



TOURS OF DUTY

Young Australian travellers are finding time to help the needy.

Open arms ... the Cristo de la Concordia statue in Cochabamba, where an Australian couple run a children's home.

They have the option of being adopted but only if they wish to do so. So far none have opted for this. In addition to three biological adult children, the couple has three adopted: Katherine, nine, and five-year-old twins Nicole and Laura. All were abandoned by their parents.

The couple and their adopted daughters, who "mix beautifully" with the adult Moorhouse children when they visit, live at the home.

The Moorhouses employ live-in staff and daily workers to help with cooking, cleaning and teaching.

But there's always extra work to be done, which is where volunteers such as Tracy Newhouse come in.

With the exception of a seven-member mission team from Listowel in Ontario, Canada, who arrived with 14 suitcases of Christmas presents for the children in late October, and a couple from New York three years ago, all the volunteers have been backpackers.

Besides Canada and Australia, they come from the United States, the Middle East, Europe and Britain, all wanting to combine altruism with sightseeing.

Some stay weeks, some months. "I was not sure how useful I would be, not speaking much Spanish, but Peter assured me early on that the kids just needed loving," Newhouse says.

"I hopefully was some help, especially in giving Delia much-needed company and a bit of a break by walking the young ones to preschool and helping with shopping."

During her month-long stay in Cochabamba, which coincided with the lead-up to the election of President Evo Morales, Newhouse not only experienced nappy changing and colouring-in but long trips in cramped public taxis, road blockages and riots, common in the country.

"I had been near riot police using tear gas at one point and had suffered the effects," Newhouse says.

However, she felt safe with the Moorhouses, whom she now thinks of as family.

"They are selfless, they live by their faith, literally, relying on God to provide financially month by month for the orphanage," she says.

Most volunteers hear about the home from other travellers.

Nina Scharf, a 23-year-old nurse from Cologne, Germany, was staying in a hostel in the Bolivian capital, La Paz, where she met Kate Gunningham, from Canberra.

Gunningham, a 19-year-old who had spent two weeks at the home, told Scharf about her experience.

Two weeks later, Scharf, at the start of a six-month backpacking trip around South America, made the seven-hour bus journey from La Paz to Cochabamba.

She will spend a month at the home.

"I wanted to see how these children that have come from such horrific circumstances now live and to meet the Australian man running the orphanage," Scharf says.

"I know that I can't change their problems but I just want to give them some love."

Peter says helpers are often surprised to find the children are happy. "And that ... they are resilient and they can bounce back."

The travellers, he says, gain as much from their time at the home as the children do.

"The young people of today look for opportunities to give."

THE CARE FACTOR AMY FALLON

Whenever a volunteer arrives to work at his orphanage in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Peter Moorhouse makes them climb to the top of the city's Cristo statue.

At 33 metres, the towering masterpiece, a benevolent Jesus with his arms outstretched - the height marking each year he lived - looks over the place also called the City of Eternal Spring for its near perfect climate.

From the top of the mountain, fringed by native jacaranda trees, the beauty and atmosphere of this valley, named by the Incas, colonised and Christianised by the Spanish, can be taken in.

In the bustling cancha (marketplace), colourful sellers peddle everything from second-hand shoes to wildlife such as toucans, macaws and monkeys, including tiny, bright-eyed capuchins. The streets are lined with palm trees and often filled with parrots and you can see the 16th-century Spanish cathedral, the elegant Plaza Principal.

But also below, unseen by the tourists on the mountain top, a baby wrapped in a plastic bag has been thrown on the rubbish piled outside a dirty adobe hut. He waits to be collected by whoever will take him away.

At the intersections of streets, glue sniffers and children line up for handouts.

In the jails, hundreds of young children exist in squalid conditions alongside their parents. Although in Bolivia it is technically illegal for

the children to stay in prisons, it is mostly unpoliced.

This city of extremes has never been a mainstream tourist destination; most travellers flock to Bolivia's other highlights such as the Salt Flats, Lake Titicaca and the Amazon.

Ironically, it is the urge to help ease the pressures resulting in unwanted children being sold off for as little as 50 cents that is now drawing backpackers to this historic city of 800,000 people.

Tracy Newhouse from Potts Point was six weeks into a six-month, around-the-world trip in June last year when her companion decided to return to Australia. Having visited the Andes and Machu Picchu, the 30-year-old wanted a new experience - more than a holiday - and to leave her mark on this remote part of the globe.

While in Ecuador she received an email from friends back home. They told her about an Australian man and his wife running a home for orphaned and abandoned children in Cochabamba. Days later she turned up at their home with one heavy backpack and barely any knowledge of Spanish.

"I saw a great opportunity to really experience another culture while hopefully lending a hand to a needy situation," says Newhouse, who has been a Christian since she was 12 but reaffirmed her faith when she was 28.

"In previous years, I had travelled all over Europe, Africa and Asia and

I didn't realise until I reached South America that I was a bit tired of just passing through places."

When she arrived at the Bolivian Children's Mission, a rented home 10 minutes' drive north of Cochabamba's city centre, she found Peter and Delia Moorhouse, their three adopted Bolivian children and 35 orphans.

The mission, now a recognised non-government organisation that collaborates with the Bolivian authorities but relies mainly on donations, was set up by the couple who left their Kenthurst home and moved to Cochabamba in 1996.

'I can't change their problems but I just want to give them some love.'

Nina Scharf, volunteer

They planned to spend a few years in this new frontier teaching English to Spanish- and Quechua-speaking Bolivians and thought they might adopt a child (their own three children are now adults).

After finding work at schools, the pair, then in their late 40s, began taking in children from Cochabamba's notorious jails. "We wanted to give them a good home," says Peter, who describes his decision to move to Bolivia as a calling. "It simply isn't fair that any child suffers."

By 1999, they had 22 children living with them. Then, in 2000, the government announced its Jubilee policy, pardoning some

prisoners, including those with young children.

The Moorhouses turned their attention to children orphaned and abandoned as well as those at risk of being abused at home.

Today the mission is home to 42 children - 24 girls and 18 boys.

The youngest, 18-month-old Eva, was abandoned by her mother, along with her sister and brothers.

She was brought to the home in the arms of her grandmother, also unable to cope with the extreme levels of poverty in Bolivia, South America's poorest country.

Samuel, who at 14 is the oldest,

came to the orphanage six years ago with his younger sisters and brothers. His mother died in childbirth.

The mission, which provides basic needs and schooling, is special among the more than 50 institutions that have been set up in Cochabamba because its major aim is to keep siblings together.

"Bolivia has no qualms in separating families by age and by sex," says Peter, a Christian who studied theology before leaving Sydney.

"We save sisters and brothers from being split apart who would have never had contact with each other again."

Most of the children will stay at the home until their late teens.

