

PRIORITY

How To Pack For A Purpose With Rebecca Rothney

The founder and chairperson of Pack for a Purpose on impacting local communities profoundly, simply with extra luggage space.

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PHOTOS : Pack for a Purpose

Sometimes, the simplest idea is the most effective one. Rebecca Rothney should know — after all, the non-profit organisation she founded in 2010 has touched over 600 community projects in over 60 countries around the globe, based on the (seemingly obvious yet entirely overlooked) realisation that underutilised baggage allowance could be used to ferry essential supplies to local communities.

It was during their first trip to Africa that Rothney and her husband Scott learnt that while their safari tour only allowed 10kg of baggage each, the airline had an allowance of 45kg of checked baggage allowance, plus an additional 18kg for carry-ons. On their second trip in 2002, they made the most out of this and used their additional baggage allowance to carry 63kg of essential school supplies to a local school. And thus, the idea for Pack for a Purpose (PfaP) was born.



The idea of PfaP is to make use of underutilised baggage allowances while travelling to help deliver essential supplies to communities.

Today, the non-profit organisation connects travellers with local community projects by way of having travellers donate useful and relevant goods to these communities. All a traveller has to do is visit PfaP's [website](#) before their trip, select a destination, pick a tour operator or accommodation and the corresponding community projects they support, save some baggage allowance for packing supplies from the list of items required by the community, and drop these supplies off with the tour operator or accommodation. These supplies will then be directly delivered to the community.



Rebecca and Scott with their guide Thomas, at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, in 2008.

Besides making it logistically easy for travellers to make a difference around the world, PfaP's model also rightly prioritises the unique needs of each community by having travellers pack only what each community requires, which circumvents problems such as waste.

It's no wonder that Rothney, who is based in North Carolina, was awarded the National Geographic Traveler of the Year in 2014, and has continually touched the hearts and lives of local communities and global travellers with the earnest work she does through PfaP.

You were a teacher and entrepreneur before starting PfaP. What were some lessons from those earlier parts of your life that you took going into PfaP?



Rebecca Rothney and her husband Scott Rothney, 2021.

To ensure success in the classroom, you need to be able to communicate information in the most effective manner for each student. [That is why] each project on our website lists specific needs sent to us by the community so travellers can make informed decisions. As an entrepreneur, I understood

from the beginning that your word means everything. I also learned, as a Nordstrom vendor supplying handmade cufflinks crafted using postage stamps, that commitments are sacrosanct and must be made with careful consideration. I also learned persistence is essential in reaching a goal.

What were some of the thoughts running through your mind when you first decided to start PfaP?

My mother believed that when you receive someone's hospitality, it is necessary to express your gratitude with a gift. It is important that the gift be useful to the host. She also believed that when you are part of a community, you must contribute to that community. Those were two of my inspirations for founding PfaP.



Rebecca's mother, Joan Jacobson.

Another inspiration was the lack of resources I experienced as a teacher 45 years ago in North Carolina. I thought if it was that difficult for me, it must also be difficult for other teachers.

As a traveller, I know logistics can be difficult. I wanted to be sure that my idea would eliminate logistics for the traveller. Three of my favourite words are: simple, easy, and effective. These were the adjectives I focused on when creating PfaP.

What has been the most rewarding, and conversely, most challenging parts in starting PfaP and keeping it going?

The most rewarding part has been the amazing, talented, and generous people I have met who donate their time to create and sustain PfaP. Without this community of caring and committed volunteers to support my idea, PfaP would never have come to fruition. Many of the interns and other volunteers who have worked here have become friends, enriching my life exponentially.



When I founded PfaP I believed that text was only found in a book, that blackberries belonged in a cobbler, and I would only “spreadsheets” on a bed! Clearly, I was going to need major assistance to make my idea a reality. I believe I may have been a Lego piece in a previous life because one of my greatest skills is making connections. I tell my interns, “If you don’t ask, no one can say yes”. I use that mantra daily. Finally, I do make amazing chocolate chip cookies, which is how I’ve “paid” my volunteers for the last 10 years.



**Award Designed by Erik Macenas
Cookie baked by Rebecca Rothney**

Most Amazing Volunteer Award created by Rebecca.

The most challenging part for the last 10 years has been trying to secure funding so we can move from an all-volunteer organisation to a truly sustainable organisation. Fortunately, for our model, a staff of two full time employees would enable us to increase our global impact significantly.

PfaP is notable in the sense that the initiative is deeply respectful of local communities — e.g. travellers are not encouraged to directly visit the

projects unannounced. Why is this so important for organisations helping local communities to keep in mind?

I believe the people in charge of local community projects are best able to decide if visitors will benefit a community project. We encourage travellers who wish to visit a project to communicate directly with the local participant so they can determine if it is desirable and/or possible.

Most people just think of travelling as just visiting a destination. But why do you think travellers have so much potential to make a difference in the local communities in which they visit?

I know that even though a stethoscope only weighs a kilo, it can touch 10,000 hearts. I know in many countries one pencil becomes two, as a child will break it and share the other half. That is why I know travellers who “Pack for a Purpose” can make a difference in local communities.



Clinic in Indonesia.

What are three travel tips you would like to share with our readers?

Having a flexible and positive attitude is essential. A curious and respectful mind is an asset. Expressing gratitude is always appreciated.

What's next in the works for PfaP?

To continue to grow the number of PfaP travellers, to increase the number of participants supporting community projects on our websites, and most importantly, to become a financially sustainable non-profit. Achieving a secure source of funding will allow us to transition from the founding stage to the sustainable stage of our NGO.

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