

Making A Positive Impact

Personal Connections Benefit Visitors & Hosts

by Jim Kane

"We always walk happily here. Lots of fresh, clean air and lots of fertile lands."

Damian, the mayor of the weaving and farming community of Chahuaytire, was explaining why he preferred his 120-family hometown to Cusco, the regional capital. We were ambling down a meadow, sharing a conversation and a glorious afternoon hike at 13,000 feet in the rural Andes of Peru, with no one within miles.



Damian, mayor of Chahuaytire, in the hills of his community.
Photo: Jim Kane

*"We always walk happily here.
Lots of fresh, clean air and lots
of fertile lands."*

"And then there's Carnaval. We get together and dance. Oh yes. Everyone in the community...Uff—wow!"

As travelers we cherish this sort of relaxed interaction with the people of the countries we visit. At the same time, we are always conscious of the

impact our visits have on other cultures, particularly in the developing world.

After living, working, and studying in five countries over five years, I decided to co-found Culture Xplorers with impact foremost in mind for both the visitor and the local communities we visit.

When researching and planning new trips, I follow these positive impact rules of thumb:

Positive Impact Traveling

- ① Go deeper, not farther.
- ② Participate, don't just observe.
- ③ Find a need and help fill it.

These same rules of thumb can be used as easily by travelers with no language skills and little time in country as they can by multi-lingual volunteers spending a year abroad. The key is the determination to travel with an open mind, a desire to connect with and respect the people and culture, and a willingness to give of yourself.

An incident on my first trip to Laos is an example of how even the most unprepared visitor to a country can make a connection with locals and leave a positive impact.

Just after landing in Luang Prabang I walked along the Mekong river before turning in for a much-needed nap. I brought along my camera looking for atmospheric scenes of river life. When I spotted a wiry, deeply tanned, barefoot man and his wife unloading bundles of firewood from their dugout canoe, I thought that I had found the perfect subject.

However, when I looked through the lens, instead of taking a shot I lowered the camera and descended the steep bank to lend a hand to the wife struggling under her load, which weighed as

If we keep an open mind, go deeper, participate when possible, and give of ourselves, we will be enriched by our efforts, and the people we meet along the way will be glad that our paths have crossed.

much as she did. With a smile and a gesture, she indicated she understood and gladly unburdened herself onto me.

My initiation into the finer techniques of wood transport would be a sweaty one. The 100 pounds of firewood tied in two bundles on either end of a pole swung more wildly with each lurching step forward. Before I reached the top of the embankment a crowd of men had gathered. Based on their giggles and gestures, I realized I was the morning's news and entertainment.

After the work was finished, Zhai, the husband, and I relaxed on the bank. As he smoked a cigarette, we fumbled through a phrasebook to start a conversation we both wanted to have. After a time, he gestured to the other side of the river and invited me to his home, pointing out some of the rarely-visited Buddhist temples nearby. In Zhai's hut, one of the most modest dwellings I have ever seen, we shared a sip of homemade firewater and then started our hike, with Ukzou, his 3-year-old daughter in tow.

We agreed to meet again the following day, this time with the help of his friend who spoke some English. The two became my guides to the nearby caves and villages of the Mekong. Parting company several days later was bitter-sweet. I was sad that I probably would not see Zhai or Ukzou again. But we smiled and hugged, happy that we had each made a wonderful human connection.



Along the Mekong River in Laos.

Photo: Kate Berardo

The moral of my story is that if we keep an open mind, go deeper, participate when possible, and give of ourselves, we will be enriched by our efforts, and the people we meet along the way will be glad that our paths have crossed. ✧



Jim Kane is the President and co-founder of Culture Xplorers. Having lived in 6 countries and traveled through 40 more, Jim now creates immersive trips to Latin America with a focus on people. Through festivals, home-stay opportunities, living traditions and positive impact projects, Culture Xplorers promotes genuine interaction between travelers and locals. Visit Jim & Culture Xplorers at www.cultureexplorers.com

First published in Transitions Abroad Magazine November/December 2003 www.transitionsabroad.com. Email jim@cultureexplorers.com with reprinting requests.