

How To WWOOF

By Max Kaplan

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What is WWOOFing?

History

WWOOFing began in 1971, when Sue Coppard, a secretary from London, wanted to give people a way to get out of the city and reconnect with the origins of the food they ate. Coppard found the experience so rewarding that she got other people involved, a group of them working at the farm on the weekends. Eventually the idea spread, and people began working longer than just the weekend and at more than just one farm. The project remained a volunteer effort, with WWOOFers compensated only with room and board during their stay. You can read a short interview with Coppard [here](#).

WWOOFing soon went international. Today, you can WWOOF in over 60 countries, doing work such as shearing sheep, harvesting olives, and weeding – lots of weeding! The idea of a non-monetary cultural exchange has taken off, and taken root.

Acronym

People frequently ask “What does WWOOF stand for? And how do I pronounce it?” The answers to these questions is not straightforward. To start, WWOOF has at various times stood for Working Weekends On Organic Farms, Willing Workers On Organic Farms, and World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. I normally choose the last one, which has been the official title since 2000.

The pronunciation in English is simple: “WWOOF” is pronounced just like “woof,” the sound a dog makes. WWOOF the noun has spawned an array of offshoot parts of speech such as the verb WWOOFing (“I WWOOFed in France last summer”), the noun WWOOFer (“We have 10 WWOOFers on our farm”), and the gerund WWOOFing (“WWOOFing is a great way to travel and meet people”).

Who Can WWOOF?

WWOOFing is for everyone! One of the great things about WWOOFing is that you get to “choose your own adventure” (just like those books you had as a kid). Some organizations have minimal restrictions on who can register with them (for instance, WWOOF USA does not allow sex or drug offenders to join), but once you get ahold of a farm you can discuss with them whether you’d be a good fit. Want to bring your dog? Woodcrest Farm in North Carolina welcomes well-behaved dogs. Want to bring your kids? WWOOF farm GR-002 in Greece lets you do that. Don’t feel up to working in the fields or pastures? Maybe a farm will need help selling their produce at a market or building a website. Not everyone will be OK with all of these things, but the options are out there if you’re willing to search for them. No prior farming experience is needed.

Where Can I WWOOF?

You can WWOOF in over 60 countries around the world. However, there is a great variety when it comes to how built out the WWOOF organization is in each country. WWOOF USA has 7 board members and 3 full time staff. In Nepal there are 5 employees. Some

countries share an umbrella WWOOF organization, called WWOOF Independents, since they don't have many farms.

One of the first steps of WWOOFing is deciding where you want to go. Some choose to WWOOF right in their backyards. My friend Eric, who lives in Rhode Island, WWOOFed less than 70 miles away on an oyster farm on the island of Nantucket. Some people are more adventurous. My friend Lanier went WWOOFing in the south of France, over 4,000 miles away from her home in the U.S. Deciding where to go is a major decision, since you will have to join the WWOOF organization of a country before you can contact any farms. This usually costs between \$10 and \$50, and gets you access to the full list of WWOOF hosts for that country. Each host will have a name, farm description, and contact info. We'll discuss this list more in the coming chapter.

How Long Should I WWOOF For?

For your first time, I recommend setting aside two weeks. The first week will be mostly learning, and the second week you'll actually be useful to the farm. Any less than that and you don't get a good feel for the work. Committing to more than that can lead to a bad situation if you end up hating it. At the end you can nearly always extend longer if you want.

Why Shouldn't I WWOOF?

WWOOFing requires you to be flexible in new circumstances. You will likely have to work closely with other people, some of whom you may not like. You might just not gel with your host. There's always some danger in traveling to a new place and living in a stranger's house, and it's possible you will get into a bad situation. I have heard several stories of people who have had to leave a farm early for various reasons. If you're not OK with these things, WWOOFing might not be for you.

How to Choose a Farm

There are many factors that go into choosing which country to WWOOF in. Here are some things to take into account.

Most Common Considerations

Cost of getting there: WWOOFing is free once you're on the farm, but getting there can be pricey. To get to Host 11's farm in Nepal from New Jersey you'd need to get to NYC on the train (\$10 round trip), catch a flight to Abu Dhabi, connect to New Delhi, fly on to Kathmandu (\$1000 round trip total), get on a bus to Tansen (\$10 round trip), and finally take a cab or hitchhike to the farm (\$10), for a total of \$1030. On the other hand, you could WWOOF within driving distance of your home and just pay for the price of gas.

Ease of getting there: Similar to above.

Language: Many people I know choose to WWOOF in a country that speaks a language they have been studying. It's a great way to practice improve your skills. If you're adventurous, there's nothing like immersion to pick up a new language quickly!

Type of farming: There are usually many different types of farm in a single country, so this often isn't an issue at this stage of the process, but if you really know what kind of work you want to do then keep this in mind. There probably won't be much kangaroo farming in Russia, for instance.

Desire: Most often people just have in their heads that they want to visit someplace. That's fine! WWOOFing is a great way to avoid being just another tourist. You'll get a much better sense of a country and a culture by WWOOFing than you would by staying in its capital and going to tourist traps. By connecting with local communities and other WWOOFers, you also have the opportunity to forge lifelong connections and friendships.

Finding a Farm

Once you have chosen a country for your WWOOFing journey, it's time to join the corresponding WWOOF organization. This is as simple as going to a website and paying a fee. [You can check out a list of WWOOF organizations here.](#) The bad (or exciting!) news is, remember all that time you spent choosing which country to WWOOF in? Well, now you have to go through a similar process to find the right farm for you.

A Note on Farm Recommendations

Some people prefer to getting recommendations for a farm from a previous WWOOFer instead of finding one on their own. I think this is an excellent option, especially if you are nervous about having a bad experience. There aren't any good farm review sites out there, so a personal recommendation is the next best thing. If you don't have a friend who has WWOOFed before, the WWOOF subreddit is a great place to solicit farm recommendations. Of course, if you go this route you miss out on the fun of reading through farm descriptions and finding that perfect farm!

Sample Farm Description

Here is a farm description that I think is pretty representative, which I copied from the [Vignobles Les Coudriers Farm](#) in France. On their profile they had a French description followed by this English translation:

We have a small organic vineyard certified by Ecocert. We live on the vineyard and many of the vines around the house were replanted by us when we first arrived here 12 years ago. Because of the density of the plantations, much more of the work is done by hand than on other vineyards of the region.

We also have about 2 acres of land where we keep a few rare breed sheep, which help to control the grass, thistles and brambles etc. The sheep also graze between the vines in the winter season.

We try to run the vineyard with as little environmental impact as possible, for example by minimal working of the land, so as to encourage biodiversity. We prefer to plant green manures to stimulate the soil if necessary, and we use very little machinery on the land.

We have an organic vegetable garden which supplies most of our needs. We would like to enlarge this to become self-sufficient.

We are situated about half way between Bordeaux and Bergerac, in the appellation Bergerac.

We are a bilingual family (english/french), having 2 children who were born and bred here, and who are now passing through secondary school locally. It's therefore possible to speak both french and english with us.

Because of the manual nature of much of our activity, particularly at harvest time (mid September to early October), the help of visitors would be very welcome, as would the opportunity to share our experiences and views on organic viticulture here, with others who are similarly interested.

Narrowing down the list

My advice is to narrow down your list to around 5-10 farms. You can always go back and expand your list later if they all flop, but 99% of the time this will be sufficient. Going through the farms you have access to is one of the most enjoyable parts of the process. Who wouldn't get excited reading about a farm in the Netherlands where they provide you with your own bike as part of your accommodations, or a farm in Greece whose description states: "The farm is by the sea (paragliding, mountain biking, horse riding)"? Unfortunately (or fortunately), many farms will have descriptions that sound just as appealing as these. You need some system for narrowing down the list. Here are my recommendations, in decreasing order of importance:

Language: Most farms will list the languages they speak in their blurbs. Some might even have translated their entire blurbs into a second language. How you use this information is up to you, though. When I WWOOFed in France, I specifically chose farms that did NOT speak English, since I knew that I wanted to strengthen my skills in French. On the other hand, if you don't speak the local language, finding a farm where they speak English might be important to you. Or maybe you thrive in total immersion and don't mind not being able to communicate verbally very easily. Google translate and a pocket dictionary can take you pretty far!

Type of Work: Do you want to tend to animals all day? Do you like doing construction projects? Do you want to work in the fields? Each farm has a unique mix of tasks that need to get done, and most will say in their description. The work will also change with the seasons. You'll still want to clarify with them in your email communications (see next chapter), but this is a good way to narrow down your choices. Remember, your hosts should only be asking you to do about 6 hours of work a day.

Region: Even after you've chosen a country, there may be a specific region of that country that you're interested in visiting. Most countries have some variety in landscape. This obviously overlaps with the previous point, since the landscape will greatly influence the type of farming that they do.

Who is on the Farm: You will have vastly different experiences at a farm owned by an elderly couple who own a few cows and who take on one WWOOFer per season, than at a farm owned by a single twenty-something who constantly hosts at least five WWOOFers at a time. One is not better than the other, but it's something to be cognizant of when narrowing down your list. Think about whether you're interested in more one-on-one or communal experiences; if you're interested in meeting other WWOOFers or you prefer to have a lot of solitary time.

Red Flags: Choosing a farm is not an exact science. It is certainly possible to have a bad time WWOOFing, and it's important to do as much as you can beforehand to make

sure this doesn't happen. Most red flags will pop up while you're emailing back and forth (see next section), but red flags you can spot right away in the description are:

- Farms that expect you to pay them for room and board (WWOOF is meant to be a non-monetary exchange)
- Farms that don't let you leave on the weekends
- Farms that are specifically looking for a particular demographic (for example "men under 20")

Some red flags might be situational: if you're a vegetarian you may not want to go to a farm where they butcher animals.

Contacting Farms

My recommendation is to contact your farms about three months in advance. I've seen it work on as short notice as one week in advance, but I don't advise this since you'll have less choice. You should plan to contact about five farms for every one result you want. Two won't respond and one will be weird, leaving you with two good options.

Intro Email

The intro email is important. Both you and the farm are trying to figure out whether you would be a good fit. I suggest keeping the intro email short, with a bit about yourself, what made you want to work at this farm, and what dates you want to work.

Follow-up Emails

After you hear back, your follow-up email should contain any questions you have. Here are some things you might consider asking about, in rough order of importance:

- Availability during the dates you want
- Type of work at that time of year
- Living arrangements
- How many other WWOOFers there will be
- How much free time, and whether they observe weekends
- Anything special you might need
- WiFi
- What the weather is like

Sample Email Exchange

This is a rough outline of how your correspondence might go.

Hi!

My name is Max Kaplan, I'm 20 and from Philadelphia. I'm writing to see if I can WWOOF on your farm from June 2 to June 16. I found out about WWOOFing from a friend of mine who went WWOOFing in Norway, and I'm excited by the opportunity to live on an organic farm.

Your farm interests me because I want to work with goats. Also, I've heard that the Girond region is very beautiful, and I want to check it out for myself! If you think I could WWOOF with you please let me know!

**Thanks,
Max**

Hi Max,

We have a place open from June 2 to June 16. I can put you down for those dates. It's a bit far out now, so please confirm with us closer to the time.

Thierry

Hi Thierry,

Great! I had a few questions before I confirm. What are the living arrangements like? Do you work during the weekends? Also, do I need to bring anything special?

Thanks,

Max

Hi Max,

You will be staying in a yurt on the property with up to 3 other WWOOFers. We take Saturday off and work a half day on Sunday. No need to bring anything special besides sheets or a sleeping bag, boots, and work clothes.

Thierry

EITHER

Hi Thierry,

That sounds great! I will confirm with you closer to the time with more detailed travel arrangements (I will likely take the train).

Max

OR

Hi Thierry,

Unfortunately, something's come up and I won't be able to take that much time off of work. I'm afraid I can't come WWOOF on your farm.

Thanks for your time,

Max

Getting to the Farm

Logistics

Have a good plan for how to get to the farm of your choice. For most farms, this won't be their first rodeo, and they'll help you figure out how to get there from the nearest major city. Getting to that major city shouldn't be too difficult. Google maps and similar services have options to select public transportation as your method of travel if you won't be taking a car.

Confirming

Remember when you made plans last week to have dinner with your friend today and you showed up on time, only to find that they had forgotten? Here, as in WWOOFing, sending a short reminder could have prevented your unfortunate situation. It is extremely advisable to confirm your travel plans with your farm in the week leading up to your stay. I recommend two days before. Otherwise, you might end up like me, waiting in a rural train station and having to borrow a cell phone because your host forgot you were coming that day.

What to Bring

Every farm is different. Even so, there are a few items that every WWOOFer should have with them when they arrive. Here is a list of what I would bring, assuming I had only a backpacking backpack (~60 liters) to put everything in. Keep in mind that you are not going to the middle of the wilderness (usually); if you forget something or need more of something, chances are you will be able to get it.

- 1-3 shirts that you don't mind getting dirty

- 1 pair of work pants or jeans

- 1 pair of shorts

- 1 pair of boots or sturdy sneakers

- 4 pairs of underwear

- 4 pairs of socks

- 1 nicer shirt/outfit

- 1 sweater or light jacket

- 1 raincoat

- 1 bathing suit

- 1 warm hat

- 1 baseball cap

- 1 pair of sunglasses

- 1 headlamp or flashlight

- 1 large (at least a liter) water bottle

- 1 toothbrush

- 1 small tube of toothpaste

- 1 small roll of dental floss
- 1 bar or bottle of soap
- 1 small bottle of shampoo
- 1 small bottle of conditioner
- 1 small bottle of sunscreen
- 1 stick of lip balm

- 1 book (or more depending on how fast you read)
- 1 set of linens or sleeping bag (unless you confirm you won't need it)
- Prescription medications if you have them
- Pocket money

Optional

- Phone
- Computer
- Small gift for your hosts (pastries, bottle of wine, something from your hometown, etc.)

You will need to adapt this list to your environment. If you're going somewhere cold, bring more warm clothes, etc.

Working on the Farm

Getting Used to the Work

It may take you a few days to get into the swing of things. Don't worry, this is normal!

Paying for things

WWOOFing is a non-monetary exchange. That being said, farmers are usually not wealthy and are spending money to keep you on their farm. I'm not telling you to go out and buy them a Lamborghini, but a bottle of wine or six pack of beer one weekend is always appreciated.

Being flexible...

You should be flexible and willing to work on a few different things. Help with the cooking and household chores. Try new foods. Poop in an outhouse. Sleep on a bale of hay. One of the biggest things I've heard is that the workday for WWOOFing is supposed to be 5-6 hours a day but that this can mean different things to different people. For instance, some farmers expect 6 hours, 7 days a week. Some expect 6 hours on weekdays, but 10 hours on Saturdays when they have to run their stall at the farmers' market.

If any of these things is too important to be left to chance, you should check in about it beforehand during your email exchanges.

...but not too flexible

Don't do things that you are uncomfortable with. WWOOF is a mutual exchange, which means both parties need to be in agreement. If you really hate a certain type of work, ask if you can switch to something you like better. You may be working on something that you didn't want to be working on, which was not mentioned prior to you arriving. Communicating is key in these situations. If you're not OK with something, say so! If things don't change, see the next point.

Leaving early

It is an unfortunate reality that you might have to leave your farm early for one reason or another. Maybe the work isn't what you expected. Maybe there's no running water and you want to get back to the land of toilets. Maybe you just don't like the people, the work, or the food. It happens. Most farmers are reasonable people, and if you say you need to leave they'll be OK with it. At one farm I went to, a WWOOFer was planning to stay a week and instead left the day after she came. My friend Lanier had an amazing two-week experience at one farm, and left the next after two days. It can happen. Have a plan for what you'll do if you need to leave early. Hope for the best, plan for the worst.

Don't freak yourself out, but do a bit of research on the area you're going to. It's not a bad idea to write down the phone number for a cab company and to look up the nearest train station, just in case.

Case Studies

What follows are a few case studies from individual WWOOFers. I am indebted to Shia LaWWOOF, G. Agar, Ellie, and J for responding to my survey. Their lightly edited response are printed in order below. Thanks!

Where did you WWOOF? What factors went into how you chose the farm you went to?

- “France (close to Tarbes); I wanted a small farm where the harvest wasn't the owner's primary source of income—I had no prior experience farming and didn't want to jeopardize the farm owner's livelihood.”
- “I WWOOFed for two summers: one in Western Europe, the other in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. I worked on a total of four farms. Hands down, the best thing to do was ask others for recommendations or read reviews about what the farm was like--although it sounds cool to work on a vineyard or olive oil farm in Italy, if the people are shitty, you don't want to be there. Best experiences didn't matter what I was doing but who I was with.”
- “Northern California, USA. I wanted to be somewhere warm but in the US so I was not too far away from home. My main criteria was that there were a lot of other WWOOFers on the farm as I was afraid I would get lonely. I therefore chose a farm that hosts about 10 WWOOFers at a time. The farm I chose also had a lot of reviews and has hosted more than 200 WWOOFers so I was sure it was a safe and legitimate farm for my first time WWOOFing.”
- “Portugal. I had been there the previous summer and fell in love with the country. I wanted to go back and had been wanting to WWOOF for years. Worked out that I found an excellent farm and had an even better time.”

What's the one item you would suggest bringing with you that might not be obvious?

- “A headlamp; even if there's electricity wherever you're sleeping, it'll probably be helpful.”
- “Don't bring too much stuff--that was a big problem for some people. make sure you have clothes for hiking and versatile clothes that won't take up a lot of space, quick to air dry, and are good for outdoors stuff. don't bring stuff for gardening, a tent, or sheets--they should supply you these things.”
- “Gloves!!”
- “Ear plugs. In case you get loud, snoring roommates.”

What tips do you have for WWOOFers once they arrive at a farm?

- “Set clear expectations on your work/off schedule”
- “Feel it out, and if you're getting weird vibes and don't feel safe -- leave. Have a back up plan. Alternatively, be confident -- WWOOFers are an incredible unique group and you can have amazing, deep connections after only a few weeks of knowing them -- met

some of my best friends this way. Don't take valuables with you. It's great to disconnect for a while."

- "Be open minded but also advocate for yourself. You are living with someone else so be open to their way of life but remember you have the right to express your needs."
- "Be friendly, happy, and willing to do anything."

What was the best part? What was the worst part?

- "The best part was getting to farm in the French countryside with a family and practice my French; the worst part was personally driven -- I was 18 at the time and I don't think I was mature enough to enjoy the experience as I would now."
- "Best part: meeting new people, especially locals who would drive me around to cool, hidden spots around the countryside. I loved being disconnected from technology -- people were super real. The two summers I went WWOOFing were the most transformative of my life -- enjoy every moment and take every risk. Worst part: One place didn't feed us, we just ate whatever we grew -- so sometimes I ate nothing but cabbage and plums for a week straight, meh :("
- "I learned so much and made amazing friends. This is an experience I will treasure forever. All the negative parts of my experience were minor and specific to my farm. Therefore, I don't think they are really relevant to an overall review of the WWOOF program."
- "Best part: The people, the food"

FAQ

Do I need a visa?

This is one of the most common questions asked in WWOOF forums. The short answer is it varies by country. Since WWOOFing is a non-monetary exchange, some countries count it as volunteer work. But, some countries classify it as employment and regulate it as such. A common piece of advice is to not mention WWOOFing by name and instead say you'll be exploring/vacationing/experiencing local culture.

What is the minimum amount of time I can WWOOF?

There is no hard and fast minimum. If a farm agrees to it, you can do it. However, my recommendation is two weeks minimum.

Can I make money while WWOOFing?

In general it's tough to pull this off. The farm you work at will not pay you, so you'll have to earn money on nights and weekends. If you're a freelance computer person this may be possible, but I don't recommend it, since you'll miss out on the culture exchange part of the experience.

Do I need health insurance?

Depending on where you WWOOF it might make sense to buy overseas medical insurance. Americans can read more at the [website for the department of state here](#).

Is WWOOFing a good way to backpack?

I think it is! It's very cheap (just have to pay to get to the farm), you get to meet real people instead of tourists, and you'll get a nice break from the run-run-run of being a full time sightseer. When I traveled in Europe for 10 weeks in 2013, I did approximately 2 weeks sightseeing, 2 weeks WWOOFing, 2 weeks sightseeing, 2 weeks WWOOFing, 2 weeks sightseeing, and thought it was a good mix. If anything, next time I would do more WWOOFing!

Resources and Alternatives

Resources

Federation of WWOOF Organizations (FOWO): This is an umbrella organization for all of the individual WWOOF organizations at the country level. They have a lot of good resources for planning, plus a sweet map where you can see all of the countries that have participating farms. <http://wwooof.net/>

WWOOFing Subreddit: A great resource for asking questions and getting answers from people who have WWOOFed in the past. Many of the case studies came from people active here. <https://www.reddit.com/r/WWOOF/>

So what is WWOOFing exactly? With a taste of New Zealand!: A short guide with pictures that I liked. <https://imgur.com/gallery/cNq1k>

Alternatives

Workaway: Similar to WWOOF but looser about the requirements. You don't have to be a farm to be a host. <https://www.workaway.info/>

HelpX: Similar to WWOOF, not sure much more than that <https://www.helpx.net/>

CoolWorks: Jobs in cool places <https://www.coolworks.com/>

More Case Studies

You can find people writing about their experiences WWOOFing all over the internet. Here are a few that stood out to me because of their level and detail and their suggestions:

[One](#)

[Two](#)

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my girlfriend Mintaka for her excellent editing.

If you have suggestions for things to add, or would like your case study included in future editions, [please fill out the survey here.](#)