

Greeter Programs: A Worldwide Travel Feature

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Have you ever wanted to explore a city with someone who lives there, loves the place, and can tell you all about the little things that only a local person would know? That's the idea behind the [Big Apple Greeter](#) program in New York, an organization that has now been implemented in seven other cities, including [Toronto](#), [Houston](#), [Chicago](#), and [Fairbanks, Alaska](#). There are similar operations running in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Adelaide and Melbourne in Australia. The next addition will see the first European program coming to Thanet, an area of Kent in the southeast of England.

The idea for Big Apple Greeter came from Lynn Brooks, who started it back in 1992. She wanted to dispel the myth that New York City was a dangerous and unfriendly place to visit by pairing up visitors with volunteers, who could show them around the area and explain about how the city works -- even down to demonstrating how to ride the subway. Today, there are 300 volunteer greeters who, collectively, speak about 25 languages and have welcomed thousands of visitors from 112 countries.

As Lynn explains, the whole thing started from a simple idea. "Every single town or city that I've visited has had the same reaction from the people that live there -- they love where they live, and they love to share where they live with visitors to the area. Of course they can share information about the place, but more importantly than that, they can share their personal experiences that a visitor would never have known about otherwise and they can share their friendship. For the visitor, it's like spending time with a friend or a family member, as people talk about the things that make you feel at home.

One thing Lynn is careful to clarify is that greeters aren't tour guides. "They're friendly and enthusiastic volunteers and they're not expected to be experts about their home town or city. They don't have a script to stick to, but instead talk about places from a personal point of view and what the neighborhood or individual buildings mean to them.

So how does the Greeter program work? The first port of call for visitors who want to learn more about a greeter in a city they're planning to visit is to check out the relevant web site. There you'll find a visitor request form to fill in. Some programs need the form submitted a month or more before your visit so that you can be matched up with a greeter, so don't

leave this until the last minute. Some programs ask you to specify which neighborhood you'd like to visit, but if you're not sure, fill in the words "Greeters Choice" and the greeter will select the neighborhood they most enjoy.

Every greeter program differs slightly, as they're adapted to each location, but you can expect your visit to last for between two and four hours during the daytime. Greeters don't meet visitors in the evening or at night. They take out groups of up to six people and included in that group must be at least one adult over the age of eighteen. Because the program is voluntary, it's important to remember that it's not always possible to match visitors up with greeters, as it depends on how many volunteers are available on any one day and how many requests they get for visits.

If they are able to match you with a greeter, then you'll be given your greeter's name and contact information. Your greeter will then meet you in a public place and you'll spend the next couple of hours getting to know the area through their eyes.

Is there any cost? No. Some greeter programs are charities and welcome donations (although none is required), and others are public services, organized by local government or tourism organizations. In case you're wondering, the organizations work on the theory that everyone pays for themselves. So if you end up on public transportation or grabbing a coffee, you pay for your own and so does your greeter. Tips are not accepted either, although many people go on to become firm friends, with promises that if the greeter ever comes to their home town, the visitor will take them on a tour and share what they love about their area.

So what sort of people become greeters? In Lynn's experience, it's something that interests a wide range of people. "You might think that greeters would only be retired people with time to spare on something like this, but that's not been our experience at all. Greeters can be retired, but many also work and give time at the weekends. They all share one thing in common. They all want to make a difference and want to share their love of their home town or city and show visitors why it's such a special place."

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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