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The article was published on *The Guardian* website in June, 2021. Miranda Bryant is a freelance journalist based in New York specialising in arts and culture. She has written for publications such as *Sunday Times Style*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*.

Miranda Bryant

The grounded¹ backpackers filling their gap years with volunteering

With foreign travel tricky this summer², some people are making a difference closer to home, be it building chicken coops or trekking³ with llamas



Volunteering at Pembrokeshire Llamas, which has been inundated⁴ with requests for its volunteer programme. Photo: Pembrokeshire Llamas

Djembe Askins had planned to be very far from home this summer, travelling around south-east Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Then the pandemic hit. But rather than completely abandon his gap year-style trip, the 24-year-old decided to transplant it to the UK.

5 Askins, who left his job at a bank in London, has spent the past nine months volunteering at farms, mostly in Wales, through *World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (Wwoof)*, a network where people volunteer for four to six hours a day in return for food and accommodation. Although the weather was “a bit wetter and not as sunny” as his original destinations, he found the experience of

¹ (her) som er tvunget til at blive hjemme pga. corona

² juni 2021

³ vandreture

⁴ løbet over ende

living in a different part of the UK and learning how to be “self-sustaining⁵” a revelation. “It does make me think about what else there is across the UK that I’ve never even been to.”

10 With foreign travel prospects still uncertain and lockdown easing postponed⁶, UK-based “volunteercations” are on the rise. Experts are predicting a summer of volunteering – especially among students and young people seeking experience and alternative gap years.

15 *Wwoof* reports a surge of interest from its UK-based membership this year – which has risen by about 50% – as people seek alternatives to foreign holidays and reassess⁷ their lives following the pandemic. Although the “double whammy⁸” of Brexit and coronavirus travel restrictions have caused the number of international members to drop, it expects the number of UK-based members to grow further as summer holidays approach and more people are vaccinated. [...]



Djembe Askins, 24, who has been volunteering on farms, 'or 'wwooffing', for the past nine months

20 “Compared to most people I’ve had an absolutely class year,” said Askins, who spent the first lockdown⁹ in a flat in London. Since he started volunteering he has “kept busy” but without much stress and has enjoyed having so much outdoor space at his disposal.

He has learned to build a chicken coop, look after animals and grow vegetables. It has also given him an opportunity to learn more about the UK.

⁵ (her) i stand til at klare sig selv

⁶ *easing postponed*: lempelser udskudt

⁷ genoptager

⁸ *double whammy*: dobbelt-problemet

⁹ *first lockdown*: fra 23. marts til juli 2020

As well as gap-year students, Scarlett Penn, chief executive of *Wwoof* UK, said it tends to appeal to people who are at “some sort of crossroads in their life” such as a career break, divorce, retirement or parents whose children have just left home.

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But, she warned, it’s not a wise choice for the sedentary¹⁰ traveller. “It’s really good for people who’ve got a lot of energy. People who just couldn’t dream of lying by a pool and reading a book.”

Penn believes that people taking stock of their lives over the pandemic and empty supermarket shelves during lockdown have contributed to the rise in volunteers. She hosts people at her smallholding¹¹ in Ludlow, Shropshire¹², and said the influence of climate activist Greta Thunberg¹³ is also a factor for young people.

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Pembrokeshire Llamas, which has 60 animals and puts on llama treks for the public, said it has been inundated with inquiries about its residential volunteering programme, largely from UK-based school leavers and students. Matt Yorke, the farm’s director, said: “We’ve had a hell of a lot of interest. At one point I was getting a request every day... we filled up for the year very quickly back in April.”

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But international visitors have faced problems reaching the farm – with one volunteer getting turned away at the border. “There are two main factors working in tandem¹⁴: the Brexit side of things making it harder for people outside the UK to volunteer and people in the UK who just want to get out and do something different and are limited to where they can go this year,” he said.

Lizzie Jolley, 21, who is nine months into a *WWT*¹⁵ volunteering placement¹⁶ at *Slimbridge Wetland Centre*¹⁷ in Gloucestershire¹⁸ as part of her university course, said many of her friends are planning to volunteer this summer instead of going straight into work. “It’s such an accessible route and it’s more of a learn-on-the-job scenario to gain that experience to help you when applying for jobs.”

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(2021)

¹⁰ stillesiddende

¹¹ lille landbrug

¹² i Midtengland

¹³ *Greta Thunberg*: (f. 2003) svensk klimaaktivist

¹⁴ *working in tandem*: påvirker hinanden

¹⁵ *Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust*: naturbeskyttelsesforening

¹⁶ praktikplads

¹⁷ *Slimbridge Wetland Centre*: vildmarksreservat

¹⁸ i det sydvestlige England