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▸ Arts and Culture
▸ Beach & Water Sports
▸ Cruise
▸ Cultural Immersion
▸ Food & Drink
▸ Outdoor & Adventure
▸ Theme Park
▸ Winter Sport

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▸ Disabled
▸ Family
▸ Gay & Lesbian
▸ Honeymoon
▸ Senior
▸ Single
▸ Student
▸ Women

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How to Do Charity in the Caribbean: Don't Send Money, Bring Crayons

Sometimes making a big difference is as easy as stuffing a box of crayons in your carryon.

Recommend (4)

By Alexis Lipsitz Flippin
July 26, 2010

Melody Wren rarely goes on a trip these days without stuffing scores of diapers, books, crayons, and Teddy bears into her luggage. Wren, a Canadian travel journalist, hand-delivers supplies directly to the neediest, for her a deeply satisfying alternative to writing a check to a charity. In Wren's forays around the world, she has found that if each visitor can put a little something back at a destination, "it can make an enormous overall difference."

In the brave new world of responsible travel, charitable giving has gotten personal. Many travelers are finding real-time ways to practice front-lines philanthropy -- whether volunteering, traveling sustainably, or, in Wren's case, packing a bag full of essentials for people in need. It's a concept that's gaining in popularity: The British website **Stuff Your Rucksack** (www.stuffyourrucksack.com), directs travelers to organizations and projects around the globe for which they can "stuff their rucksack" and hand-deliver much-needed supplies.

You don't have to travel halfway around the planet to make an impact, though. For North Americans, the Caribbean is one of the world's loveliest destinations, with some of the most glamorous resorts on the globe. It's also a region bedeviled by poverty, a reality that many travelers are rarely exposed to -- or have little inkling how to help. The most vulnerable of the disadvantaged are children, and nearly every island has a handful of children's homes or orphanages: generally small, locally operated organizations that receive little or no government assistance. If a Caribbean holiday is in your future, consider packing a little something extra for the following organizations, listed below with their current needs. (For other islands, contact tourist boards or Unicef [www.unicef.org] to hook you up with local charities.) Keep in mind that it's always a good idea to contact the home before you come calling.

In the Bahamas, the **Ranfurly Homes for Children** (tel. **242/393-3115**; www.ranfurlyhome.org), on Mackey Street in Nassau, New Providence Island, has provided a safe haven for children who have been abandoned, abused, or orphaned since 1956. Located next door to the Dundas Centre for the Performing Arts, it's currently home to 32 children ages 8 to 18.

If you're going to **the Bahamas**, bring along:

- Basic toiletries (lotion, deodorant, soap)
- Towels, facecloths
- Scissors, pens; school supplies
- Underwear (ages 8A-18)

In Jamaica, the **SOS Children's Villages**, a private, nondenominational and nonpolitical

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welfare organization (and a Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize Laureate), operates a children's home in Montego Bay (tel. 876/953-7845). The home houses 99 children ages 1 to 18 and desperately needs basic supplies.

If you're going to **Jamaica**, bring along:

- Children's underwear
- School supplies (notebooks, pencils, crayons)
- Basic toiletries (soap, shampoo)
- Diapers

In the Dominican Republic, the **DREAM (Dominican Republic Education and Mentoring) Project** (www.dominicandream.org) accepts hand-delivered educational materials and books at its headquarters in Patio Plaza, Calle Principal, Cabrete (tel. **809-571-0497**).

If you're going to the Dominican Republic, bring along:

- Spanish-language books (not above the sixth-grade level) -- the project even has a "Dream List" of books on Amazon (www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/3023XSGAMA321)
- School supplies (notebooks, construction paper, pencils, scissors, rubberbands, markers, masking tape, chalk)
- Art supplies (glue, balloons, paint and paintbrushes, pipe cleaners, molding clay, Playdough)
- Educational toys (puzzles, Legos, dominos)
- Band-aids, soap, Q-tips, mosquito repellent

In Grenada, the nonprofit Queen Elizabeth Home for Children, in Tempe St. George (tel. **473/440-2327**), run by Marion Pierre, is the home to children 2 to 10 years old. (Its book and video needs were recently amply met by the New York-based **REACH Grenada**.)

If you're going to **Grenada**, bring along:

- Children's underwear
- Basic toiletries (soap, toothpaste)
- Bath towels/bath curtains/bath mats
- Crib sheets

In **Barbados**, the official **Child Care Board** (tel. **246/429-3961**) oversees 10 children's homes inhabited by some 100 children, many of whom were abandoned or pulled from abusive homes. The children's needs change seasonally; please contact the board before you leave home to get the latest list of necessities.

- Unpacking just once and leaving routine behind
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- Exploring the world while feeling at home

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Note: *This information was accurate when it was published, but can change without notice. Please be sure to confirm all rates and details directly with the companies in question before planning your trip.*

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KarlaHart wrote:

Great idea, especially if supplies are donated to a school, orphanage, other instead of directly to kids (which can encourage begging). When in rural areas/developing countries I usually seek out a clinic or appropriate medical professional to donate my emergency kit (clean syringes, antibiotics, etc.) just before I leave.

I hope that the diapers requested/donated above are cloth -- as convenient as disposables are, they add to the environmental burden of the country and don't have the functional life of a cloth diaper!

In most countries I've visited you can buy basic school supplies in country. Seeking them out gets you off the tourist trail and can create some fun memories. Buying locally is often cheaper than buying in the U.S. and you are helping to support the local economy. If you shop in markets your money will probably be especially helpful to locals. And, you avoid extra baggage fees as well (\$25 saved can buy a lot more pencils and paper). I expect that the same holds true for children's underwear. First aid supplies I would be more inclined to bring from home (I've gotten donations from my doctor's office when there for pre-travel visits).

7/26/2010 3:46 PM EDT

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Sandia wrote:

My husband and I have been going to Isla Mujeres, Mexico for almost 20 years...I started off by bringing ambulance supplies to the local Red Cross [my ambulance corps throws out SO much stuff when the protocols change or we start using a new supply company]....then as we got to know more folks on the island, we started bringing down school supplies for the Little Yellow School House which is for disabled children and we also bring good used clothing for families in need [our friends know which families need it and recently there was a bad fire that wiped out several family homes]....many of the fellow tourists I have met over the years also bring things to Isla, it is a very unique destination, most tourists are worried about matching shoes and outfits for themselves while many of us Islaholics bring only a carryon bag for our own clothes, then donations go into our checked bags! It was sad when the airlines started charging for baggage, I think it affected the amount of donations...as for Fries9130- the maid was probably grateful for the supplies but she was probably also disappointed that she was not given a monetary donation [especially if she did not have kids!]- they are paid very little and their living expenses are supplemented by cash tips. We usually leave a tip as well as school supplies, hand lotions, etc. Thanks for this article, hopefully it will benefit other vacation spots as well....

7/26/2010 2:32 PM EDT

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fries9130 wrote:

When we were in the DR a few years ago I had read that the room maids appreciate school supplies for their kids/relatives/etc so I took a whole bunch and left them w/ a note (in Spanish) in lieu of a tip every day. Never got any response so I don't know if there were appreciated or not. Next time I'll probably stick with a monetary tip.

7/26/2010 10:13 AM EDT

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aeisenberg wrote:

When we went to Guatemala a couple of years ago, we brought lots of markers, pencils and such to the village where AsGreenAsItGets.org operates (near Antigua). The kids loved it. Visit there if you can, it was a fantastic experience.

7/26/2010 9:38 AM EDT

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