



Linda Shahinian and husband Herb

Touring Is Great. Volunteering Is Even Better

By Linda Shahinian

Three years ago, my husband and I went to Armenia for three weeks as tourists. We took day trips near (a restored pagan temple) and far (a 10th century monastery) and followed maps and guidebooks around the capital city of Yerevan.

We connected with old friends and made new ones. It was a wonderful time but merely an hors d'oeuvre before the delicious entrée and dessert to come.

As for so many before us, the journey whet our appetites to return, not just to see more but to do more—to be involved and make a contribution beyond our annual check-writing.

So we returned for two months as volunteers through the Armenian Volunteer Corps (AVC). My husband extended his passion for paleontology into archaeology by working at the 3,000 year-old Karmir Blur dig site and I used my planning and editing skills at the American University of Armenia Acopian Center for the Environment. Our feedback told us that we each made valuable contributions, confirming our primary reason for being there.

Importantly, our work took us far beyond finding a femur or adding a comma to a prepositional phrase. We learned, as much as you can in two months, to live as locals. We got to know natives, had good and bad taxi experiences, walked, watched, talked and listened. Volunteering gave us a depth of experience that tourism did not – could not.

We felt connected in a very special way and that connection lassoed us into a return two-month volunteer trip the next year – and will for as many years as our septuagenarian bodies and minds will allow. The wonderful thing about volunteering is that you get at least as much as you give.

Exposure to new cultures and customs expanded our knowledge of history, language, music, cuisine, art, architecture – well, the list of benefits goes on. And it's not just exposure to the host country. AVC, for example, has had volunteers from 39 countries so we've made connections with others worldwide.



Our second year volunteer placement was in a cultural ministry lab where my husband stabilized 3,000 year-old fossils and I restored the same age pottery. Again, we learned as much as we contributed, expanding our techniques and skills while adding to the cultural heritage of an ancient civilization. It doesn't get any better!

If you're wondering what to do with the rest of your life, my answer is: volunteer - in your 50s or 70s or any age. You'll be rewarded in so many ways, both personally and in the good you'll do!