

A life LESS ORDINARY

Determined to help those less fortunate than themselves, three women honed their skills, became dedicated volunteers and saw the world along the way. By Claire Halliday.

LOOKING FOR AN experience with real meaning? For many, international travel can be life-changing enough. Combine that with the rewards from volunteering your own time and skills to those who need it, and volunteering on an overseas project could be the time of your life.

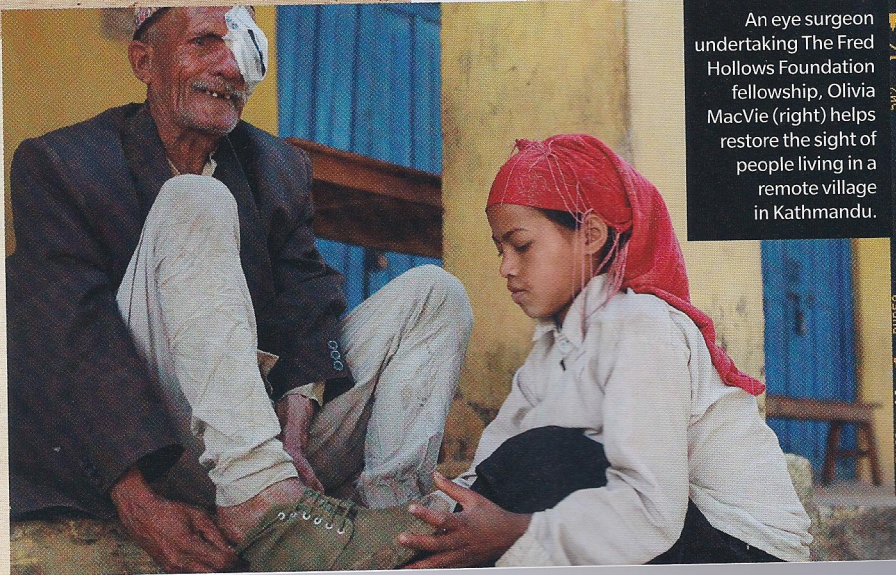
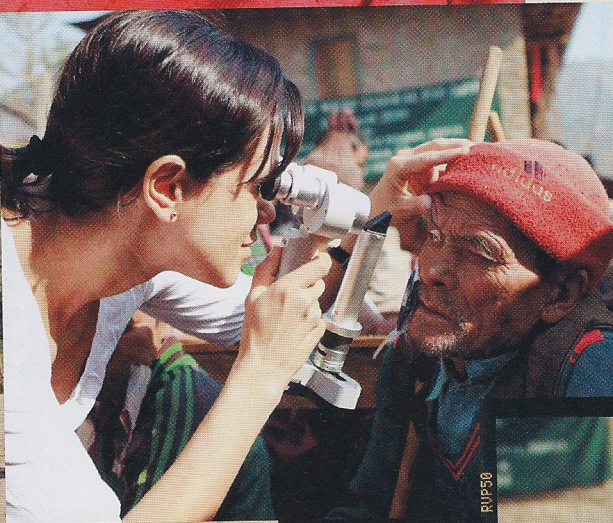
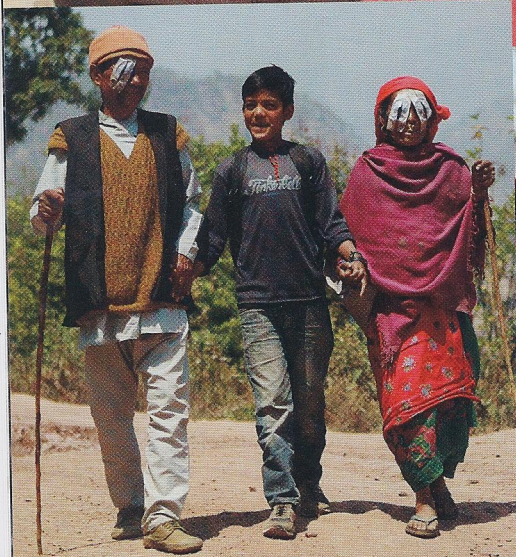
Saving eyesight in Nepal

Ask Olivia MacVie about the true joy of international travel and her answers highlight much more than just the chance to observe the way others live. For her, travel is about playing her part in improving those lives, and as an eye surgeon undertaking The Fred Hollows Foundation fellowship – an opportunity created by the foundation for ophthalmologists in their final year of specialist training – the rewards are worth the effort.

Last April, Olivia, 34, of Perth, was at an eye camp in Nepal, a location only accessible after two days of four-wheel driving. On the way back to Kathmandu, Olivia spent two days – including her own birthday – caught in the drama of a fatal tractor accident. In between, though, she showed what this travel experience is all about – helping restore the sight of 187 people in a very remote village.

“If you have a particular skill, putting it to use where it is needed is rewarding, and working in a situation where you are helping other people brings meaning to the lives we lead,” she says. “I’ve always had a sense of adventure so this is a good way of satisfying that personal need.”

For Olivia, witnessing the poverty and misfortune of human beings is, she admits, difficult. Knowing she makes a difference, though, keeps her motivated throughout what can



An eye surgeon undertaking The Fred Hollows Foundation fellowship, Olivia MacVie (right) helps restore the sight of people living in a remote village in Kathmandu.



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be a demanding travel experience. "Coming to a developing country for work is different to coming for a holiday. Giving up the comforts and conveniences of the Western world is challenging but when I go home again, I am truly grateful for what I have," she says.

Becoming an eye surgeon has, she explains, been a "long road" that began with six years in medical school, two years as an intern/resident medical officer and then another few years of building her CV to apply for ophthalmology training.

Working overseas, Olivia says she typically meets with the local ophthalmologist in the morning and then looks at the eyes of pre-operative patients and notes whether any difficulties are anticipated.

"They're then taken to theatre and prepared for cataract surgery. Meanwhile, we see the post-operative patients from the previous day and see a few outpatients in the clinic before going to the operating theatre," says Olivia.

Despite so much overwhelming poverty, Olivia says the people are generally "very gentle and accepting of their difficult lives".

There are many moments that have affected her. "On an outreach microsurgical eye camp in Nepal, I came across a lady who had been blind from cataracts for 12 years," she says. "She was brought in by her granddaughter, whose face she saw for the first time after the surgery. It was such an emotional experience for both of them; they both cried."

Growing up in a country she describes as "quite insular", Olivia says the travel experience has broadened her horizons and made her more aware of the different lives being lived elsewhere.

"I have always acknowledged the fact we are lucky to live in Australia but I have never felt so truly grateful as I do now after

this experience," she says. "It's both personally and professionally rewarding," says Olivia. "It is a unique, meaningful life experience."

Conserving nature in Oman

As a qualified solicitor, Rasha Skybey, 26, first became aware of Biosphere Expeditions after conducting a Google search for 'Middle East conservation holiday'. "On a day when I was questioning what I was doing with my life, without contemplating the idea of living for two weeks without flush toilets, running water, electricity, mobile phone and hair dryer, I booked a trip with Biosphere Expeditions to search for the critically endangered Arabian leopard in Oman," the Sydney resident says.

It was an act that surprised even herself. "Even though I had always dreamed about it, I'd never seriously considered doing any sort of adventure travel because I didn't think I was the type. I had never been camping, hated the outdoors, never exercised and refused to leave the house without blow-drying my hair and wearing heels," says Rasha, who spent two years as a paralegal for the NSW Crown Solicitor's Office before using the inspiration of Biosphere trips (she's been on three) to pursue her current job as a covenant officer for the conservation organisation Trust For Nature.

Of the Biosphere trips she has undertaken, Rasha says Oman was her favourite "as it was the spark that lit the flame".

"Oman proved I could be like an adventurer on the National Geographic channel - that I could climb rocky mountains, that I could go to the toilet in a sand hole, that my life wouldn't end if I didn't use my mobile or didn't wash my hair. I met the most amazing people and I played a role in saving one of the most beautiful creatures on the planet."

There were some confronting moments, "like the time I slept under the stars without a tent and realised there was nothing separating me from the lions I could hear in the distance".

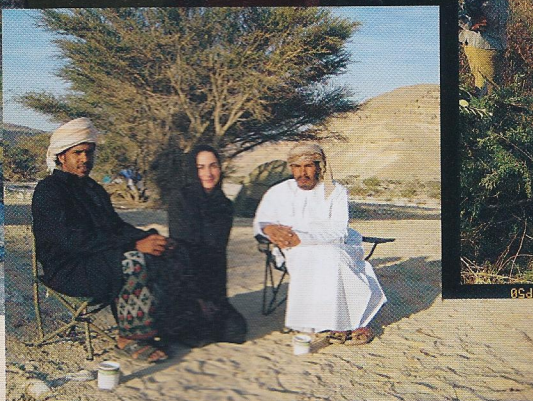
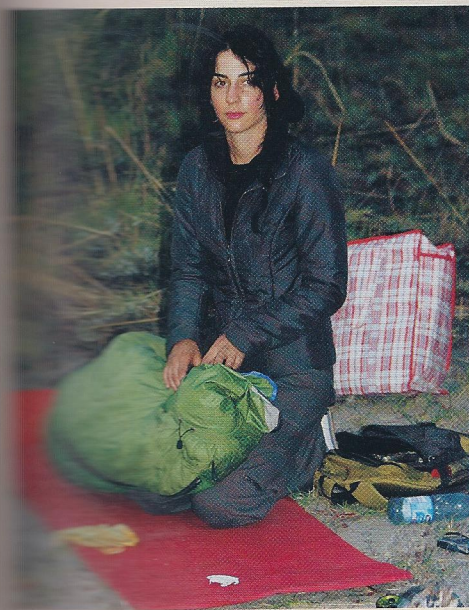
Even though she refers to it as merely "a small contribution in the grand scheme of things", Rasha does believe individuals working together can make a difference.

"I want to help with the preservation of some of the most beautiful and innocent creatures on this earth and would hate to be witness to their disappearance and know that I did nothing to stop it," she says.

In her own life, the personal growth, she believes, is obvious, with a new-found confidence in her physical and mental abilities. Next is a trip to Broome in November, monitoring Australian flatback turtles.



From solicitor to adventure woman, Rasha Skybey (left) went into the wild in Oman to search for endangered animals and to meet the locals - all part of a Biosphere Expeditions project.



your life: community

A breast cancer survivor, Anne Ditton (right) decided to follow her dream – she resigned as a primary school teacher, trained as a vet nurse, and became a dedicated volunteer for the Moon Bear Rescue Centre in China.



"It's all a matter of finding the time and money to do it."

In her own case, that time and money comes from eight months of solid working to accumulate enough annual leave time and savings to help fund her volunteering expeditions. She allows around \$3,000 for return airfares and an extra \$1,000 for any equipment needed, plus spending money.

In Rasha's experience, the commitment is worth it. "I've done the whole Contiki thing and, while I had fun, nothing can top the sensation of seeing an elephant outside your hut or the exhilaration of driving through the bush at night in search of lions and hyenas. It's an awesome experience – well worth all my annual leave and savings," she says.

Saving bears in China

When, in 2000, Anne Ditton first saw a photograph of moon bears suffering the cruelty of bile farms, she felt what so many of us feel when something strikes a chord. The Sydney woman researched the work of the Moon Bear Rescue Centre in Chengdu, China, and contacted Animals Asia Foundation, which runs the centre, to offer her services.

"Initially, I was just a supporter financially, but I always had a dream that one day I would be a volunteer at the centre. That seemed impossible because I was working full-time as a primary teacher. However, I got breast cancer and retired from teaching, so I trained as a vet nurse in 2005-06 to acquire some skills that could enable me as a volunteer," Anne says. "When I got a second chance at life, I knew I wanted to work to help animals."

With the Chinese penpal she started writing to back in 1966 sparking her initial interest in China, there was also another connection to the bears. "My first job at the rescue centre was as the small animal carer, looking after

numerous dogs and cats, many of which had been saved after the 2008 earthquake," Anne says. "I find caring for animals so rewarding. Also, I got to see the rescued bears every day and was able to help on some occasions in surgery or with bear husbandry. This time my job was almost full involvement with the bears – day in, day out, for six months."

Her duties, aimed at relieving the pressure on the centre's staff, included preparing the bears' morning meals – fruit smoothies with added vitamins – before cleaning up the area and the bears' cages and bedding.

"After that, I set off to do observations on particular bears," says Anne, who had to make a note every five minutes on the type of behaviour displayed by the bears.

"Sometimes I also help with bear post-mortems," she says. "Although some days are emotionally devastating, for instance when bears or other animals have to be euthanised, most of the time it's a joy to be there."

When it comes to life back in Australia, Anne says she is "fortunate I can be absent for some time" and be able to give her time to help a cause for which she feels so passionate.

"I'm retired, have no partner, my two sons are grown men and I own my own home," says Anne. The voluntary work, she says, gives her back "much more than I give".

Her advice to anyone considering similar volunteer work is simply "do it". "It will enrich your life. As long as you love animals, you're not afraid of hard work and are flexible and adaptable about living in a different culture, you'll be right."

Although there are times it seems hard to keep going, especially when a sick bear dies, Anne reminds herself of what she is achieving – "knowing that I have made a difference, however small, to the wellbeing of some very special beings", she says. *

How to help

The Fred Hollows Foundation offers scholarships to provide ophthalmologists the chance to experience a 'Fred Hollows style' of delivering health care to developing countries. Interested applicants with appropriate qualifications can learn more by visiting www.hollows.org.au or calling 1800 352 352. Donations can be made through the same details.

Although the scholarships are only open to suitably qualified applicants, the foundation does offer a special program to donors called See Australia. This program allows people to raise money for the foundation over a period of time and be rewarded at the end with a trip to visit The Fred Hollows Foundation's Indigenous programs in the Northern Territory.

Biosphere Expeditions offers a variety of travel experiences, ranging from one- to two-week stays, working around coral reefs, mountain ranges or deserts. Prices start from \$1,750 (monitoring turtles off the coast of Western Australia).

On October 24, Biosphere is holding a conservation taster day in a national or state park close to Melbourne – allowing potential travellers to discover expedition and wildlife research and conservation skills. Cost: \$95. A similar day will be held in Sydney on October 31. For more details, visit www.biosphere-expeditions.org.

Animals Asia Foundation has information about how to support its projects financially or through volunteering skills. Volunteers must have veterinary experience or experience in animal management. They must commit to a minimum of three months – this is to allow them time to get up to speed with the operation. Moon bear volunteers must make their own way to Chengdu or Hanoi (around \$1,800 return). Transfers, accommodation and meals are all covered by Animals Asia Foundation. For more details, visit www.animalsasia.org.

