



SHONDALAND STAFF

Volunteering on a Farm Changed the Way I Travel

During a trip to Italy, a writer discovers how donating her time and energy leads to rewarding new connections.

At the end of my first day harvesting olives in southern Italy, I cried. What was I possibly thinking, flying 6,400 miles from San Francisco to Bari, Italy, in late fall to engage in two full weeks of manual labor? I'd just spent eight hours laying down large green nets beneath rows of trees and raking olives off their branches from the moment the sun cracked its way above the horizon to the time it disappeared below the plateau. My legs and arms were aching, my clothes were covered in mud, and all I wanted to do was sleep.

A year later, I'd be ready to do it all over again. The first time I'd visited Puglia, the summer before my first olive harvest, was magical. I was attending a workshop run by Messors, an organization that offers immersive educational opportunities in everything from art conservation and restoration to the food and culture of the local region as part of a small group of visiting journalists.

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We spent our afternoons practicing the art of painting frescoes, touring nearby towns brimming with ancient cave dwellings, and learning how to make local cheese, including salty, pear-shaped pecorino. In the evenings, we'd gather around an extended outdoor dining table set beneath strings of fairy lights, sharing plates of fried zucchini blossoms and fresh-from-the-oven focaccia bread, or sip copious amounts of red wine in the great room of the *masseria*, the massive 18th century farmhouse where we were staying,

listening to Tonio Creanza, Messors' founder and director, sing songs about *parmigiana* while strumming his guitar.

It was pure paradise, so when Tonio invited me back to help harvest his family's 700 olive trees later that year, I thought, why not? As I soon learned, harvesting olives would be a whole different experience from my summer sojourn. In addition to me, Tonio had gathered together four other harvesters to round out the crew: a 40-something woman from Belgium, a Hungarian man in his 30s, and a young couple: Matthew, who hailed from Canada, had harvested with the family the year before. This time, he brought along his Lithuanian girlfriend, Renata, to join him.

The bulk of our group came through Workaway, an international platform that pairs hosts in need of assistance with travelers willing to help in exchange for room and board. For the past several years, Tonio listed the opportunity to join the harvest on the site. Instead of a sprawling farmhouse with plenty of room to disappear in, we'd all be living with Tonio's family in Altamura, a small walled city that's not on any traditional tourist route.

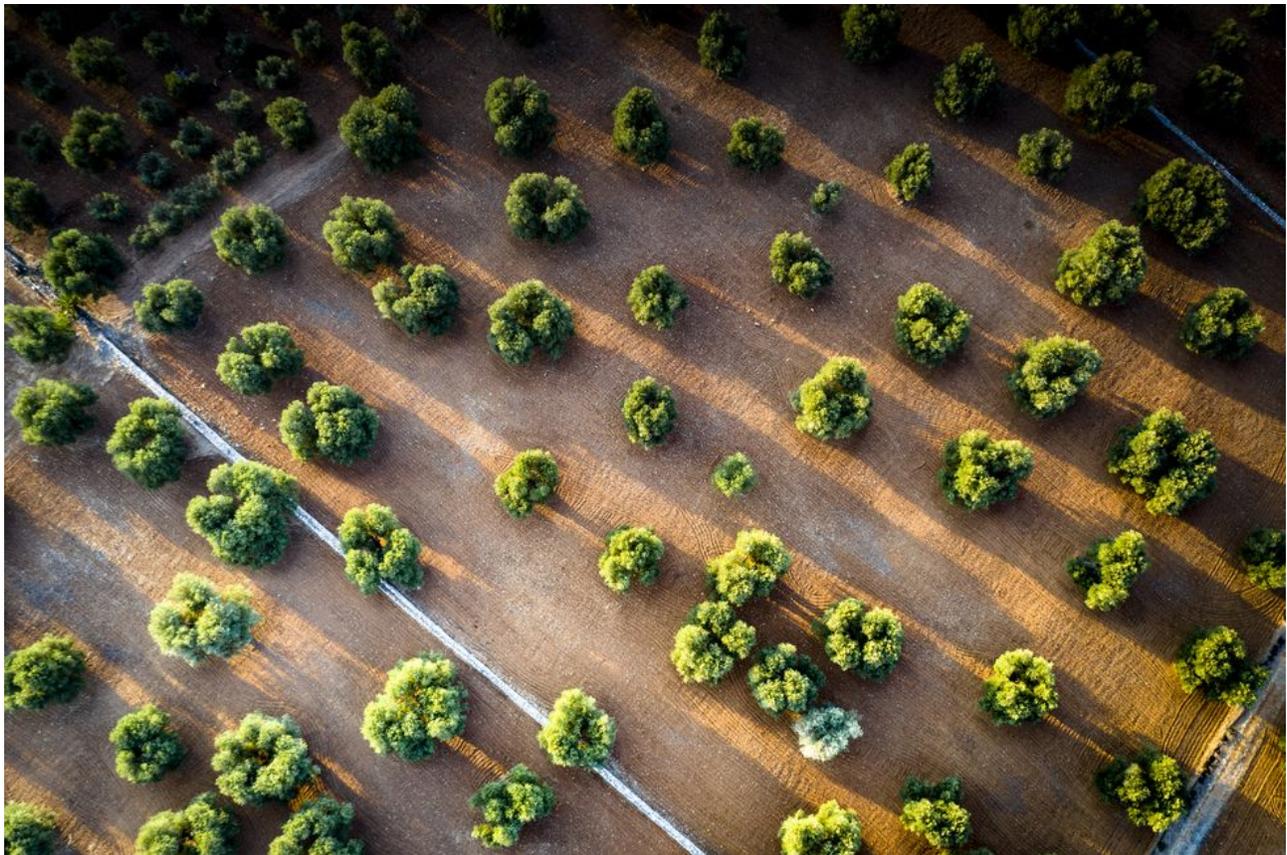
“Now in my 40s, all I wanted was privacy. Hadn't I left the days of bunk beds and shared bathrooms behind me?”

Tonio stayed with his parents on the three-story building's first floor, while his brother Peppe's family occupied the second floor, and the volunteers took the third. For the next three weeks, our little group of misfit travelers would basically be together 24-7. It was like a combination of those first days of college and that feeling of showing up at a distant relative's door.

Admittedly, the potential for awkward social dynamics made me queasy. It's not that I'd never shared space with strangers. About a decade ago, I spent six months backpacking mostly solo throughout New Zealand, Australia, and

Thailand, bedding down in youth hostels and meeting other globetrotters to hike, barhop, and bungee jump with during the trip. We'd trade tips on the best caving outfitters in Waitomo and where to dine cheaply in Melbourne, then move on from one another. But now in my early 40s, all I wanted was privacy. Hadn't I left those days of bunk beds and shared bathrooms behind me?

There was also the work itself. Each day, we'd drag ourselves out of bed at 7 a.m. and gather around Tonio's parents' table, where *nonna* would have jams, bread, and coffee out on the kitchen table and pack our lunch with any food left over from the night before. We'd then head down to the garage and pile on layers for warmth, lace up our field boots, and pile into the van, driving off to one of the family's seven orchards.



By immersing myself on the farm, I witnessed a different side of Italy.

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While one field might be expansive and flat, another would be sloped, rocky, and dominated by limestone bedrock that was extremely hard to navigate.

Using a mix of pneumatic racks and hand rakes, we'd knock the olives off their trees, collecting them into nets and removing as many leaves and twigs as possible before transferring each bounty into crates and starting the process again. Our work was intense and exhausting. After a few days, I realized it was also starting to be fun.

Not only was I bonding with my fellow harvesters, but I was also partaking in an ancient tradition that had been passed down generations in Tonio's family alone. On the weekends, his brother's family and sometimes Tonio's father would join us. It felt more like a celebration than work.

Each day at lunch, we'd turn over some empty olive crates, covering a few with tablecloths and using others for chairs, then lay out the spread that *nonna* had packed for us: ear-shaped *orecchiette* pasta and sautéed broccoli rabe, containers of cheese and meatballs, and my favorite, *cialledda*, a traditional shepherd's salad brimming with onions, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, and water-soaked chunks of crusty Altamura bread. Sitting there in the middle of the olive field, I was content.



Eventually, the olive harvest felt more like a celebration than work .

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Still, I looked forward to rainy days when Tonio would take us on impromptu adventures to sip cocoa-topped *espressinos* or visit thousands of dinosaur footprints preserved in a nearby quarry. Sometimes we'd attend local talks in town or visit friends of Tonio with some *panettone* in tow. We even helped decorate his family's Christmas tree. The thing was, I really did feel like the people I'd spent those last weeks with *were* family. It wasn't something that I'd intentionally sought out, but I was so glad I found it.

When an opportunity to join the harvest the following year arose, I jumped at the chance. It had been a rough year. I'd recently broken up with my boyfriend, and work had been sporadic. Once I was back in the olive groves, I felt at ease. Rather than poring over my daily stresses, I found myself focusing on laying the nets, gathering the olives, and thinking about what

nonna might be preparing for our next meals, as well as getting to know a whole new group of harvesters from Canada, Holland, and Serbia.

“I gained a new appreciation for the Italian countryside and its people. I wasn’t just seeing this storied land. I was living it.”

By immersing myself in the tasks at hand, I gained a new appreciation for the Italian countryside and the people who worked it. I wasn’t just seeing this storied land; I was living it and forming connections that went deeper than sitting down together for a few cocktails or coming together for a walking tour with fellow tourists.

Prior to the harvest, I’d always wave off invitations to stay with friends I’d met on the road, largely because I felt uncomfortable. Would I be imposing on their space? What if I wanted to go to bed early, and they wanted to stay up late? But my time in Italy taught me just how much separating myself in such circumstances prevented me from authentically experiencing a place and its people. Now, if they were offering, I was in.



My experience on the olive farm reshaped how I travel.

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For instance, when a woman I met while volunteering at an art restoration workshop invited me to spend a few nights at her Berlin flat, I accepted. Over the next few summers, I became a regular in her Kreuzberg neighborhood, bicycling the streets, people-watching along the canals, and getting to know the district just like a local.

At one point, my friend introduced me to her parents in Erfurt, a medieval town of cobbled streets and tiny squares that had been a part of East Germany. One afternoon, her mother laid the table with a spread of jams, cheeses, and hard-boiled eggs. While we ate, her father described in broken English what life was like under Stasi rule. It was a moment I never would have had without allowing myself to say yes to others.

In the years since the harvest, I've also tried finding ways to delve deeper into the cultures and communities I visit. In Iceland, I readily partook in the island nation's annual *réttir*, a centuries-old sheep-sorting tradition that

involves straddling sheep that have been herded together into a large pen and leading them to the appropriate farmers. It's a multigenerational event that grew out of necessity (Iceland's sheep are free-roaming during the warmer months) and showcases the importance of livestock countrywide.

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One of my favorite experiences was a trip to Stockholm, Sweden, where I used a communal dining app to book a dinner in the city's residential Hammarby Sjöstad district. It took place in the apartment of the couple hosting it, and I was the only non-Swede there. Our small group of eight eventually moved up onto the building's rooftop, taking in the lights of Stockholm and talking well into the night about everything from dating in Sweden versus the United States to why Nordic summer homes are a way of life.

A day later, I joined one of the attendees for a paddling trip around the city's isles in a vessel from the Stockholm Canoe Club, where he was a member. As we rowed along the water, he pointed out some of the best spots to park your vessel for a beachside picnic and where to stop for *fika*, a type of lingering coffee break. Afterward, I couldn't help thinking how thankful I was to have agreed to this local escapade. As my time harvesting olives has taught me, it's these unexpected adventures that reap some of the truly best rewards.

Laura Kiniry is a San Francisco-based writer who has contributed to the BBC, Condé Nast Traveler, Smithsonian Magazine, Atlas Obscura, Serious Eats, Via, and Westways.

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