

Why take a gap year?

“Once you have scared off muggers in Rio you feel you can do anything”

Now is the best opportunity you will ever have to chase a dream, to do something outrageous, extraordinary or fulfilling, and to explore the world.

Louise Ellerton raves about her gap year, saying:

“It was amazing. I saw things and did things that I never normally would have done. I went trekking through the Sahara on a camel, and slept out under the stars, on the roofs of houses and in bus shelters. I tried all sorts of foods and experienced the wonderful hospitality of locals, who always had time for me.”

At this very moment there are around 200,000 pre-university and post-university students doing something different before getting back on the educational treadmill or thinking about a career. Gap years are not just the preserve of the Prince Harrys and Prince Williams; just because the closest thing you have to a healthy bank account is a pig-shaped china object with a slit at the top you need not give up hope.

A gap year is the perfect time to go out and meet people outside your local postcode. Leaping into a gap you will learn about different cultures, as Claire Loseby, who taught English in China explains:

“I got so much out of my gap year; the chance to learn about and live in a culture different to my own, the opportunity to make new friends and unbelievable life experiences. I’d never imagined myself eating slugs before, but now I believe anything is possible.”

Slugs aside (or on the side, perhaps with a salad garnish?),



it’d be such a shame to look back and wish that you hadn’t done something when you had the opportunity. Edith Piaf was able to sing ‘Non, je ne regrette rien’ with such feeling because she did a season as an Alpine chalet cleaner. Well perhaps not, but you get the idea. Lucy Misch agrees:

“I got so much out of my gap year it isn’t even possible to write it all down. Friends, experiences, memories, passions for things I never thought possible, excitement, independence, and the travel bug more than ever.”

People who take a gap year usually emerge more mature, self-confident and focussed, or at least with a bit more to talk about. This certainly is true of Amanda Akass, who had this to say about her gap year:

“I got out of it a huge sense of achievement and confidence in myself. Once you have trekked through the Andes in the freezing cold, scared off muggers in Rio, or been lost in a jungle at night, you feel you can do anything. I have seen some of the world and the incredible memories I have are definitely something to hold on to forever.

And this happened to Naomi Lisney too:

“What I hadn’t anticipated was how much of a boost to my self-confidence the year would be. I now know that I was actually capable of going out there on my own to make new friends; I also realised that I was free to be a whole person with these new friends, to reinvent myself, as it were. All of this and more really gave me the boost I needed to start uni in a happy confident state of mind, more likely to make friends and also less likely to spend time worrying about what other people thought of me.”

Sometimes your intended career or course, from Arabic to zoology, benefits from a stint of learning abroad. In Amanda Akass’ case, this was something the university suggested:

“I originally intended to travel after university, but I ended up having a gap year after school because the university said it would benefit me to broaden my experience before starting my English degree. I had been considering this option already; the idea of taking a year out to see the world rather than being

stuck in an endless cycle of study and exams was very appealing.

For Sarah Bruce, her post-university gap-year experience helped her get the job she wanted:

“I volunteered overseas for five months with Trekforce Expeditions. This really changed my perspective and my priorities and it opened a door for me to work in the charity sector, doing marketing. Having studied law at university, this was something that had never crossed my mind.”

Otherwise a gap year is an ideal time to learn a language properly – how do Spanish classes in Guatemala or Italian classes in Switzerland grab you? Or what about learning a new skill such as skiing, salsa dancing or sailing? Voluntary work is another way to gain valuable experience. You can learn a whole heap of stuff by living and working with new communities, cultures and people.


Then again you may want to get a job during your gap year – either to save for those cruel variable top-up fees, or, if you’ve just finished university, to pay off debts you accrued while studying.

Otherwise, you might want to get some work experience, like Jonathon Williams did. He explains:

“I travelled abroad for six months and then sought relevant work experience to prepare for my degree. I intended to study politics and got a job working as an MP’s assistant in the House of Commons.”

Or perhaps you’re just unsure what to do next. Away from the rigours of formal education you might discover what actually interests you. This is what happened to Ramone Param:

“My main reason for taking a gap year was because I was undecided on my course and university choice. My gap year helped me to firm up my idea of what I wanted to achieve and what I wanted to do.”

Of course, you might just want a good, old-fashioned break and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. 

Extract from Lonely Planet’s The Gap Year Book. For a chance to win a copy of this book see page 11