

**BUSINESS DAY**

# Taking Trips That Mean Something

By JULIE WEED APRIL 9, 2018

Carol Sullivan awoke recently in Cuenca, Ecuador, excited for the day ahead. She was in the second week of her study abroad experience, and after Spanish class, she and her fellow students were going to the local market to buy dinner ingredients and practice their new language skills.

“The local women may be aghast at how little we know but are very willing to let us try,” Ms. Sullivan said. She and her husband, Terry, who is also her classmate, are in their early 70s.

The Sullivans are part of a trend among adult travelers, who show a growing interest in going to class, volunteering or working abroad as part of their experience.

Older travelers often want to continue to learn and have an impact on the world, said Andrew Gordon, who founded the company Diversity Abroad 12 years ago. “They want their travel to have meaning,” he said. Mr. Gordon’s company connects and does advocacy work for nontraditional students who want to study overseas.

Road Scholar, which organized the Sullivans’ program, began as an organization offering not-for-credit classes on university campuses for adults age 60 and over. Now it offers what it calls educational travel adventures worldwide. Travelers may focus on a particular ecosystem they are visiting, attend class on a college campus or, in a twist on the Semester at Sea concept, spend 115 days on an ocean liner circling the globe with experts delving into destinations’ histories and cultures. All adults are welcomed, but the audience typically skews older and the average age of a “road scholar” is 70.

The organization is a nonprofit and offers family caregiver grants and other scholarships.

JoAnn Bell, the senior vice president of program development at Road Scholar, said that adults studying abroad, like their college-age counterparts, value the time in a foreign country’s culture as much as or more than academic instruction.

“We had seen a decline in enrollment for programs heavily weighted to classroom time,” Ms. Bell said.

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with the neighborhood cafe owner every morning on the way to class was just as important as the class, she said.

Three years ago, Road Scholar started its Living and Learning program, offering six weeks in either Florence or Paris, where participants could live in an apartment near a college campus, attend classes and go on excursions to cooking classes, theatrical performances and other cultural experiences. The idea became so popular that the organization now offers similar programs in Berlin; Sicily; Jerusalem; Seville, Spain; and four other cities.

Megan Lee manages search engine optimization for GoAbroad.com, which lists over 15,000 study, work and volunteer abroad opportunities for students and adults on its website. Ms. Lee said she had noted an increase in searches for activities aimed at people in their 30s through retirement age. “There’s an increase in searches for ‘adult gap year,’ ‘adult study abroad,’ ‘retirement volunteer abroad’ and even ‘adult intern abroad,’” she said.

Her observations echo the findings in surveys like the 2018 Travel Trends Study by AARP, which noted that at least half of travelers in all age groups surveyed were interested in “authentic” international experiences like touring or eating with locals.

Programs abroad for adults should be tailored to their needs, Ms. Lee said. Older adults don’t want to live in a dorm, she said, and of course, don’t need the same level of supervision as college students. They also may want “less taxing” volunteer duties, either because they get tired, or because they want time to explore the area, Ms. Lee said.

The college students “probably learn more Spanish in less time,” said Craig McCarter, 82, a participant in the Road Scholar program in Cuenca.

Ellen Varoy of VolunteerHQ.org sends volunteers of all ages around the world for assignments ranging from one week to six months. Retirees have the time and money to do longer placements, she said. Working adults are sometimes looking to “support their professional development by getting outside their comfort zone and challenging themselves in a foreign environment,” she said.

Some study abroad participants do look for experiences with direct professional impact. USST International, associated with the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, brings in 100 mostly college-age students from other countries each year for business classes and internships in China. Alex Lee, the recruiting coordinator, said he had seen an increase in applicants in their 20s and 30s. Older students in the mixed-age class tend to take the program more seriously than their younger counterparts, he said, sometimes extending their internship or focusing more on their Mandarin lessons.

Casonnie Ruiz Leon, 45, is making the transition from owning a restaurant to starting a catering business in Florida. She is also a part-time student at Miami Dade College. Ms. Ruiz Leon participated in a study abroad program in Paris that examined the global food supply, restaurant management, cooking and hospitality. She said she was able to offer her real-life experiences to the class, and to see what the “new generation was up to.”

Mr. Gordon, of Diversity Abroad, said he had noticed a more diverse group of adults embarking on these endeavors. “Organizations like Travel Noire have demystified travel abroad for communities of color and made people more comfortable with the idea,” he said.

Heilwig Jones, the founder of Kaya Responsible Travel, said 21 percent of participants she helped to volunteer overseas were age 30 or older. Popular destinations included South Africa, Thailand and India, and popular subjects included wildlife conservation, women’s empowerment and small business support, Ms. Jones said.

Ms. Lee of GoAbroad.com said she expected study abroad programs for adults to grow. “Millennials like to travel, and we expect that to continue as they get into their 30s and 40s,” she said.

The opportunities to work, learn and study abroad are myriad. Some of the online directories include thousands of programs, and it is impossible for listing companies to thoroughly check the quality of each one. Interested travelers should vet offerings independently and in detail, Ms. Lee said. She advised people to “check reviews, ask about the company in online travel forums, see if their social media channels are active, and ask to talk to a past participant.”

Make sure a company is really delivering the experience it claims to be offering, Ms. Lee said.

***Correction: April 9, 2018***

A photo caption in an earlier version of this article misidentified the teacher of a cooking class in Cuenca, Ecuador. She is Marcela Orellana, not Miriam Matute.

A version of this article appears in print on April 10, 2018, on Page B2 of the New York edition with the headline: Study Abroad for People Who No Longer Have to Worry About Grades.