

Good Short-Term Mission Travel Means Experiencing Culture Shock!

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My first mission trip outside the United States immersed me in culture shock! I had never been to airports filled with pandemonium. What is going on here? I had never stood in lines where jostling and cutting in were normal. I had never been to a bathroom without toilet paper! The list goes on and on!

I had never been to places so remote that water had to be filtered for drinking, where it was necessary to keep water out of your mouth when (cold) showering, and where brushing your teeth required constant vigilance! I wish now that I had documented some of those early travels more completely. They were certainly for me historic, inspirational, instructive experiences. I was green. I was afraid. I was thrilled. I felt the danger. I felt unprotected. I had no visible safety net.

Today I have a montage of memories that have blurred over the past third of a century. Today is different. But I still value culture shock when it sneaks up on me and surprises me! And that happens on almost every mission journey I make!

In leading mission trips for college students, I felt that one of the best things I could do was not protect them from everything that could happen. I wanted them to experience culture shock—beyond the security and safety of my sheltering wings. I wanted them to see a different world, poverty, genuine need, hunger, total dependence on God. I wanted them to see cultures they had never seen, to understand a little of people's struggles. To eat things that they had never thought of eating—because that was what was served and that was what everyone else was eating.

Our world is filled with good people, people who are just trying to find their way. They need much. Their greatest need is Jesus. So often our short-term mission trips theoretically go to serve them but never see them. Culture shock well-done will make you fearful, and help you embrace and celebrate the differences you feared and learned to celebrate. How sad that many go on mission trips and never see it for themselves! How sad when mission trips depend on the familiar, may I say luxurious? Good accommodations, food we like, restaurants, language we understand, very little outside our comfort zones—most often with the expectation of a couple of days of “mission vacation” to cap the trip. Where are the open windows, mosquitos, mosquito nets, without air conditioning? Where are the grueling travel days, unfamiliar tastes and sounds and odors? When do we have to help push the taxi out of the mud? When do we endure ridiculous heat?

Culture shock, as Rick Steves says, “rearranges your cultural furniture.” I would say also that it forces you to discard your personal cultural baggage – at least if you really want to make a difference. Across the years, many have asked if they can go with me. My common response is, “Yes, but you need to know that you will not meet many people who speak English. I will translate, I will try to help you know what is going on, but it will be up to you to see and participate.” Few go. Those who do always return counting and recounting their blessings!

When someone says they want to go on a mission trip, my first question is nearly always, “Why?” If you want to lose some cultural baggage and along the way, make a difference in the lives of people with a multitude of needs, “Welcome aboard!”