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Some cast doubt as to whether gap years represent anything more than glorified tourism, affluent middle-class kids on expensive overseas trips. The latest guide for British gap-year travellers, the "Rough Guide to a Better World", has quite a go at young gappers, describing them in the main as arrogant, inappropriately dressed and obsessed with haggling to get money out of very poor people.

"Well, of course they are," laughed Don, a 20-year-old from Sydney. "That's why they went abroad in the first place, wasn't it, to learn all these things?"

Unsurprisingly, there are those who are taking time out in perpetuity. One young man, who described himself as a "three star gypsy" told me that he had been on a gap year for 12 years. He had travelled the world, worked in ski resorts, packed fruit in New Zealand and dived in the Similan Islands. And he had no plans to stop.

Like the Greek islands, Khao San Road is a

crossroads for travellers. Some youngsters are beginning their gap year, others completing it. Those about to return to either university or a new career said they had more self-confidence, but perhaps the real value of the experience was culture shock; the sheer roller coaster ride of being flung together with people they would have never had met otherwise.

One 20-year-old Canadian anthropology student had been lucky enough to visit Bhutan. "Trekking is a great leveller. You are exhausted at the end of each day but up early the next, tucking into dried yak buttock for breakfast and looking forward to the next 17 kilometre hike along mountain tracks. I realised that I had only ever thought about God when I was in trouble, but Bhutan was truly a place to wash the heart."

A few individuals felt they had passed some test without having been told what that test might be. Others felt their aspirations were declining, because they have seen the world

and feel they didn't know where they were going, or now had no focus. At best, "you could know humanity, but you couldn't change it." That's pretty deep, coming from an 16 year-old Welshman, who added, "I also learned that I had more strength than I thought I did. I also had a lot more growing up to do than I thought. When I came back I realised how much of a child I was."

On a more fun note, one added "If I learnt anything from this experience, it is that if you cannot bond with the locals over alcohol, there is always gambling. More importantly, wherever your destination may be, half the fun is getting there and back. In any case, you don't really want answers to every question. About your own country, perhaps. But about others? Leave some space for reverie, for amicable invention." And when it's time to return, you realise there really is no place like home, but may even find yourself missing the maggots in the bananas.

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1st May 2005

It has been five weeks since we visited Khao Lak and so much has changed there. The Thai army as well as UNICEF has moved in to help with the rebuilding of Khao Lak. It was heartwarming to see how much has been done there. Some of the smaller camps are gone, by gone I mean they have been made bigger camps to free up the land and businesses are again opening.

Our day started with loading of the cars

Khao Lak Rebuild

with what we had here at DD's (DD Swiss Resort) Then, off we all went to Makro to finish off the shopping for the trip to Khao Lak. Both cars were full to overflowing with dried fish, dried meat, rice, noodles, salt, sauces, oil, fruit, toys, clothing, and baby needs.

It seems to have come a long way in five weeks, yet on our arrival at Nam Kem temple we found ourselves overwhelmed with the amount of people and children there. It has grown so much larger since we were here last. But in true Aussie style we all got on with the job at hand, which was to make the children smile, which in turn made the rest of the community happy and it has become just that, a community waiting to be relocated to their new homes when they are finished.

The time we spent there was not long enough, but long enough for Lynne and I to see Fon again, as she has left the camp to live with her family. She took the time out to come and see us, which was great as we are very fond of her and her baby. As the camp has grown so much we decided to not give out the money envelopes as there was not enough to go around. We then decided to make another trip. Sue hired a car so

Lynne and I could go to Makro again to spend the money we had brought back with us.

17th May - Rex again came to our rescue, he and Awarut drove Lynne and I back to Khao Lak. As always the children made the trip worthwhile. To see them going back to school made us all feel good even if the school is only a shed with some old tables and chairs.

Lynne and I wish to thank from the bottom of our hearts the following people for their support and help;

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