



# Seeing the World From the Inside

*Volunteering  
abroad  
pays with  
priceless  
memories*

By Lori Russell

Growing up, Micaela Ballinger remembers hearing the magical tales and musical tunes of Ireland and dreaming of one day seeing the Emerald Isle for herself. When that time came in March 2009, the 20 year old from The Dalles knew she wanted a more intimate experience of the country and its people than a weeklong guided bus tour or whirlwind backpacking trip could provide. Instead, Michaela decided to get her hands dirty and travel as a volunteer worker with the organization World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF).

The online network helps connect people who want to volunteer on organic farms with hosts looking for help. Hosts supply food and lodging—often in their homes—in exchange for hands-on help with sustainable farming practices on their land.

Volunteers—or WWOOFers—screen potential hosts using the organization’s online database, then contact those who interest them directly to negotiate accommodations, length of stay and work hours.

After arriving in Ireland, Micaela contacted Vanessa and Cinead Shipman, who live on a farm in County Wicklow south of Dublin. The couple invited her to stay and work with them for a week.

“That’s often how the hosts screen you,” Micaela says, “If things work out, they ask you to stay longer.”

Like many WWOOF sites, the farm was not a commercial operation, but at the home of a family seeking to live sustainably by growing a large vegetable garden and raising pigs, chickens and ducks.

Micaela says her first task was pulling weeds.

“I needed to learn the local plants and weeds so I knew which to pull and which to leave in the ground,” she says.

As the days passed, Micaela began taking on more of the manual work of tending the garden: preparing the soil, planting seeds and building raised beds—chores that had held no interest for her at home.

“Growing up in The Dalles, my dad and grandparents planted a vegetable garden every year,” she



**Micaela Ballinger harvests vegetables on the Shipman farm in Ireland, left, and mixes paint at a farm in Greece, above.**

Photos courtesy of Micaela Ballinger

says. “I didn’t appreciate the work that went into it.”

From March to May, Micaela worked on three different farms, with the hosts sharing her time and skills depending on their needs. She then traveled to Greece, where she spent several weeks pruning olive trees on the Peloponnese Peninsula.

In southern Spain, she fashioned stone mosaics through another online network, [www.helpexchange.net](http://www.helpexchange.net), which includes trade jobs such as roofing, painting or pouring cement.

Working with both organizations allowed her to live and work with volunteers from around the world.

“You meet people you wouldn’t necessarily spend time with at home or school,” Micaela says. “We had different ideas about a lot of things, but we got along. It was like with math; you can have different equations that come to the same result.”

Accommodations range from a room in the family’s house to a tent or a camper van. While Micaela usually stayed in her hosts’ homes and ate with their families, on one farm in Ireland she shared a yurt with a half dozen other WWOOFers, sleeping on straw bales covered with sheepskins.

Volunteers made their own meals and cut wood for the stove they used for heat and cooking.

Although she traveled solo, Micaela says she never felt unsafe.

“I chose to stay with families rather than couples or singles, or I selected hosts that used groups of volunteers,” she says. “After e-mailing a host, I always talked with them on the phone and asked questions. Most had had WWOOFers before, so they could tell me how things worked. It takes trust on both sides.”

While the idea of hopping from country to country for work sounded appealing initially, Micaela admits it was harder than she had imagined.

“It costs money to travel, and after a week’s stay you are just learning about the place and the things to do,” she says. “The longer you are there, the more the hosts let you start making decisions as if it were your own place. I realized I wanted to see the results of my labor.”

Micaela had that opportunity when she returned to the Shipmans’ farm. Her former hosts were expecting their third child and needed help with the farm chores and caring for their 5-year-old son, Naoise, and 3-year-old daughter, Rose.

Micaela stayed with the family four months, building chicken houses, raising chickens, clearing garden beds, and sharing in the family cooking and childcare. She returned to the United States in November—a week after daughter Matilda joined the family. Since then, she and the Shipmans have continued their friendship through e-mail.

Micaela says what surprised her most wasn’t the people she met or the work she did. It was herself.

“I learned how accessible the world is,” she says. “You can read books or statistics about a country, but to really know it, you have to go and see for yourself. People are essentially good. You have to give them a chance, even the ones you don’t get along with. I also learned I was open to things I would not have been open to at home.

“In school, all subjects are broken up. There is math and science and a foreign language. When traveling, you learn it is all connected. I thought I would just learn about gardening, but I also learned about raising chickens and children. I moved from house to house. I helped cook. I saw things come full circle.” ■

*For information about volunteer work opportunities around the world, go to [www.wwoof.org](http://www.wwoof.org) or [www.helpx.net](http://www.helpx.net).*



**Three-year-old Rose Shipman shows off the garden’s bounty as brother Naoise, 5, plays with the family cat.**