

Merry Chimpmas to All!

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A few years ago, I got fed up with the holidays. I was tired of the commercialism and forced good cheer. Black Friday tales were depressing and someone always seems to die in search of the cheapest trending gift. So, I had it. I decided to cancel Christmas that year.

I briefly contemplated cancelling Christmas like the Grinch – driving around and stealing ornaments, decorated trees, presents, and roast beast – but determined that would inevitably take more energy than I wanted to expend. I didn't even have the energy to be a Grinch!

My next thought was a solo vacation. I began researching singles cruises, tours, and all-inclusive resorts. I researched Club Med and Hedonism and all sorts of resorts with singles options. My only thought was "EW!" They all seemed so icky and uncivilized. Sybaritic debauchery seemed to ensue in every picture and activity description. I'm no prude, but that was not for me.

As I stared at my computer screen, hoping for some option to present itself, I started thinking about some of the pages I follow on Facebook. An idea began to form at the back of my mind and a smile spread across my face – a nice smile, not a Grinch smile at all!

A friend had started following [Save the Chimps](#) earlier that year and I had grown enchanted with the chimpanzees. I was soon following their exploits closely via Facebook and researching the organization. I discovered that they are the largest chimpanzee sanctuary in the world, housing more than 260 chimpanzees. I read a few of the chimpanzees' histories and

learned that while some were former pets or rescued from the entertainment industry, the majority had been the victims of experimental bio-medical research testing. In fact, the first 21 chimpanzee residents of Save the Chimps were retired by the Air Force after participating in tests by NASA to determine the effects of space travel. If you are looking for a tearjerker, watch the documentary, "[One Small Step: The Story of the Space Chimps](#)." It is truly heartbreaking watching the chimps be strapped in to a rocket and blasted into space.

I decided that I wanted to spend my Christmas volunteering at an animal sanctuary, preferably Save the Chimps. I contacted the sanctuary and received a quick response that they would love to have me volunteer over the holiday. I just needed to fill out some paperwork and prove I did not have TB. I made my travel arrangements and became increasingly excited to go volunteer. I further explored the [Save the Chimps website](#) and [Facebook](#) pages, packed my bags, and flew down to Florida a few days before Christmas.

I can honestly attest that I had the best Christmas of my life, despite working physically harder than I had in years. My "job" was to help in the kitchen with food preparation for the chimps. They get three meals a day and each meal usually consists of three different items of fruits and vegetables. The staff and regular volunteers at Save the Chimps are extraordinary. They exhibit a level of care and love for the chimps that I had not expected, but soon shared. Not only were the chimps well-cared for every day at the sanctuary, with three meals, veterinary care, and plenty of enrichment, they got to celebrate Chimpmas!

The 250+ chimps at Save the Chimps are divided into family groups on 12 islands. Each island gets a Chimpmas party consisting of Chimpmas trees, decorations, and plenty of presents. Many of the presents are donated and all are wrapped with love and care. You have never seen anything so incredible as when each Chimpmas party starts and the door to their house is opened. Chimps come running out, grabbing presents, decorations, and sometimes even the tree! Some of the chimps tear into the presents, searching for treats, toys, or enrichment. Others seem content to carry the box around for a bit, grateful for the kind bounty.

In addition to the Chimpmas parties, generally spread out over a few days as it takes a lot of work to set each party up, the chimps are given a special Chimpmas dinner. The chimps know something special is coming when they receive their food in a paper cup. I was fortunate to be able to watch the Chimpmas dinner feeding and I still tear up when I think about that experience. The fact that these chimpanzees who had endured so much, and share 98.6% of our DNA, could be so caring and appreciative of this slight gesture of humanity, was truly heartwarming. Their ability to forgive the atrocities suffered at human hands caused me to re-evaluate aspects of my life that I had been neglecting.

As much as I love the chimpanzees, however, I recognize the power and strength they possess. Part of the paperwork I had to sign when I started volunteering expressly forbade me from any type of contact with the chimps. At first I thought they were being silly. My only previous experience with chimps had been what I had seen at zoos or on television. Getting up close with a chimpanzee gave me a new perspective. They are beautiful and affectionate and silly and fun-loving. Their eyes express a world of emotions I hadn't thought possible. A

moment later, a chimpanzee charges across the island and flings himself at the gate, causing it to shudder violently, and I realize the raw power these chimpanzees possess. I read that they are up to seven times stronger than a human being. It seems like so much more. I am reminded that they are wild at heart and deserve to live as such. Unfortunately, they cannot be released into the wild. Most were born in captivity, ripped from their mothers, and never learned the skills they would need in the wild. At [Save the Chimps](#), they live as close to a natural life as can be provided for them.

I went back the next two years to volunteer for Chimpmas. Both were equally as rewarding to me. The chance to give something back to the world feels great. The opportunity to provide care, if only meal preparation, for these animals is the best gift I could ever give myself or receive.

Unfortunately, I was not able to volunteer this year. I am planning a trip to Costa Rica in February and cannot manage two big trips so close together. I do plan on volunteering at a Wild Animal Sanctuary in Costa Rica, and look forward to sharing that experience here. I notice this year that something inside me has forever changed. Christmas just didn't feel like Christmas here at home. Christmas is not about gifts or presents. Christmas to me will forever be Chimpmas and the feeling that participating in their celebrations evokes. As I looked at the [Chimpmas](#) photos posted on Facebook, I was sad that I had not been able to go, but happy to watch the chimps' celebration.

So, if you have found yourself dreading the holidays lately and wishing for something more fulfilling and satisfying, I completely recommend volunteering at an animal sanctuary. Most would welcome your help, especially over the holidays when a lot of their regular volunteers travel for their celebrations. Pick an animal that interests you and there will probably be a sanctuary to protect them. Make sure the sanctuary is accredited by the [Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries \(GFAS\)](#). Many so-called sanctuaries are no better than roadside zoos or animal attractions and do nothing to relieve the suffering the animals have endured.

Whatever you do, do something that will be heartwarming and uplifting. Plan a trip with your friends or suggest that gifts be donations to favorite charities. Do something to enjoy your holidays and stay away from the soul-crushing commercialism that starts at Labor Day and runs until nearly Valentine's Day.

I speak for paws because I have a voice!

Merry Chimpmas and Happy New Year to all!

[Tammy Wunsch](#)



