

Journeys That Give Back



Formerly a successful financial consultant and senior business executive, Jo Ousterhout shifted gears towards philanthropy when she founded **Metta Journeys** (mettajourneys.com), with travel expert Deepak Patel, a few years ago. Now, the California-based group partners with charities to organize philanthropic trips to struggling countries to let donors see close-up where their donations are going.

To date, Metta Journeys has worked exclusively with Women for Women, a dynamic charity which helps women from war-torn countries work towards a sustainable income via a twelve-month diploma program, but Ousterhout is open to organizing trips for other charities. “These trips change peoples’ world view and make them want to give more of themselves, not just money,” she says. Take, for instance, a recent

trip to Rwanda during which an American traveler lent her glasses to a local woman, who was having trouble seeing the small screen on the American’s camera. They were the first reading glasses the woman has ever worn and Ousterhout remembers the shriek of surprise and joy at the clear image. It led the traveler to give her the glasses. “People become spontaneously generous on these trips,” says Ousterhout, who has yet to see a sponsor get through a trip dry-eyed. On another trip when donors saw the filthy and rusty condition of the mattresses in a Rwandan orphanage, they banded together to buy one hundred new mattresses.

When I met with Ousterhout, she brought along a photographer who had just returned from a Metta trip to Bosnia. He showed me photos of both the Rwanda and Bosnia trip and they were so powerful. While the cultures of each place are, of course, totally different, both groups survived a genocide about fifteen years ago and the women bear the emotional scars from repeated rapes and watching their husbands and other close male family members being tortured and killed. The individual stories were deeply distressing, but the valuable work being done by Women for Women casts a hopeful light on the future. Ousterhout says that donors get a real sense of achievement by seeing how they are helping others, often with modest financial outlays. Many of the photos I saw depicted donor travelers hugging or chatting happily with their host “sisters”. For the most part, locals are shocked and touched by the generosity. “They wonder, ‘Why does an American care about me,’” says Ousterhout, though she also points out that there are emotional rewards on both sides, with the giving as satisfying as the receiving.

Metta’s trips are limited to twenty people and kids are allowed only when the partner charity works directly with children. Each trip focuses the first few days meeting the women who are involved in the Women for Women programs and seeing their work, which could be on a farm, greenhouse or sewing circle. The group also visits relevant historical sites, learns about the complicated history of these countries and gets to know the locals. Inevitably emotionally draining, the trips end with some sightseeing; for instance, the Rwanda group traveled to see gorillas by the Congolese border and the Bosnian group toured Dubrovnik. “We have found it takes a couple of days for these experiences to sink in, “ says Ousterhout, the reason she recommends the sponsors stay on a few more days to relax and process instead of jumping back into their old lives immediately. For travelers looking for a holiday more rich than simply getting a tan and sightseeing, these philanthropic journeys are the chance to have an adventure—outwards and within.

Read the blog entries, published on the *Huffington Post*, by Zainab Salbi, the founder and CEO of Women for Women International on [Remembering the Balkans](#) and on [Iraqi Women Today](#)

Read about a philanthropic trip, open to the Indagare community and guided in part by Gandhi’s grandsons, to India

Read an interview with the founder of Voluntourism.org about the ins and outs of a [volunteer vacation](#)

[Elena Bowes](#) 10/13/2009