

## Chapter 20:

# Getting the Most From Hosting

### Achieving Mutual Benefit and Succeeding Together:

**We** generally understand the role of “host” as someone who receives “guests” and then provides for them and entertains them. However the “guests” who participate in a Workaway arrangement are not passive, as they have their own role to play. They may be provided for, but they are also active providers... of whatever help and support is required.



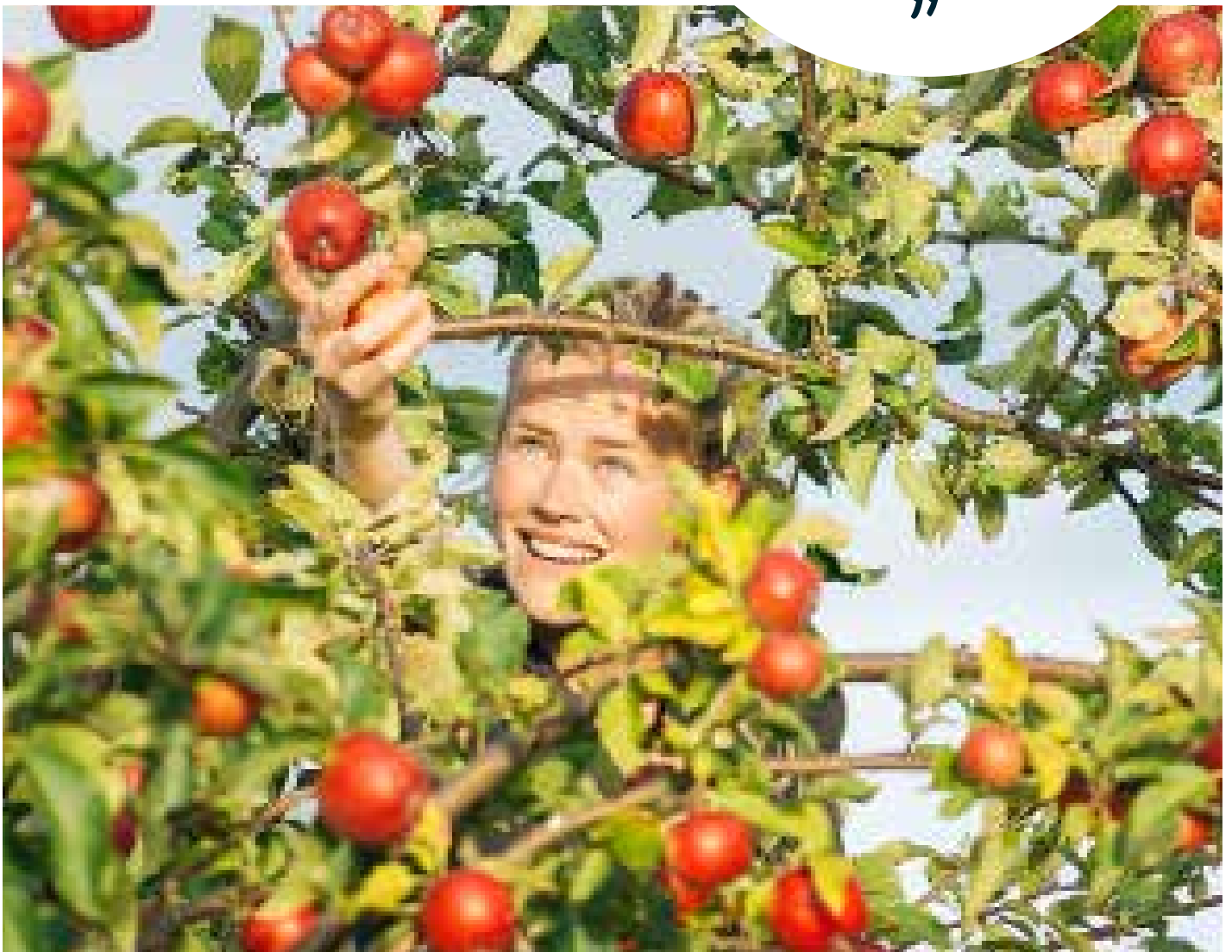
For a first time host, it may be difficult to find that balance. The newcomers are not family but arriving as friends. They are not “employees”. It is a new role, but one that can be extremely rewarding once you embrace it.

It’s important to remember that the arrangement takes place because the host has been selected amongst the hundreds and hundreds of other possible hosts, and similarly a Workawayer has been selected from amongst hundreds and hundreds of other possible applicants and will no doubt travel many many miles to reach the destination. This is both a compliment and a responsibility, which is why it is so relevant to find out the other’s motives, to become aware of their expectations and to make an effort to convert their hopes into reality.

## Clear Communication

By giving a detailed and informative description of the location and the way of life a host is more likely to attract those people who are best suited to the placement and the projects going on there. *“The top visits are those from people who have read the information provided. They know roughly what to expect of the location, the types of exchanges we have available & our reasons for being”.*

“  
IF YOU BUILD EVERY  
TRANSACTION AND RELATIONSHIP  
IN BUSINESS AND LIFE WITH YOUR  
BEHAVIOUR GUIDED BY THE CONCEPTS OF  
MUTUAL BENEFITS FAIRNESS AND TRUTH,  
THE BENEFITS WILL COME.  
”



As well as communicating clearly what is required from the volunteer, a host should attempt to provide the helpers with the opportunities and experiences which allow them to get the most from their stay, and of course to encourage them, whether it be learning a particular skill, or immersing themselves in a new language or culture. Sometimes volunteers are shy or reticent about taking the leap out of their comfort zone, even regarding goals which they have expressed a desire to fulfil. For instance, it's difficult to stick to the commitment of only communicating in a foreign language, unless you receive constant support and motivation from the hosts.

Moreover, a watchful perceptive host may recognise a particular talent or aptitude; a creative streak perhaps, or a rapport developing with the children. If there is scope for this, the ideal scenario would be to give them the opportunity to incorporate these as part of their collaboration, or suggest ways of pursuing their interests within the local community. A happy helper produces the best results!

In fact, being a host doesn't only mean becoming familiar with other cultures, it also brings fresh insights into one's own. By becoming attuned to what visitors find fascinating, unique or intriguing about local life makes a person more aware of their own culture, simply by acknowledging that life elsewhere can be very different. With this knowledge a host is better prepared for informing their guests of dishes, events or places that are most likely to interest a newcomer. Then there is also the practical information on the location/opening times of internet cafés, banks, post offices, community centres and pharmacies. Perhaps this could be compiled to produce a visitor's guide...or posted on a Facebook page as Cat (from Hawaii) has set up:

*"...We also started a FB page with fun things to do while they are here and past Workawayers have added to it"*







“

COMING TOGETHER IS A BEGINNING.  
KEEPING TOGETHER IS PROGRESS.  
WORKING TOGETHER IS SUCCESS.

”

Nobody can guarantee a stay full of non-stop fun, clearly some necessary tasks are laborious. However when “peppered” with a sense of humour, good food and conversation they become much more pleasurable. Some hosts even create regular opportunities for visitors to give comments or ask burning questions which could be interpreted as inappropriate at any other time. Example of these could be: “What made you decide to live/travel here?” “In my country we do things differently, would you like me to tell you how?” or “It’s normal in our culture to shower several times a day, here people shower much less—Is this to save water or because it isn’t considered necessary?” Encouraging honesty

and openness is very positive, but with the understanding that certain subject matter, especially regarding politics, religion or sexuality, could be offensive .

Any feedback received from Workawayers, provides the host with valuable insights into his/her own lifestyle and culture, which in turn can be used to better to prepare for and inform future guests. Questions such as: “How was your stay different to how you envisaged?” “What information would have been useful to know in advance?” “What were the highlights of your visit?”

## How Many Workawayers Will a Host Need?

The number of volunteers who can be accommodated may be limited by the practicality of the sleeping/living space available. A lot depends on the nature of the project too, whether teamwork is required or a helping hand or two. Bare in mind that each person will probably need initial help in settling in and then guidance whilst they are actively involved.



One Workawayer is good for developing a close relationship and gives greater scope for language/cultural exchange, simply because it is almost unavoidable!

Workawayers who come as a couple could probably offer a greater array of skills between them, and tend to operate as a self-sufficient unit, organising their free-time together and keeping each other company.

By accommodating a number of individual Workawayers simultaneously, especially if there are more visitors than hosts, the environment is more likely to feel like a social hub for travellers. What it loses in local appeal will be replaced with cultural diversity and lively conversations, although a host could feel outnumbered at times.



“  
THE RICHER WE HAVE BECOME  
MATERIALLY, THE POORER WE BECOME  
MORALLY AND SPIRITUALLY. WE HAVE LEARNED  
TO FLY IN THE AIR LIKE BIRDS AND SWIM IN  
THE SEA LIKE FISH, BUT WE HAVE NOT LEARNED  
THE SIMPLE ART OF LIVING TOGETHER AS  
BROTHERS.  
”



## Sharing Sleeping/Living Space

Sometimes hosts open their homes to their helpers, which can be a challenging but extremely enriching experience too. A place which was once private, is now public in many ways, and another person's home at least temporarily. Some placements offer separate living spaces for visitors, others have shared facilities.



Workawayers adapt to a range of accommodation; from hammocks/tents in warmer climates, to shared dorms, or their own private studio or quarters. However, it is important to be clear about the conditions on offer from the start. Include explanations of the bathroom/washing facilities as well as access to a food preparation/kitchen area. Any systems in place for the running of the household: re-cycling, sharing the washing machine, limits on energy/water consumption as well as domestic responsibilities should also be outlined, as host June told us:

***“We have now changed our profile to emphasise that volunteers must be willing to do whatever needs doing. We list all possible tasks in the profile.”***

Even routines which may seem obvious such as meal-times, clearing up after using materials and rest times, may need to be spelt out. What is “normal” or logical behaviour for one person is not necessarily so for another. Hosts who consider themselves very easy-going may discover that they even have house rules/etiquette they hadn't even been aware of before! These could be, for example: taking shoes off indoors, cleaning the bath tub after use, asking permission before using or borrowing something, and what is considered to be an acceptable level of noise or alcohol consumption.



## Providing Food

Although most hosts offer lodging and board, there are various agreements which can be reached within this. Providing food, doesn't necessarily mean picking it/shopping for it or preparing it. In fact many hosts relish being cooked for, as part of the exchange, especially if it means sampling home-cooking from other countries. Meal preparation/laying the table and washing up can also be seen as a shared responsibility or assigned via a rota system.

Some hosts opt for giving their helpers supplies and them leaving them to put their own meals together as and when they prefer. This allows for difference in food preference and eating habits, however if all meals are organised in this way there is less opportunity for enjoying each others company and sharing culinary tips.

In some instances, when the host is absent or the volunteers are house-sitting, it may be necessary for volunteers to provide their own food, this is usually reflected in a reduction of volunteering hours expected.



## Hours

In exchange for board and lodging you can expect to receive around 5 hours volunteering per day 5 days a week. Often this means helping out until lunchtime from Monday to Friday and then having the afternoons and weekends off. This is only a guideline and it is up to the hosts and helper to decide how to make the best use of their work and leisure time. It's important for both parties to be willing to adapt to each other's needs and circumstances.

Perhaps a volunteer wants to extend his weekend by having Friday off, but making up the hours at another time. Similarly there may be projects which have to be finished the same day, even though this means staying on a little longer than usual.

“  
WE MAKE A LIVING BY WHAT  
WE GET, BUT WE MAKE A LIFE  
BY WHAT WE GIVE.  
”

Although it's important to be flexible and understanding, it's essential to have a clear idea of each others' expectations and clearly outline the arrangement in order to minimise frustration/ misunderstanding later on.

## Length of Stay

There are Workawayers who stay for a week, and those who are invited to stay on indefinitely, and become locals themselves! As a host usually has to invest more time in the first few days to help the newcomer acclimatise and settle in to their new environment, it makes sense for a volunteer to be around for a minimum of two weeks. When hosts require on-going help, then there is the option of giving Workawayers an open-ended offer, or specifying a time period which could then be renewed later on if so wished.

For hosts who have a specific undertaking in mind, with a proposed start and finish date, then this will define a Workaway's stay. In fact sometimes this arrangement can work well for hosts who prefer to do things stage by stage, getting to know someone before deciding whether to offer them an extended stay or greater involvement. Of course, the offer might come too late if the Workawayer has already organised other placements or travel plans.





# Selecting a Workawayer and Preparing for Their Stay

Once again providing an honest account of the volunteering/living conditions is more likely to attract those who'd most likely fit in and dissuade those who are less suited. It's a good sign when a Workawayer demonstrates that they have read the host's profile by commenting on certain aspects or asking informed questions about it. Rather than evaluating a person in terms of their qualifications and experience, it seems that personal attributes such as open-mindedness, enthusiasm and a cheery disposition are far more significant.

One host decided to make up a Pre-Arrival Information sheet based on comments and observations made by previous Workawayers. She sends this out to her prospective volunteers even before they book their tickets, to make sure that they know what to expect from their visit.

In the weeks leading up to the stay, both parties should make an effort to keep in contact and update one another, especially if there is a change of plan. Chatting on Skype, or another video calling software, really helps in establishing a relationship as well as increasing the likelihood of maintaining consistent communication.

Hosts should have a clear idea of the activities to be done, perhaps even in the form of "To Do checklist", and have everything in place so that volunteers are clear about what needs to be done and have all the necessary tools and materials. If an activity is dependent on the weather, it would be good to have some alternative projects in place just in case, this saves the awkwardness of a helper hanging around waiting to start.



A host should also mention in advance any special equipment which may be required: sleeping bags, mosquito nets, work gloves, wellington boots or any specific clothing/accessories to deal with the climatic or environmental condition.

Transport options on how to arrive should be made clear, and if onward travel to the destination is limited or complicated a host should consider offering pick-ups from airports or bus/train stations. Over the first few days a volunteer will need time to acclimatise, the extra time dedicated in making him/her feel welcomed and supported is time invested well.

# Dealing With the Unexpected

*“Nine out of ten times the visits are successful. Our volunteers leave after having a positive experience, learning from and contributing to the project. Though we have lots of tales to tell about the one-in-ten exceptions...!”* (author of host blog)



When both parties are clear about their expectations the chances of disappointment are minimised, however sometimes issues do come up and it is better to try and deal with them as soon as possible before they escalate. Someone's unhappiness can affect the morale of the whole team. Talking face-to-face without anyone else present at a time and a place where neither is likely to be interrupted is best. Showing concern for the other person and observing that something could be wrong demonstrates an interest in their welfare. Sometimes this alone is enough to smooth things over.

“

PERHAPS TRAVEL CANNOT PREVENT BIGOTRY, BUT BY DEMONSTRATING THAT ALL PEOPLES CRY, LAUGH, EAT, WORRY, AND DIE, IT CAN INTRODUCE THE IDEA THAT IF WE TRY AND UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER, WE MAY EVEN BECOME FRIENDS.

”



It's important to take time to listen first before responding and try to avoid being judgemental. If the problem relates to the other it's better to express one's own personal response to a situation, rather than being accusing or interpreting another's behaviour. It's important to remain calm and respectful towards each other, with the goal of reaching a resolution, rather than scoring points or defining who is "wrong" or "right".

Normally misunderstandings can be sorted out. Some Workawayers require more reassurance and guidance than others. By providing them with the encouragement or deserved praise they feel valued and therefore motivated to continue. However on the rare occasions that the volunteer decides to leave, it is best to be supportive rather than obstructive. If the host and the Workawayer have a back-up plan in place for such eventualities the departure is easier to deal with.



Illness is another unexpected factor which can complicate matters. Even though it may mean missing a few days work allowances need to be made as a person needs time to rest in order to recover. This may generate feelings of guilt or frustration, but patience and understanding is required.

There may be ways of making up the hours later on, or finding alternative ways of making a contribution which are less physically demanding.

Being a host sometimes means learning to be a creative problem solver. As humans we are constantly learning and being challenged. Our capacity to be diplomatic, understanding and tolerant is paramount.

*"I try hard as a host but know I don't get it right 100% of the time—we are still learning. I really appreciate when volunteers share best practice with me".*

NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL, COMMITTED PEOPLE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD. INDEED. IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT EVER HAS.

# Hidden Benefits

A host may receive invaluable help from his Workawayer, but often there are many extra hidden benefits.

As we embark on our working lives, we may not have the possibility of travelling extensively. Opening our doors to the outside world is in some ways the next best thing. We often travel to learn about different ways of living, eating, seeing the world or learning a new language, and all this can be brought into our homes by our guests. Equally true, as mentioned earlier, is the possibility of gaining insights into our own local culture by learning to see it through a visitor's eyes.



## Learning a language

Having a foreign volunteer to stay could be a great way to learn their native tongue, or improve the skills you already have in it. Ironically, many experts would argue that a classroom can inhibit language acquisition: the pressure of performing, memorising and being tested on your progress. Learning at home is a more natural and relaxed setting. Instead of the language practice being the focus, the emphasis is to make yourself understood. This is genuine communication in an authentic context at the pace of the learner, not the “teacher”. In fact, learning a language whilst carrying out another activity, such as cooking, gardening or even learning another skill is considered to be a very effective method.





## Kids

Children benefit enormously from these encounters, as it broadens their vision and knowledge of the world out there to explore one day.

Each visitor brings with them a world of possibilities and surprises: new stories; games; songs; delicious recipes to try; a different language perhaps and examples of different customs and ways of living. They may have skills and talents to perform or share—children are not shy in showing their enthusiasm, asking to try new things and consequently learn extremely quickly. Living alongside people from vastly different social and ethnic backgrounds makes a child question the concept of “normality” and hopefully will immunise them forever from institutionalised prejudice directed at anyone who is considered “different”. With this awareness comes maturity and a perspective of their own and other’s cultures. An intensive course in humanity which is rarely achieved in a school setting.





## Shaping futures

There is always something to be learnt from another person, and always something you can teach them in return. There have been many incidences in which one has inspired the other, or passed on information or a skill which has later shaped/changed their life in some way. These testimonies of personal revelations or lifestyle transformations as a result of a Workaway encounter often appear unexpectedly.

Knowing that hosting someone in the very least could help them achieve what they are looking for from their travels, but could go on to leave a lasting impression or influence their life in a myriad of ways—is quite an incredible prospect! Or, conversely it could be the host whose life is changed dramatically as a result!!

The beauty of life is that anything is possible, and Workaway sometimes acts as a catalyst for this “magic” to happen!

Feeling inspired and wanting to learn more in-depth information about Workaway philosophy, hosting, volunteering and travelling? Visit our [blog](#) to read more practical tips, advice & stories.

