Boarding the small boat that would transport her to the deep jungle, Alison Mulford began to feel nervous. The recent college graduate had signed up for a six-week volunteer stint at the ARCAS Wildlife Rescue Center in northern Guatemala. But Mulford didn’t speak any Spanish, and as the boat made its way across Lake Petén Itzá, the Madison, Conn., native wasn’t sure what to expect.

Her trepidation peeled away when she arrived at the spartan but “homey” volunteer house overlooking the lake: “The spirit of the place was pretty clear the moment I got there.”

Founded in 1989, ARCAS rehabilitates animals confiscated from illegal traffickers, including parrots and macaws, spider monkeys, coatimundis, jaguars, ocelots, anteaters, and reptiles. With a small staff and up to 600 patients a year, the nonprofit relies on volunteers to provide basic animal care and pay bed-and-board fees that help fund the center.

Living in dormitory-style accommodations, Mulford worked in shifts to monitor and feed the patients, clean enclosures, and even venture into the surrounding forest to gather food for her charges. And when a baby howler monkey needed one-on-one nurturing until old enough to join others of her kind, Mulford didn’t hesitate to join the center’s staff, even though that meant extending her visit to more than a year.

Like Mulford, a growing number of humane-minded vacationers are combining their passion for animals with a zest for travel. Opportunities for animal-related “work-cations” and “voluntourism” exist all over the globe—with shelters and spay/neuter programs, wildlife rehabilitation and habitat protection organizations, sanctuaries for farm animals or other species, and more.

Mulford caught the “volunteer traveling bug” during a summer break spent caring for baboons at a South African rescue center. Her experiences there and at ARCAS have made her a fan of one-of-a-kind vacations that give back to the community and its animals. “If you go with an open mind and a can-do attitude,” she says, “you can travel anywhere and do anything.”

PASSPORT WITH A PURPOSE

After teaching in Guatemala and Costa Rica last year, Kandice McDonald planned a few months of carefree travel through Central America with her fiancé. But the environmental science graduate from Livermore, Calif., eventually grew tired of bouncing from place to place and “just being tourists.” And she longed to see a sea
turt. A Google search brought the couple to Costa Rica’s Corcovado Foundation Sea Turtle Conservation Program, where McDonald found “a sense of purpose and belonging.”

Each night, McDonald and other volunteers scouted the beaches along Drake Bay to protect sea turtle eggs from poachers, marveling at the flecks of green bioluminescent material in the sand and ocean. “We called it ‘Avatar sand.’ . . . It looked like stars in the sand.” She spent her off-duty hours swimming in waterfalls and hiking through the rainforest.

The highlight of her two-week stay was the night she and another patroller spotted the tracks in the sand that led them to witness one of nature’s most mysterious processes. They waited in the shadows for nearly an hour while a 3-foot-long olive ridley turtle dug a nest and began laying her eggs. “They go into a trance-like state and finish the process no matter what,” says McDonald, who helped measure and tag the turtle and later dug up her 80 eggs to deliver to the hatchery.

Helping to preserve the area’s sea turtle population was “a great way to give back to the Osa Peninsula for sharing all of its tropical wonders with me.”

ROADS LESS TRAVELED
Kathy King’s vacations—though rewarding—bear little resemblance to the weeks of adventure many travelers aspire to. For weeklong stretches, the Norfolk, Va., resident works 14-hour days, staying at $40-a-night motels in economically depressed Indian reservations and down-on-their-luck Appalachian towns.

It started in 2007, after the lifelong animal lover learned about the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association’s Rural Area Veterinary Services program. She decided that a week helping to bring free vet care to needy communities would be a meaningful way to spend her time off.

Six years and nine RAVS trips later, King has seen communities where stray animals are ubiquitous, alcoholism and unemployment are rife, and a 4-year-old dog is considered “really old.” But she’s also seen a band of wild horses on a sunset-lit ridge in Nevada. And working the clinic intake lines, she’s met hundreds of people who are sincerely grateful for the chance to provide better care for their beloved pets.

There was the North Dakota client who was worried about the growth on his elderly Labrador’s leg. When he came to pick up Sam after surgery, the man asked King how much he owed. “I told him that it was free [and] he just about cried. . . . He hugged us all,” she says. “… That’s why I do this.”

Along with her sense of accomplishment, King’s souvenirs include Larry, a Chihuahua-mix adopted from one excursion, and many lifelong friends. “People are there because they really care,” she says of her fellow volunteers. “They are trying to . . . make these animals’ lives better.”

Humane Travel Tips

▶ BEWARE “HUMANE-WASHING.” Not all volunteer trips are what they seem. In Africa, for example, unscrupulous operations charge volunteers thousands of dollars to care for orphaned lion cubs, who they say will be returned to the wild, says Humane Society International’s Teresa Telecky. “In fact, they pocket most of the money and never release lions.” Look for nonprofit organizations that teach the community about conservation, circulate tourist dollars back into animal care and the local economy, and give animal welfare top priority.

▶ PREPARE TO ROUGH IT. Volunteer duties can be demanding or light. Make sure you can handle the work, climate, and living conditions. In Costa Rica, Kandice McDonald’s bed was a foam pad atop some boards. Intense humidity and cold showers were part of Alison Mulford’s Guatemalan experience. Also, check the political climate and area crime reports before booking your trip.

▶ CONNECT WITH CULTURE. For an enriched experience, explore and learn the culture of the place. With help from HSI, ARCAS and Corcovado have developed ecotourism programs that enable local residents to derive incomes based on preserving, rather than exploiting, native wildlife. McDonald paid $25 a day to stay with a local family and experience everyday village life. “It was very slow pace, very ‘pura vida.’” she says. On expeditions led by local guides, Mulford visited the Mayan ruins in Tikal and went for a memorable candlelight swim in the turquoise pools of Semuc Champey.

▶ LOOK CLOSER. If you don’t have weeks of vacation time, consider opportunities closer to home. For the past three years, Raji Karandikar and her 16-year-old son, Jay, have volunteered at Farm Sanctuary in Watkins Glen, N.Y., five hours from their New Jersey home. They drive up on Friday evenings and spend Saturdays cleaning barns, painting outbuildings, or even brushing the cows or putting sunscreen on the pigs. “It’s like a great family outing,” says Raji. “I get to spend time with Jay and we stop for dinner [on the drive] and talk about school and other things, like which animals we are going to see this time and what we are going to do.”
TO RECEIVE a free weekly Meatless Monday text with a link to a mobile-friendly recipe, text TASTY to 30644. For more recipes, visit humanesociety.org/recipes.

Sweet ‘n’ Sour Skewers

Make a splash at your next family barbecue with this colorful summertime recipe from The Vegan Dad Cookbook (vegandad.blogspot.com).

INGREDIENTS
(adjust amounts depending on the number of skewers you want to make)

- Red pepper
- Green pepper
- Onion
- Extra firm tofu, pressed
- Pineapple
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Juice of 2 limes
- Juice of 1 orange
- Splash of tequila (optional)
- 1 to 2 teaspoons chili powder
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- Salt and pepper to taste

1. Cut veggies and tofu into large chunks.
2. Combine oil, juices, tequila if using, and spices. Toss the veggies and tofu chunks in the mixture and let marinate.
3. Thread the veggies and tofu tightly on skewers* and cook on a well-oiled grill over medium-high heat for 15 to 20 minutes, rotating them for even cooking and brushing the veggies with the extra marinade at least twice.

* If using bamboo skewers instead of metal, soak them in water for 20 minutes beforehand to prevent them from burning.

Hot off the Grill

As the weather heats up, many cooks venture out of the kitchen and head for the outdoor grill. Along with lazing by the pool, weekend camping trips, and Fourth of July picnics, barbecuing is a summer ritual.

But as more people eschew ribs, chicken, and burgers for healthier, eco-friendlier fare, they often feel stumped for grilling options, says history professor and food blogger Nathan Kozuskanich. When Kozuskanich and his family adopted a meat-free diet seven years ago, his father feared the propane grill he gave his son would fall into disuse. “But the truth is you can cook just about anything on the grill,” says the North Bay, Ontario, father of four.

In fact, Kozuskanich enjoys his barbecue so much he cooks on it year-round, often shoveling a path to it through the winter snow. He scatters smoking chips into the grill pit for enhanced flavor and uses a clay pot for roasting seasoned potatoes and other veggies, which caramelize and sweeten over the open flame. He flavors tofu and seitan with dry rubs and tasty marinades, then lets them sizzle to crispy perfection. Using tandoori oven techniques, he even cooks bread and pizza in his barbecue on a baking stone. “If you think of the grill as a multipurpose tool … the possibilities are endless.”

More than 600 recipes appear on the Vegan Dad blog he began writing in 2007, with more than 100 included in his self-published The Vegan Dad Cookbook. Among his blog’s grill stars are portabella and onion sandwiches, smoked paprika potatoes, jerk-seasoned tempeh topped with fire-roasted peach salsa, and his favorite, oyster mushrooms drizzled with herb-infused oil—creations he hopes will inspire those eating lower on the food chain to “rediscover the grill and reclaim it.” — Ruthanne Johnson
IAN SOMERHALDER

The Vampire Diaries’ dangerously moody Damon Salvatore has a talent for breaking necks, ripping out hearts, and exerting “compel” thought control on the ordinary mortals who stand in his way. Off-screen, actor Ian Somerhalder takes a gentler approach to changing minds and behaviors.

Soon after the popular TV series catapulted him to fame, the Louisiana native launched the Ian Somerhalder Foundation in 2010 to promote a variety of animal and environmental causes. He’s also testified before Congress on behalf of species conservation, rescued stray kittens on set, raised money for his hometown animal shelter, and encouraged his millions of fans to create a more humane world.

In this edited interview with senior editor Julie Falconer, Somerhalder explains why compassion for animals is in his blood.

How did growing up with pets shape your philosophy on animal protection?

Since I was young, home always represented a safe place that welcomed all. This went especially for stray and neglected animals. That open-heart and open-door policy continues in the homes I make while filming. In Atlanta, I have three rescued pets. Being surrounded by the pure and genuine energy of animals allows a person to understand the necessity and brilliance of compassion—a key element that could truly inspire positive shifts for many of the world’s problems.

What was your reaction to winning the Wyler Award at this year’s Genesis Awards ceremony—given in memory of Genesis founder and Broadway headliner Gretchen Wyler?

The Wyler Award was such a huge honor, but it was a gigantic wakeup call for me. With the Ian Somerhalder Foundation, I realized that it’s not that it takes tons of resources; what it takes is really smart planning and the right partnerships. What we decided to do with ISF is we’re going to buy 200 acres in Louisiana, and we’re going to turn it into an animal sanctuary with a youth education component.

What changes do you hope your immortal TV character will witness over the next 100 years?

Damon has definitely been around for quite a while and has witnessed firsthand the mass change and destruction people can bring to the planet. The planet he knows has gone through some serious change in the past 100 years, so the next 100 are more crucial than ever. He’s pretty invested in seeing some serious change considering he’s the one who will have to continue living here. I would imagine he hopes to see a change in consciousness. Although I doubt he’d want too massive of a change in consciousness since he still needs to be able to compel!

FOR MORE of this interview, visit humansociety.org/allanimals.