

Expo

What a difference a year makes

Gap-year travel broadens the mind and career, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash.**

We used to call it backpacking, though I personally sold it to my parents as "The University of Life" and begged for admission as I dropped out of the real one back home.

The Brits coined it "the gap year", referring to 12 months between school and university or university and the workforce when individuals take to the well-worn travel paths of those who have done the same.

No matter what you call it, extended periods of travel are a rite of passage for middle-class Australia. In my day, we followed the *Let's Go* guides and hit the European summer trail, bunking down at The Pink Palace in Cyprus, sleeping on top of Mount Sinai in Egypt, swigging lager at Oktoberfest in Germany and tanning up in Santorini.

Now the gap year is an industry unto itself with travel operators offering everything from "voluntouring" for three months in an Indian slum to wildlife conservation in Cambodia, teaching English in Japan and working in a pub in London. Prince Harry spent his gap year building roads in Africa and rounding up cattle in Australia.

There's a pretty penny to be made in this kind of travel. The Mintel Gap Year Report of July 2005 valued the gap year market at £5 billion (nearly \$12 billion) and dubbed it the fastest-growing travel sector of the millennium.



The independent travel market has officially gone mass market. They've done the research, made the contacts and set up the logistics for you, so all you have to do is show up.

The new gap year isn't just for fresh-faced students emerging from a tower of textbooks either. Any life event that requires a break will suffice with mid-career sabbaticals growing in popularity as a thinking platform to finish one career before creating a new one.

Some couples choose to gap it together with one last extended hurrah before starting a family, others take long service leave and take their kids with them.

However you do it, there's nothing like a year abroad to change your perspective on living. Careers have been made, life partners found, businesses born and spiritual bents discovered by those on a gap year. Here are some options.

Volunteer Abroad

Deidre Bounds, founder of one of the world's most successful "voluntouring" companies i-to-i, turned her own career sabbatical into a global business.

The British entrepreneur spent time teaching English in Japan, China and Greece and



backpacking in Australia before returning to a one-room apartment in Leeds and creating i-to-i life-changing travel (i-to-i.com) inspired by her own experiences.

Her company now employs 130 staff around the world and works with 5000 "voluntourists" on 170 meaningful travel trips from working with lions in South Africa to saving orang-utans in Malaysia, coaching soccer in Argentina and building homes in Vietnam.

It's clear that socially responsible travel is big right now, especially in the gap year market where travellers have more time to dedicate to a project.

Local company, Youth Challenge Australia (youthchallenge.org.au) offers multinational team-based experiences in developing countries for volunteers aged 18 to 30. The

organisation is involved with environmental conservation, social development, construction and health projects with programs from five to 11 weeks in Australia or abroad.

There's an interview process to be accepted but, once in, volunteers could be working on health projects in Guatemala educating and informing about AIDS, or constructing entire villages in Costa Rica. Participation fees start from \$2950 plus air fare. A strong work ethic is required and don't expect luxury accommodation either - you may find yourself sleeping top-to-toe in a hammock.

Improve your skills

Adventure training specialists The Base Camp

Group (basecampgroup.com) specialise in instructor holidays, where travellers can learn a skill and gain a qualification at the same time. They were the first company to run a ski and snowboard instructor course in Europe and now offer instructor courses and specific improvement camps to people who want the fun without the exams in skiing, snowboarding, scuba diving, waterskiing and more in Canada, France, Switzerland, Britain, Spain and Egypt.

Once you've achieved your qualification, they'll help place you with a job in your chosen field too. Trip options are divided into Career Break, Gap Year, Instructor Course, Performance Camp and Industry Fast Track sections and are offered in both short and long-term formats.

What's on offer? How about a four-week

Special Report



> GAP YEAR TIPS

■ **Be creative** It's possible to track, plan, diarise and find cyber fame with your gap year abroad. Many have even made money and funded their travel doing it. Where the Hell is Matt?

(wherethehellismatt.com) put Matt on the global travel map when he quit his job and went travelling. Dancing for a video camera in front of the world's most famous landmarks created a groundswell of intrigue on YouTube. His travels are now funded by sponsors. And he's still dancing.

■ **Read up** Lonely Planet's *The Big Trip*, published this month, is the ultimate guide to gap years and overseas adventures. There are 336 pages dedicated purely to extended travel adventures. It's sure to be a bible for anyone considering taking off. See lonelyplanet.com.

■ **Connect with others** Don't know where to start? The Gap Year Company started the phenomenon rolling on the internet in 1998 with their website gapyear.com. It has since won numerous awards and been voted in the top 100 travel websites by London's *The Times*. Tom Griffiths, author of *Before You Go: The Ultimate Guide to Planning Your Gap Year*, founded the Gap Year Company in 1997. The internet portal helps gap year travellers find travel mates, source education opportunities, learn languages and connect with the gap year community through message boards and forums.

■ **Plan your visa** It's possible to apply online for working holiday visas, tourist visas and skilled migration visas through the Visa First website (visafirst.com). With an A to Z of countries, simply click on the one you want to visit or work in and register.



CSIA Level 2 instructor course in Verbier, Switzerland with Base Camp Group and Powder Extreme professional instructor Felix Tanguay for £3795 (about \$9070), including accommodation; or an 11-week course in Banff, Canada for CSIA Instructor Level 1 and 2 for £6385 (about \$15,280), including accommodation, full season lift pass and 25 hours of coaching a week. These are just two of hundreds of options.

Working holidays

Not everyone has access to a trust fund or long service pay to trek the globe. Working holidays offer a solution for those wanting to work and travel. Australia has numerous reciprocal working holiday visas with various countries

including Hong Kong, Japan, Britain, Canada and Denmark. Most working visas require the traveller to be between 18 and 30 years of age.

Know how to pull a pint? Many British pubs offer lodging as part of the package when working in a pub. It certainly saves on costly English rent. The Original London Pub Company (londonpub.com.au) ensures you know where you will be working, for how much and how long before you leave home to start your travels.

The International Exchange Program (iep.org.au) is a one-stop working holiday shop with positions at US summer camps from May to August for eight to 10 weeks. Candidates get food and board plus \$US1950 salary for the camp. In return they work with the kids on the camp and help out on a roster system.

If summer camp doesn't appeal, then IEP has working holidays with ski resorts in Canada and Colorado's Rocky Mountains.

The other option is to take your career skills with you, not for advancement but for income while you decide where to go next.

Career Teachers (careerteachers.co.uk) has short and long-term placements within the education arena in Britain, as do Sanza Teaching Agency (sanzateaching.com).

If you're experienced in the financial, legal, accounting and IT worlds, then Absolute Global (absoluteglobal.net) places workers in contract jobs around the world.

Whether working, volunteering or actively gaining a new skill, extended travel is guaranteed to look good on your CV should you ever decide to bring your real world back home.

and register.
■ Learn to surf for free Couch surfing is the gap year equivalent of trip adviser. It's possible to surf from one free couch to the next thanks to a global network of folks offering their couches free of charge to travellers. There is a rating system, reviews from travellers on whose couch and company is worthy and reviews from couch owners on who to avoid letting in your front door. See www.couchsurfing.org



So many options ... (from far left) trekking in the Himalayas; marvelling at volcanoes; mustering in the outback, as Prince Harry did. Photos: Reuters, Getty Images