



Wander woman: On Mozambique's Tofo Beach, Erin Michelson holds a spear to tag sharks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE STEPHENS, MARINE MEGA FAUNA

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The New Philanthropist

One on One

BY KEITH BELLOWS



From the January/February 2012 issue of [National Geographic Traveler](#)

Erin Michelson is going places. The business consultant (recently based in San Francisco) and self-described “adventure philanthropist” set out on December 31, 2010, on a two-year journey to more than 70 countries on all seven continents. Along the way, she is donating time and money to humanitarian causes—including, so far, impoverished communities in Uganda, HIV/hAIDS organizations



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in Ethiopia, and housing initiatives in the Philippines—and connecting with local communities in ways that casual tourists can't. Michelson, who chronicles her adventures at *GoErinGo.com*, says the journey is enriching her life, leading to a “more engaged existence and new depths of happiness.” *Traveler* interviewed Michelson by phone during her stay in Beirut, Lebanon.

What is adventure philanthropy? It's a lifestyle, making giving part of your life and your travels. For me, it began during a hiking tour in the Usambara Mountains of Tanzania. Heading to a remote school, our group was advised to bring paper and pencils as a gift. Instead, we brought soccer balls, musical instruments, and art supplies, thinking these would be more fun for the kids. When we reached the school, we discovered 700 students crowded five to a desk with no books or pencils. The principal literally had ten sheets of paper in his desk. He was completely gracious about our gifts, but we realized we had made a mistake. To set things right, we bought lumber with which the students' parents built new desks and chairs for the school. That sparked the idea that, when traveling, you can better understand people by getting involved in their community and its needs.

And “Erin Goes Global” followed? Yes. It's a two-year sabbatical from my business during which I'm traveling the world, volunteering with various organizations, having amazing experiences, and hopefully, doing some good along the way. As a professional fund-raiser, I'm connecting philanthropic groups I encounter to funders in the U.S., in part through my website. There, people can get involved and learn that philanthropy can be fun. There's a tool on the website called Donate My Dollars, where visitors can vote on where I give money. Most of the local organizations I get involved with focus on women, children, and poverty.

What kind of reaction are you getting? It's been very positive. I connected to a great organization in the Philippines that was suggested by someone online. I stayed for three days on the island of Culion, site of a former leper colony. I talked with locals and learned about the state of Hansen's disease in the world today. More people are sending ideas about where I should go. This has been a help, because I'm not a big travel planner. I just kind of show up.

Did you single out specific projects before you left? Definitely. One is called Drop in the Bucket, a group that builds village wells in Africa. I'll be working with them in Uganda, Tanzania, or South Sudan, depending on how the vote goes. I'll spend a month there, embedded with the community, filming the building of the well and interviewing the villagers about the project. The organization does great work bringing water to villages.

Have you found any local heroes? Yes. I just spent the afternoon with Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly from an organization here in Beirut called Baladi History and Nature. It is working to preserve the cultural history of Lebanon. Atuki Turner founded an organization in Uganda in the small village of Tororo, working on issues of children's rights and women's rights. And in Israel, I'll be working with Yudit Sidikman, whose organization provides self-defense training for young girls in conflict areas.

You travel mostly alone, right? Yes. Traveling solo, you get much more involved in the community and are more open to talking to people and having more experiences.

Any surprises along the way? I think Southeast Asia has increasingly become a safe place to travel. I was surprised at how open, friendly, and helpful the people were. I've also been surprised and encouraged by the availability of local guides and homestays, which provide a more textured experience than hotels do.

Any disappointments? I've endured times of discomfort, and yet those can provide the best experiences. During a three-day kayaking trip in New Zealand's Fiordland National Park, it stormed the whole time. We could never reach our landing beaches and had to camp in miserable places, but that's where we saw the most incredible wildlife. It's as if you have to pay your dues. I was just at a jungle wildlife sanctuary in Laos, where there were leeches and bugs, but spending time with elephants, including washing them and walking with them, was fantastic.

Have you ever felt threatened while you were traveling? I've been mugged a couple of times in other places. I was kidnapped a long time ago in

Vietnam, but I got away. Luckily, I've never been seriously hurt. Before leaving the States for this trip, I took a three-day self-defense class. The physical training was one of the most empowering experiences of my life. I was so enthusiastic about the program that I decided to give scholarships so two other women could participate.

What next? I'm writing a book called *The Adventure Philanthropist*. It will highlight not just my stories but also those of others who are living passionately and changing the world in their own ways.

[Keith Bellows](#) is the editor of *Traveler*. ▣