

Connecting to the source

BY HALEY MAY

When considering traveling for an extended period, cost is a major concern—plane tickets, bus fare, taxis, food, hotel rooms, campsites, and hostels all require money. For those who have not developed a career and will not have income on the wing, this is no small challenge (especially in the face of an economic downturn). Luckily, anyone can fulfill dreams of travel through international communities like Facebook, Craigslist, Rideshare, CouchSurfing, HelpX, Hostelworld and WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

All of these web-oriented tools can make travel cheaper for decent amounts of time (over two weeks). Both HelpX (short for “help exchange”) and WWOOF offer work-for-housing/food trades. HelpX includes babysitting, cooking, cleaning, gardening and yard work in exchange for a place to stay and/or groceries and meals. WWOOFing is typically a half-day’s work on an organic farm for room and board, and an unforgettable experience that you cannot buy.

My interest in WWOOFing began when I decided to travel for a year. I also had the desire to reconnect with the “roots,” both literally and figuratively, of that which sustains me: food. Having been raised on a farm, I was not convinced by the prevalent attitude that food is limitless, easy to get and ever more convenient to consume. Because most of us are not

regularly faced with the reality of resources and work required for its production, the lack of connection with what we eat is understandable. The media encourages the illusion that food comes from “somewhere out there.” Besides wanting to rediscover homegrown food for myself, I wanted to work outside and travel the world. WWOOFing made all of this possible for me.

I’m writing this article from Hawaii, where my WWOOFing experience began in September 2011. I was on the North Shore of Oahu at a farm called Mohala for two months. I remember being amused by the directions provided by the farm’s director, Mark Hamamoto: “Turn left at the ‘Goats for Sale’ sign.” Though twice the amount of typical work hours were asked of me, I also had twice the opportunity for hands-on experience forming soil blocks, planting, making compost, harvesting, selling at market and, of course, weeding. It was worthy work for fresh papaya, lilikoi (passion fruit), lemons, pomegranate, arugula, collard greens, dino kale, basil, lemongrass, and oregano, as well as introductions to Hawaiian/Asian foods like poke (raw fish salad) and natto (fermented soybeans). I learned an enormous amount by immersing myself into the work.

I was not surprised when I came home from my eight-month trip to Hawaii, Fiji and New Zealand that this symbiotic style of farming is going on



Haley May and Mark Hamamoto weeding at Mohala farm in Oahu, Hawaii. (Photo by Andrew Peterson.)

in the Rogue Valley and the Applegate region. When I was in Wyoming this summer, my grandmother, Joan Peterson, sent me an article from the *Mail Tribune* providing some details, a piece that I recommend looking up online. In June 2012 the *Tribune* describes the WWOOF trend succinctly: “(A)s the organic and, more recently, eat-local movements have picked up speed, the number of WWOOF farms—more than 1,500 in the United States—also has grown. WWOOF farms in Oregon tripled in number to 92 over the past six years. More than a third of those are in Jackson and Josephine counties.” What better place to WWOOF than here in southern Oregon.”

The numbers are impressive, considering that WWOOFers are unpaid volunteers and often outside their zone of comfort. Even with my background, I ran into my own “growth opportunities.” Centipedes and fire ants, well-worn dirt-

caked clothes, and competition with mice for my food were not easy to accept. But what I came to realize is that it is amazing what you can get used to and how little you actually need to live. And if you can arrive at a point where this becomes realized, discomforts and inconveniences become a small price for the experience, as many WWOOFers can agree.

Those of us who have had the pleasure of living in the Applegate know this is where the “good life” is; there is an awareness about the sources that sustain us. Whether you are interested in travel or just want to get your hands dirty, opportunities are waiting at home and abroad. Think about it over the winter months. For myself, I find it exciting to discover and share novel and useful ways of fitting into the circle of life. As said in Hawaii, “Ola Mai Ka Piko...” (connecting to the source).

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