

Traveling Solo? Pair Up With an International Greeter

International Greeters offer a chance to ‘come as a guest, leave as a friend’ while exploring a new city

By [Wendy Helfenbaum](#) | January 23, 2025 | [Travel and Adventures](#)

Isn't it great when you travel to a far-flung destination and meet up with a friend who lives there — someone who shows you their town through the eyes of a local? But what if there is no friend to greet you?

On a recent solo visit to Sydney, Australia, I wanted to explore the city, but dreaded joining a group walking tour for the same-old, same-old. Instead, I spent a memorable half-day with Frances Gallagher, 69, a retired teacher I met through the [International Greeter Association](#).



Sharyne Tu with guests from Germany | Credit: Sharyne Tu

Modeled after [Big Apple Greeter](#), which was launched by New Yorker Lynn Brooks in 1992 to create unique experiences by connecting visitors with enthusiastic local volunteer guides, the nonprofit organization now has ambassadors in 171 destinations across 47 countries, all offering to show you the hidden gems in their city — for free. More than 3,200 Greeters worldwide — many of whom speak multiple languages — can lead individuals or groups up to six.

"People either say: 'Show me around the major highlights of the city' or 'Take me somewhere I wouldn't find on my own.'"

City walks — called Greets — are a fantastic way to explore a new destination on foot or using public transportation. Visitors can leave the planning up to their Greeter or help customize a tour. After filling out a short online form specifying what I wanted to do and see — architecture, gardens, markets, street art — I was matched with Gallagher, who treated me to a fascinating walking tour while expertly dodging many of the 40,000 runners during the Sydney Marathon.

We explored the Royal Botanic Garden and Circular Quay, shopped outdoor markets at The Rocks, an historic neighborhood tucked beneath the Harbour Bridge, lunched at a boisterous pub and got up-close-and-personal with 48 penguins at the SEA LIFE Sydney Aquarium.

"Greets I've enjoyed most have been with travelers who share stories about their home, children and work life. In return, I share my stories and they learn something about what it's like to live here," says Gallagher, who joined Sydney Greeter in 2017 and schedules one Greet a month.

"When I travel, I'm always interested in how people live in Barcelona or Lisbon or New York. I find visitors like to get guidance from a local about what's available, how to navigate [public transport](#), and our no-tipping habits. People either say: 'Show me around the major highlights of the city' or 'Take me somewhere I wouldn't find on my own.'"

Recommended

Vacation Like a Local

House swapping in retirement can let you vacation in beautiful locales you might not otherwise be able to afford

A Smart Idea Goes Global

In her 20 years with Big Apple Greeter as director of programs and volunteers, Gail Morse, 71, has watched the once-small organization become a global movement. She says Greeters provide a friendly face for visitors while supporting sustainable tourism and opportunities for cultural

exchange.

"It's such a simple, beautiful concept: People meeting people, sharing their love for their hometown," says Morse.



Frances Gallagher with Wendy at SEA LIFE Sydney Aquarium | Credit: Wendy Helfenbaum

"We started before the internet, when people read newspapers. Today, getting your insight into a city from a human being has become a novel concept. Often when we travel, our experience is talking to wait staff in a restaurant or maybe somebody standing in a line somewhere. You don't really get to talk to local people, and that's what we do."

Most of Morse's 190 Greeters are over 50; many are early retirees. Some do Greets once or twice a month; others meet visitors several days a week.

"There's no becoming isolated when you're a Greeter, and it can become addictive."

"This is a very healthy activity. You're out walking, thinking on your feet, in conversation. There's no becoming isolated when you're a Greeter, and it can become addictive," she says.

According to Morse, "Our oldest active Greeter, Arnold Strauch, is 99 and has been a Greeter for 32 years. We're pleasantly surprised to be getting younger Greeters in their 20s and 30s now, too."

While Greeter organizations prohibit tipping, they accept charitable donations. Volunteers are vetted through one-on-one interviews, notes Morse, with most referred by friends who are already Greeters.

"We had mother and daughter visitors from Oregon. The mother was born in New York City, but her family moved to the West Coast when she was a baby and she'd never been back. She wanted to see where she was born, where her parents met and married, and where they grew up," recalls Morse.

Most Popular

1. Documentary Faces the Reality of Lewy Body Dementia | **Health**
 2. 6 Must-Have Nutrients For Brain Health | **Food and Nutrition**
 3. 3 Foods That Help Regulate Blood Sugar | **Health**
 4. How To Support Your Prostate Health | **Health**
-

"We paired her with a Greeter who not only knew the neighborhoods but is also a [genealogist](#). It was more than they were expecting and was a great experience."

Wonderful Adventures in the 'Windy City'

Paola Rampoldi, 57, a chemist in Buenos Aires, Argentina, visited Chicago last October with her husband Martin. She discovered the local Greeter chapter while planning her trip online.

"I found it very interesting because what I'd experienced in previous city tours was a person with an umbrella and a large group of people," says Rampoldi.

"People are so appreciative that somebody is doing the tour in their language; that's very gratifying, and it also keeps my language skills up."

"Our Greeter, Dana Herpe, emailed me about our preferences, availability and if there was anything special we would like to visit. I thought, wow, this'll be a personalized visit hosted by someone that really loves their city."

The Ramboldis spent almost four hours with their Greeter, learning about historic buildings, The Bean sculpture, and local architecture.

"It was an amazing, memorable experience. I found it by chance and now I tell everybody about this organization," says Ramboldi.

[Chicago Greeter](#) Howard Raik, 81, got involved in the chapter's first pilot project in 2001, and does 18 Greets each year. A former trainer of [Peace Corps](#) volunteers, Raik grew up in New York and lived in the Philippines, Micronesia and Brazil before moving to Chicago in 1975. Because he speaks Portuguese and Spanish, he often hosts visitors from Argentina, Spain and Brazil.

"People are so appreciative that somebody is doing the tour in their language; that's very gratifying, and it also keeps my language skills up," says Raik, who has gone on Greets as a visitor in Vienna and Buenos Aires.

"Most people are coming to Chicago for the first time, and I try to get them the day after they arrive, so everything is brand-new."

Raik takes people around the Loop and to places they're not likely to find on their own.

"One is a fine arts building built in the 1890s that has an elevator operator. There are some office spaces on the higher floors that are pretty much as they were at the turn of the last century," he explains.

Raik also showcases the Chicago Cultural Center, originally built as the first branch of the Chicago Public Library.

"This remarkable building is a treasure with two gorgeous spaces, one of which has the largest art glass dome done by the studio of Louis Comfort Tiffany," he says.



A Texas couple visited friends in Germany and had a tour with Schübbe in Hamburg's city center | Credit: Fred Schübbe

Native Chicago resident Sharyne Moy Tu, 71, has led more than 100 Greets since 2018. Tu usually does two Greets a month, but during the summer, she'll do up to five tours a week.

"Being a Greeter keeps you young; I recently did a tour with people from London and Paris and I walked seven miles that day. I feel like I'm in my 40s," says Tu, a former executive director of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce.

Some of Tu's must-see stops include Millennium Park, Chicago Riverwalk and taking the water taxi to Chinatown for dim sum at her favorite restaurants, Phoenix and Imperial.

"I did one seven-hour Greet with parents that were about 80, their children and teenage grandchildren who loved learning about our culture," says Tu. "And I had a gentleman from Jakarta, Indonesia who was very excited to do the Chicago Marathon. We met up the next day, and he wanted to see everything Chicago's known for, and then eat Chicago hot dogs."

A Growing Phenomenon

[Hamburg Greeter](#) and IGA secretary Fred Schübbe, 60, is proud of the organization's continuing development.

"We added 24 new cities in 2024 and our network is growing," says Schübbe, who joined in 2019 and meets visitors once a month in the largest of Germany's 22 Greeter locations.

"I enjoy preparing walks; each one is unique. I love when people are open to be taken to places off the beaten track so we can explore lesser-known neighborhoods."

One of Schübbe's most memorable Greets took place with visually impaired guests who wanted to experience the city by touching objects.

"I have now many friends all over the world, and thanks to Instagram and WhatsApp, we stay in touch after the Greet."

"That really gave me a new perspective on my own city. They enjoyed having someone who could tailor the tour exactly to their needs, and I learned so much during the hours we spent together," he recalls.

Another perk for Greeters and visitors? The all-too-true IGA motto: 'Come as a guest, leave as a friend.'

"I have now many friends all over the world, and thanks to Instagram and WhatsApp, we stay in touch after the Greet," says Tu.

"When I went to Paris recently, I reached out to a mother and son I'd met in Chicago a few years ago. I'd introduced them to our famous Garrett's Popcorn, so I brought them a can and we had a wonderful time."

Schübbe has also stayed in contact with guests he hosted years ago and has visited their homes in various cities. And Raik invited a visiting Jewish couple to his home during Rosh Hashana.

The most successful Greets are ones where visitors have done at least a little

advance research so guides can narrow down options, suggests Gallagher. And be honest about your physical abilities, she adds.

"I often have to rethink the day within the first 10 minutes when a visitor who said they're comfortable walking can't handle stairs or hills," she says.

Each Greeter chapter is run independently, and most post photos of their Greets on their social feeds. I had so much fun with Gallagher in Sydney that I can't wait to try a Greet in every city I visit. And I'm thinking about becoming a Greeter in my hometown, Montreal.



Wendy Helfenbaum is a Montreal-based journalist and TV producer who writes about careers, travel, wellness, home and garden, and parenting. Her work has appeared in Woman's Day, Costco Connection, Canadian Living, Parenting.com and many more. [Read More](#)

Editors Recommendations

Hit the Road with a Travel Companion for Hire



A Female Solo Traveler's Greatest Hack: Meeting Other Women



Global Greeters Offer More Than a Pleasant Walk for Travelers



Help keep our trustworthy journalism free for everyone!

For more than a decade Next Avenue has been providing readers access to trustworthy, quality journalism that matters most as we age. While our journalism has always been free to consume, it is not free to produce. Make a gift today to help us get even better, and keep our nonprofit service free and accessible to everyone.

DONATE TODAY

[Learn About Next Avenue](#)



Meeting the needs and unleashing the potential
of older Americans through media

[About Us](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Sponsorship](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Advocates for Aging](#)

[Contact Us](#)

A nonprofit journalism website produced by:



©2025 Next Avenue