Cat-cuddling in South Africa

Safari holidays are all very well, but at the Cango Wildlife Ranch in South Africa you'll get slightly closer to the fauna.

A two-week tour with i-to-i (0800 011 1156, www.i-to-i.com), now part of the First Choice group, combines wine-tasting in the Western Cape and canoeing on the Garden Route with 10 days of mucking in (and out) at the world's biggest cheetah contact centre. You could be bottle-feeding the cubs, playing fetch with Bengal tigers, even helping dress the wounds of an injured lion. One of 19 "meaningful tours" worldwide, it costs £995pp, including some meals, but not flights.

House-building in Ecuador

Gap-year expert The Leap (01672 519922, www.theleap.co.uk) offers three "mini-leaps" in Kenya, Mozambique and Ecuador. With the last of these, you'll live for two weeks among the hunter-gatherer communities of the Amazonian jungle, under the auspices of the Yanapuma Foundation. A range of work options includes thatching village buildings and running after-school clubs. Spend time off trekking or whitewater rafting. Two weeks cost from £795pp, including all meals, but not international flights.

Furniture-making in Kenya

Gap Year for Grown-ups (01892 701881, www.gapyearforgrownups.co.uk) offers 80-odd trips of under a month, from elephant-rescuing in Jaipur to English-teaching in Venezuela. For maximum immersion, opt for its Kenya Camp Life programme: two to

four weeks working with the staff of the Stephen Kanja primary school in the Shimba Hills, which lacks electricity, textbooks and desks. You'll paint, build and teach sport and music, while lodging in smart safari tents, with elephants and baboons yards from your flaps. Two weeks cost from £892, with all meals, but not flights.

Favela-painting in Brazil

Samba away the mornings and paint the town all afternoon, with the dance-holiday specialist Jingando (020 8877 1630, www.jingandoholidays.com). It can tailor-make a fortnight in Rio that combines samba, salsa and capoeira lessons at Marinho Bras's renowned dance school with sessions working on the Make Favela Art community project. Designed to pep up the shanty towns above Santa Teresa, it aims to paint an entire hillside favela so that it becomes a huge mural visible across the city, improving the living conditions and self-esteem of the residents. Fifteen days in February cost from £1,999, with flights from Heathrow.

River-cleaning in Egypt

On the Go (020 7371 1113, www.onthegotours.com) has a new 10-day Eco Egypt itinerary: in Cairo, you'll spend a day helping at a shelter for homeless children, and another with a women's co-operative that makes handicrafts from salvaged textiles. Then there is a day or two on a traditional

felucca along the Nile — helping to spring-clean the river bank. It's a group trip with an Egyptology guide; departures in February and September; £299, including some meals, but not flights.

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**Team
work:
mixing
cement's
easier in
pairs**



**Do something:
care for cats,
or be a muse**

Alamy, Leap Overseas, Real Cap