



BY JENNICA PETERSON &
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BRAZIL
 Iko Poran
 55/(0) 21-3852-2916
ikoporan.org

From \$1,245
 for a three-week
 program, including
 lodging.

Child's Play

Last summer, Canadian medical school student Amy Gajaria, 27, joined a Brazilian circus. Gajaria volunteered for three weeks in Rio de Janeiro with Crescer e Viver (Grow Up and Live), a nonprofit circus school program that aims to educate and boost the self-esteem of children from low-income communities. "The kids have a chance to be physically active, express themselves creatively, and work with others," says Gajaria. "A lot of them come from homes in favelas where they may not have great adult role models. They really look up to the circus school staff."

Crescer e Viver is one of more than 50 programs that have partnered with the organization Iko Poran, which places international volunteers with Brazilian nonprofit groups that need an extra hand. Participants might teach English or environmental conservation, or coach soccer or gymnastics, among

other possibilities. Gajaria has a background in theater and trained on the trampoline when she was younger, so she was matched with the circus school program.

"Three days a week in the afternoon, I assisted the youngest kids with acrobatic activities inside a big-top circus tent in Rio's Praça Onze neighborhood, near the Centro (downtown)," explains Gajaria. "I helped the little ones as they did cartwheels and handstands to warm up. Then I assisted the instructors as the kids worked on the trapeze, juggled, jumped on the trampoline, rode the unicycle, or learned how to balance on each other. I was just blown away by their talents," Gajaria says. "The part that was most meaningful to me, though, was talking one-on-one with kids who don't get that kind of adult attention at home. I'd ask them about their lives and try to explain snow and hockey to them. There were two lit-

tle girls and a boy in particular whom I really connected with. They called me *titia* (auntie)."

Iko Poran volunteers also take 20 hours of intensive Portuguese classes. "I would bring my Portuguese homework to the circus school to do in between activities," says Gajaria. "The kids wanted to do it with me. They thought it was hilarious."

Volunteers stay at the Casa Amarelinha guesthouse in Rio's artsy Santa Teresa neighborhood, a good base for exploring the city's famous Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, Tijuca rain forest, and samba clubs. "Rio is an incredible city. You could just go there on vacation and have a good time. But I got to feel like I had a purpose for being there," says Gajaria. "I also got to know a community and become friends with Brazilians who weren't involved in the tourism industry. And I got to hang out with amazing kids. It was just so much fun." **A**

Help Kids on These Other Trips Worth Taking



India



Kenya



Mexico

COOK ISLANDS
Global Volunteers
(800) 487-1074
globalvolunteers.org

On Rarotonga, in the South Pacific's Cook Islands, help fourth- through 12th-grade Maori students strengthen their English literacy skills with one-on-one reading sessions. English is an official language in the Cook Islands, but most of the students in this program grew up speaking Maori. During your stay, you may also have a chance to take part in research at the Whale Center, spend time with elders at a senior center, or volunteer on another community project. In your free time, snorkel to see giant clams and moray eels, and hike through tropical forests in the Takitumu Conservation Area, home to rare orange kakerori birds. From \$2,395 for a one-week program (longer stays possible), including meals and lodging at the beachside KiiKii Motel.

INDIA
Missionaries of Charity
91/33-2217-2277
motherteresa.org

In 1950, Mother Teresa founded the order of the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, India, which is dedicated to serving the city's poorest citizens. A Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Mother Teresa died in 1997, but her order has continued her work. Volunteers from around the world, no matter their religious affiliation, are welcome to join in the effort. You attend an orientation (held Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 3 p.m.) in the Nirmala Shishu Bhavan home for children in Kolkata, and afterward a sister will assign you to a project. Possibilities include the Gandhi Welfare Center, where you might educate and feed young street children; or the Daya Dan home for mentally and physically disabled children, where you can provide support by playing with the kids. There is no time requirement or fee to volunteer. Participants must arrange their own lodging and meals in Kolkata.

KENYA
Elective Africa
(609) 643-0188
electiveafrica.com

Experienced musicians can teach underprivileged children in Mombasa, Kenya, how to play the piano, trumpet, guitar, drums, and other instruments through Elective Africa's music program. For about four hours a day, you'll assist with music classes at the Nyalali Music School and Centre, which aims to help kids from the city's Bombolulu slum discover their abilities and build self-confidence. From \$1,750 for a four-week program, including hostel lodging, meals, and Swahili instruction. For an additional \$200, participants can take a safari in the Masai Mara National Reserve, known for its wildebeests, zebras, and lions.

MEXICO
Kaya Responsible Travel
44/(0) 161-870-6212
kayavolunteer.com

As part of Kaya's equine therapy program in Oaxaca, Mexico, volunteers work three days a week to aid children with a range of disabilities as they learn to care for and ride horses—skills that can relax muscles for physical therapy and increase self-esteem. Volunteers should be comfortable with horses and with special-needs kids who may have Down syndrome, attention deficit disorder, or lower-body paralysis. On days off, wander inside the 16th-century Santo Domingo church or stop by Chocolate Mayordomo for a cup of local cocoa. From \$1,229 for a two-week program, including homestay lodging, meals, and eight hours of Spanish classes weekly.

SRI LANKA
Projects Abroad
(888) 839-3535
projects-abroad.org

Near the town of Wadduwa, on Sri Lanka's southwestern coast, Projects Abroad has set up a computer center. The program offers free, three-month courses in information technology to children in the community. Together with a local instructor, volunteers follow a set curriculum that teaches the students basic computer skills: how to use Microsoft Office applications (Word, Excel, PowerPoint), conduct Internet research, and communicate online. Outside the classroom, go white-water rafting on the Kelani River, relax on Wadduwa's golden beaches, or hike to the summit of a 7,360-foot sacred mountain that has drawn pilgrims for more than 1,000 years. From \$2,045 for a two-week program (longer stays encouraged), including homestay lodging and meals.