

Story and photos
Andrew Stewart

Helping *hands*

Most kiwi farmers could do with an extra pair of hands at some stage during the farming calendar. Whether it is painting the house, water blasting moss off buildings, beating an errant garden into shape or tidying up the farm and learning new skills, it all takes time and energy that many do not have. So how would some hard working helpers from overseas sound to those struggling with their workload? Legions of overseas volunteers are coming to New Zealand on backpacking holidays, keen to learn about the kiwi way of life in exchange for some grub and a place to lay their heads.

Dutch volunteers Floor van Descant and Myrthe Piji enjoy some time exploring their host farm.

All Wwoof but no bite

One of the most popular volunteer organisations is Wwoof NZ, a subsidiary of the global organisation of the same name. Andrew Strange has been involved with Wwoof NZ since 1987 and is now a director. He described the organisation as volunteers who work in exchange for food and accommodation. "Generally we stick to the core principles of organic farming without being elitist about it," he said.

To become a host, applicants must meet a number of criteria, some of which are based around organic farming practices. In reality this could mean having a traditionally run farm that has an organic vegetable garden, so the scheme is not restricted solely to those whose whole farms are organic.

Volunteers stay on average a couple of weeks at one farm but stays range from a couple of days to a couple of months. The general rule of thumb is volunteers are required to work between five and six hours a day in exchange for meals and accommodation but this can be negotiated between both parties and some are paid for extra hours worked.

Although founded on organic principles, the experience has evolved to become more of a cultural exchange. "As a traveller you often miss out on that more personal contact with the local community," Andrew said. Living in such close proximity to their hosts often creates lasting relationships. "Often hosts will visit Wwoofers that they have built a relationship with in their home countries," Andrew said.

Wwoof NZ started in Nelson, (Willing workers on organic farms, now just Wwoof) in 1973 when a local farmer took in a couple of travellers, Lincoln University students on holiday, and they stayed with him while working on his farm. From that small beginning has come steady growth, both with hosts and volunteers. In 1987 there were about 100 Kiwi hosts, which has grown to today's 1350 registered hosts.

About 8000 people volunteer through Wwoof NZ every year, with an incredible range of skills, personalities and backgrounds. There are certain hotspots, such as Coromandel and Golden Bay, where there are higher concentrations of organic farmers. "Probably 90% (of Wwoofers in NZ) would be foreigners, whereas in the United States only 30% would be from overseas," Andrew said. He felt that because a lot of young Kiwis grow up in a rural environment they might have more of a desire to travel overseas than work as a Wwoofer in their own country.

So how does it work? It costs \$40 to join Wwoofing NZ, which has an annual membership of \$20 and applicants have to fill in an application form. They then build a profile page outlining what skills

"We have had some wonderful volunteers that have arrived as strangers and left as great friends," Kylie Stewart (centre).



they offer, what type of placement they are seeking and for how long. The hosts also build profile pages describing what tasks will be required, how many hours to work and accommodation information. All the information is displayed for members on the website and also published in a Wwoofing book.

Backpacker board

Another popular website for volunteers coming to NZ is the backpacker board, www.backpackerboard.co.nz Though this offers a range of services, one of the most popular is the jobs forum. Here hosts can display a listing outlining details of their farm and the type of work they are offering. Volunteers can then view the ad and apply directly to the farm owner. Having a detailed description of what is required minimises the chances of disappointment for both parties so it is important to be honest when describing what is expected. Details of pay, hours worked and accommodation are possibly the most important and, as with any description, photos tell the story better than any words.

Host responsibility

Inviting overseas help onto your farm is not to be taken lightly. You need to be able to offer them a bed to sleep in that is not going to cramp the rest of your household, normally two or three meals a day and take the time to explain jobs and rules to them. But successful volunteering is more about a willingness to engage with different cultures and communicate with travellers who are a long way from home.

Rangitikei Farmstay owner-operator Kylie Stewart first heard about volunteers after inquiring about au pair help through a

Wellington agency. "When I told them we had no children (at that time), she said we could have volunteers, so I asked for two of them. Her first volunteers were both German and stayed at the farm for a couple of months, working on restoring an old hayshed into a museum and bunkhouse. This experience led Kylie to search online for more volunteers, which in turn led her to the Wwoofers and backpacker board websites. "We have now had too many to count. We had our first volunteers in September of 2008 mostly from spring to autumn. We have had lots from Germany, a few from Holland, France and England.

Kylie has given the volunteers a huge variety of work, depending on what is happening around the Farmstay and farm and what they enjoy or are capable of. "If we have Farmstay guests coming, the volunteers help with cleaning, otherwise anything from gardening, water blasting, helping with our zoo of animals, painting and if my husband gets hold of them, cleaning the woolshed and farm work," she said.

With so many different nationalities, language has probably been the biggest barrier. "A few of them have come with poor English and instructions for tasks have been lost in translation. I have become fussy and now ensure their English is okay and that they are prepared to work hard and have fun too. I never used to but I now ask for their CV, a picture of themselves and I intend on using Skype in the future too for interviews. That way I get a good idea of what they are like before they arrive on my doorstep and I am stuck with them for a week," she said.

Having had so many volunteers, Kylie now has a good grasp of what makes good ones. "Someone who is hard working, has

Host Kylie Stewart's advice for volunteers:

- ▶ If you are going to a farm, don't take all of your number ones.
- ▶ You are going to get dirty so some old clothes would be helpful.
- ▶ While in Rome, do what the Romans do. Embrace the Kiwi culture.
- ▶ Don't fall into the trap of hanging out solely with backpackers from your home country.

a sense of humour and has common sense. Because they are working for free, some think that is a licence to eat you out of house and home. The most frustrating thing is when volunteers don't ask questions. You give them a task and leave them to it thinking they have understood and then you find the job not done as asked. Once again that is often the English barrier."

When asked whether it has been worth the effort and expense of housing volunteers, Kylie was emphatic. "We have had some wonderful volunteers that have arrived as strangers and left as great friends. Some have come back for Christmas, to show their family or just to work again. Often it is really sad to see them go although we keep in touch with lots of them and hope to visit them one day. It would be great to be their wwoofers in their own country to see what life is like for them day in and day out. Until then, they know they have a NZ family if ever they return here."

Kylie's five things every volunteer should bring with them:

1. Old clothes
2. Covered/flat footwear
3. A sense of humour
4. Some common sense
5. An open mind

More: www.wwoof.co.nz and www.backpackerboard.co.nz



Marine atop her calf feeding machine.



Benoit enjoyed learning new farming skills.

Profile of a Wwoofing couple:

Full name and ages: Maurice Marine, 22, and Laurent Benoit, 23, France.

How did you hear about Wwoofing?

In a backpackers in Auckland (BASE) when we were looking for a job. We bought the book there and did the paperwork. A friend of ours in France also told us a bit about wwoofing before leaving.

How did you find your places in NZ?

We found our places thanks to the Wwoofing book and the website and we sent a lot of emails.

What was the worst Wwoofing experience?

We had 10 Wwoofing experiences and had only one bad and it was in Gisborne. In the book they said that they are looking for four Wwoofers but when we arrived there were 12. Some had to sleep in a caravan and we had to sleep in another house down the road and take the car every morning. We worked five hours per day doing exactly the same work (pruning persimmons, pollinating kiwifruit and picking oranges). The family didn't share anything with us. They only spoke about working fast and making money. We didn't eat very well and access to the fridge was forbidden. And we had a lot of stupid rules to respect. We also spent one week with a crazy woman with three horses who didn't like Benoit at all.

What was the best experience?

Five of our placements were really nice. We liked the places where we felt like a part of the family and shared everything. Surprisingly, we enjoyed every family who had kids, maybe because we had a good feeling with them. We found all parents with happy kids were happy too.

If you had advice for other Wwoofers what would it be?

Spend time to read the comments of the others on the website, avoid places like big orchards with a lot of Wwoofers because in those

it's not about sharing the experience but about being a cheap worker. And be ready to work. If you don't want to work for someone else or if you are really lazy, maybe wwoofing is not for you.

List the five essential items every Wwoofers should have:

Every wwoofers should have a wonderful car (like our hunk of crap), dirty clothes, sunscreen, sunglasses, a good map and a camera.

What was the funniest moment as a Wwoofers?

We had a LOT of fun with most of our hosts. We spent two weeks with a family with two children and it was funny all day long.

The youngest one would do something wrong then look at you and tell you "that's funny" with a huge smile and we couldn't do anything else apart from laughing with him. For us, Wwoofing was the best option to travel. You don't need a lot of money, especially when you are on a farm in the middle of nowhere. You really get to know NZers, you learn a lot about the country, the way of living and the food. You also meet amazing people and you get memories you will never forget.



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Eliza feeding Eliza, her new pet lamb and namesake.



Harry and Eliza with their adopted animal family.


A backpacking couple:

Harry Edge, 21, Eliza Beacham, 18, from the UK.

How did you find volunteering? We heard about volunteering on Kiwi farms through friends who have previously travelled to NZ and also from various websites and forums. We applied for our position at Rangitikei Farmstay on the backpacker board website.

What has been the worst job? One afternoon we had to clean and tidy up the woolshed before all the shearing began. We had to scrub all the bird poo off the floor, which took us a good three hours. And then we had to clean the toilet which hadn't been done for five years.

How did the experience of volunteering compare to your expectations? It lived up to what we had imagined and more. Looking at the Rangitikei Farmstay website we were very excited before our arrival and we were showing off to friends and family where we were going to be volunteering. The best and most enjoyable moments have been working hard and achieving goals to be praised and have our hosts appreciate our help in exchange for their lovely home cooked meals and homely accommodation, not forgetting the amazing views and scenery NZ has to offer. The only advice we would give to people who intend volunteering in NZ is that they should research the position before committing so you know what you are getting into and communicate with the employers as much as possible so you can understand each other.

Harry and Eliza's five essential items for a volunteer: Old clothing for working, sensible footwear, insect repellent, iPod and elbow grease. 



"Research the position before committing so you know what you are getting into".