



A Year of Living Differently

HUMANITY WRAP
By Roger Beaumont

The gap year is fast becoming a ritual part of the transition to adulthood, an opportunity to experience foreign places and cultures, and perhaps contribute something along the way.

Travelling to far-off lands on your own while still young is the most exhilarating, frightening, lonely, and brilliant thing most people ever do. According to student travel specialists STA Travel, 65 per cent of students in affluent countries world-wide now take a year out before or after university to seek work or pleasure anywhere that looks interesting and challenging.

Taking a "gap year" has proved so popular it has made the dictionary. But the definition is loose. It can mean anything from working on game reserves and luxury yachts to voluntary work in an East European orphanage or sinking a well in an African village. It can mean helping tsunami victims or just bumming on a beach. It really depends on whether you want to plug the gap or fill it.

But a gap year spent wisely can do remarkable things not only for your confidence, but also add some serious weight to your resume. What's more, the modern "gapper" is just as likely to be a teacher taking a sabbatical to learn French in Paris, an engineer spending six months passing on his skills in Tanzania or a graduate picking up some work experience in Moscow, as a backpack-wielding adolescent named Thor. The genre is no longer subject to age.

Having only 12 months should lend a gravity to the intention. It's the need to learn, experience, laugh, contribute, and hopefully, return in one piece. Some

gappers are clearly more genetically hard-wired for adventure than others. According to one survey, younger travellers seeking to broaden their horizons are more likely to be accessing soap opera plots and football results back home than learning a new language or wandering off the beaten track. Contact is just a click away. However, several said they would do things differently next time, spending longer in one place and contacting home less often. But then, the constant e-mail link is often demanded by parents anxious about their offspring abroad.

Nothing changes. Shaming me into writing home while on the road to Xanadu 30 years before the days of e-mails and mobile phones, my mother sent me off with a pile of postdated "delete as appropriate" letters along the lines of: Dear Mum, It is sunny/raining/snowing. I am well/sick/in Shanghai Prison. I have been learning Mandarin/teaching English/smuggling jade...

Lucy Huxley, a sociologist from Manchester Metropolitan University told me that, "Rather than seeking the unknown it could be argued that gappers today go looking for the familiar and kindred spirits. Rather than finding danger they are finding a place possibly more comfortable than where they were back home in their everyday life."

There are plenty of gap year students in Thailand as it is a perfect destination for first-time travellers. Most people I met had recently graduated or had left their jobs to travel and consider the possibility of a complete change of lifestyle. Interestingly, their journey was not so much a gap between things, as a leap into the unknown. And yes, one backpacker told me he had planned his entire itinerary around ensuring that he never missed a televised Manchester

United match.

"That's pathetic," snorted 23 year-old Steve Tillitson. "I spent my gap year in Uganda as a volunteer with Project Trust in 2003, and the whole point of my trip was to stay away from the normality I was used to. I didn't want to see a mobile phone or a television. Living with local people in Africa for a full year has set me up for ever. My opinion of what's important is completely different and I no longer depend on the material things in life.

"Experiencing a year of squatting over holes, picking ants from your bread and washing mouse droppings out of the kettle is a must for everyone. What's the point of travelling half-way round the world to watch Manchester United when you could watch them in your local pub?"

Is the gap year experience liberating or educational? "Both," beamed 22 year-old Mandy Bates from London, sipping an orange juice on Khao San Road. "It's been great to get away from fast food, fast art and bloody rap music. It's also taught me that you have to stay on your toes. You have to nudge your focus when travelling. You don't get a second chance to make a first impression. What's more, we are ambassadors for our own age group and culture during a gap year, which is something many gappers tend to forget."

Sitting next to her was a former student from York University on a stop-over from Japan before returning to take up an IT job with Vodafone in the UK: "I don't know what was the bigger culture shock: getting used to life in Japan, where trains are never late, touching your nose in public is rude but reading pornographic comics is not, or returning home to a land where, well, none of this applies."