



wwoofing



what is it?

In 1971, a lady living in London – Sue Coppard – decided she needed to get out of the city on a regular basis. She felt she needed to breathe the country air and do something physical, useful and meaningful. She approached an organic farm in East Sussex and negotiated for herself and three friends to stay overnight and be fed, in return for help in the vegetable garden. The trip was a great success and they started to do this exchange every third weekend.

News gradually spread of 'Sue Coppard's land army' and other farms began to get in touch, eager to host these willing volunteers. And so Working Weekends on Organic Farms was born. There have been two name changes since then, and WWOOF now stands for World-Wide Opportunites on Organic Farms. With 15,000 hosts and 100,000 volunteers in 105 countries, WWOOF is now truly global.

WWOOF works a bit like a dating agency. The national organisation – WWOOF UK for instance – holds a list of the hosts for that country. The volunteer pays to join the organisation and is then given access to the host list. Where there are only a few hosts in a country and no national organisation exists, WWOOF Independents holds the host list.

Because WWOOF UK is a charity which wants to be as accessible as possible to everyone, all joining costs are kept to a minimum. In the UK it costs £20 to be a volunteer and this gives you access to the 700 hosts in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for a year. Hosts pay £30 to be listed.



what are the benefits?

Hosts get a helping hand in return for providing bed, board, cultural exchange and land-based learning. Volunteers get all the health and well-being benefits associated with being outside and spending time in nature; experience alternative ways of life; gain new skills and travel cheaply. And everyone gets to meet new people.

There are other organisations that run similar volunteer programmes, some of which freely admit they are based on the WWOOF idea. HelpX allows you to work at farms, hostels, B&Bs and on sailing boats. Workaway covers 'painting to planting, building to babysitting or shopping to shearing'. And Couchsurfing is more about a place to stay and the social interaction that naturally results – although you are expected to muck in with household chores. What sets WWOOF apart from these other organisations is that it's all about the organic mindset. It's used by people who are keen to learn about the land and sustainable living. Very often, for people wanting to buy their own land, WWOOF is a sort of apprenticeship, to talk about potential issues and pitfalls and to get a feel for what crops and livestock they may or may not like to work with.

WWOOFing is a great way to meet exciting, inspiring, like-minded souls and to reconnect with the earth. You can learn all sorts of wonderful skills in farming, animal husbandry and more sustainable ways of living. You can rediscover the link between local food production and local community, whilst getting outside, doing something meaningful and helping organic farmers and smallholders.



what can I do?

See resources for joining WWOOF. To get an idea of the possibilities on offer, most national websites offer a preview facility without the contact details. If you like what you see you can join either as a volunteer or, if you have a property which could benefit from some enthusiastic help, join as a host. As a volunteer, you join the national organisation of the country you want to volunteer in; join WWOOF Italy if you want to volunteer in Italy for example. Just make sure before leaving home that you have the right to enter that country when you arrive. As a host, you join the national organisation where your property is based.

Once you're set up as a volunteer it's up to you to have a look through the host list, decide on which hosts you'd like to visit, then contact them to negotiate your stay. Clear communication is key, and it's a good idea to contact a host before you commit to staying with them, to make sure expectations of both sides can be met. If you are travelling with children or a pet it's absolutely essential that you make your host aware of this and get their prior agreement.

Many hosts struggle to make ends meet and find the help of WWOOFers extremely useful. Because of this they like to book up volunteers well in advance; this means that it's better to plan your stay in advance, to avoid disappointment. Also remember that a great many people WWOOF in August and a lot of hosts can be completely full at this time if you don't book early. If you arrange a stay and then

can't keep the arrangement, be sure to tell your host so they can replace you. If you do find yourself in a last-minute situation (for example you've been let down by a host or volunteer) many national WWOOF groups have a forum to find replacements in a hurry. For most though, you'll need to be a member and logged in to see or post comments.

You can WWOOF on farms, smallholdings or communities (a good way of meeting people); and you can WWOOF for a weekend or for longer stays – all by negotiation with the host. You should be given a variety of jobs. Some will be great fun and others won't! Expect both. Your host or a representative should work with you at least some of the time, so you have a chance for a social, cultural and knowledge exchange.

Expect to do roughly 5-6 hours a day, 5 days a week in exchange for full board and lodging. At some places you'll eat as part of the family/host unit, at others you may eat separately or with other WWOOFers. Accommodation varies from host to host, but should be dry and fairly clean (expect a host's home to have a more outdoorsy feel than you're used to). You may be offered anything from a private room to a tent or a caravan. All this information will be part of the host's details. Many hosts also offer bikes or other methods of transport so you can get around the local area on your days off.

Take work clothes, warm clothes, wellies, waterproofs, head-torch, any protective equipment you have (especially gardening gloves), anything you can't live without (e.g. a particular type of coffee), enthusiasm, tolerance and respect for your host and their home. Oh, and don't forget your sense of humour!

resources

- see lowimpact.org/woofing for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Margaret Halliday, *WWOOFing North & South*
- A Greenman, *Practical Guide to WWOOFing*
- woof.net – international federation of national WWOOF organisations
- woofindependents.org – countries without a national WWOOF organization
- woof.org.uk – WWOOF UK



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