

For the best way to see the world, start in Goring...

In an unassuming street in Goring, a global enterprise is hard at work. With offices in 32 countries, more than 500 staff and around 8,000 people heading out on schemes this year. Projects Abroad is the world's largest provider of volunteer projects in developing countries

From teaching in Mongolia to working on a conservation project in Peru, the organisation, which has its head office in Aldsworth Parade, offers a wide range of opportunities to see the world at grass-roots level.

Founder, Dr Peter Slowe, said: "Here in Goring is the operational centre for sending 8,000 people to do wonderful things and I'm full of admiration for them. The depth of the experience you get when doing a project like this is incomparable to visiting as a tourist."

He added "When kids go back packing, they see a bit, but they don't see nearly as much as they do when they live with a local family, and they don't really contribute anything. Doing that is a much different experience and gives them a chance to actually be a part of the community."

Peter started Projects Abroad back in 1992 out of his back bedroom. At the time, he was working as a geography lecturer at Bognor College and was responsible for arranging volunteering trips abroad for students. After a while, he began offering the trips to other universities and that's when Projects Abroad got going. He continued lecturing on and off throughout the first few years, but in 1998 made the move to working solely for Projects Abroad. Before moving to it's current base in 2004, Projects Abroad was based in Angmering, where Peter lives. The organisation works to find people a suitable placement based on their skills or interests, and, included in the fee, they provide volunteers with flights, accommodation, a personalised website with details of their trip and staff to meet them once they arrive abroad. Most people who sign up are aged between 18 and 25, but Peter said there is a small group of retired people who decide to give it a try. A more recent trend has been for professionals to take some time out to work abroad, and something which is starting to take off is for lawyers to work on human rights projects, particularly in South Africa.

Recruitment director, Ian Birbeck, was one of the organisations first volunteers and has worked with Peter since 1992. He said most staff working in the head office have gone on volunteer trips, adding "We try to give our staff experience, at least once or twice, working in these countries, because otherwise what can they say about it when they are talking to people? Also, it's important to see these projects actually working and nice to have people come up to you and say thank you for what you have done for them."

Projects Abroad offers schemes in countries across the world whether it's medical students wanting to get hospital experience to gap year students to people wanting a career break.

THAI-M OF HIS LIFE: Jim Cherrin, who did volunteer work in Thailand

An oceanography student from Angmerling said working as a volunteer on a marine conservation project was one of the most brilliant experiences of his life. Jim Cherrin, 21, travelled to Thailand twice when he was just 18, once for three weeks then again for seven weeks. While there, he carried out tasks like beach clean-ups and working in the mangrove forest. Jim, of Cumberland Crescent, said: "To see an environment that is usually untouched artificially, being replanted and reworked for the betterment of the environment and the local community was really fulfilling. Nothing came even close to the scuba diving, though. To actually swim over the coral reefs and aid in their maintenance and restoration was breathtaking. The joy and fulfilment I took away with me was like nothing I've experienced before." Jim, who is not doing a marine biology and oceanography degree at Plymouth University, said during his time he was made to feel like a member of the community. He added: "It was like they understood what we were doing for them and their country and they extended their thanks in any way they could, especially politeness and respect. "I really felt like I belonged there."

DOCTORS INDIA HOUSE: Tessa Van der Kleij, centre, with nurses in India (photo)

For Tessa van der Kleij, the experience of working in a hospital in India was invaluable. Two years ago, the 20 year old from Windlesham Gardens, Shoreham, spent two months as a volunteer in Tamil Nadu. She lived with a host family in a remote, rural town and believes it was doing the placement with Projects Abroad that got her onto her medicine degree at Brighton and Sussex Medical School. The second year student said: "It was better than I imagined. I didn't really know what to expect, and I was nervous, but the family was the most welcoming I have ever met." "I would definitely recommend other people to do this, and I would definitely like to do it again. I plan to go once I am qualified, so that once I'm there I can offer more hands-on help."