



Green Your Gap Year

The chance to do something completely different or time to take stock. **Claire Nelson** discovers, it's not just students and university graduates taking an eco-conscious gap year.

Planning a gap year offers an endless choice of exciting possibilities. It's the opportunity to travel to fascinating places, learn new languages, discover other cultures, and, perhaps most invitingly, take some time out from the routine of daily life. Formerly the grand endeavour of school leavers and university graduates, these days a higher number of people are now taking gap years later in life as well. More professionals are having career breaks, and since the recession many companies are encouraging their employees to take sabbaticals in order to cut costs without making redundancies.

Choices

For students, the gap year is a chance to do something completely different, and for career breakers, it's a time to take stock and reassess life's priorities. So, it's no surprise that most people look to spend their gap years doing charitable and voluntary work placements. There is an endless choice of opportunities all over the world - from working with animals in South Africa, to building schools in Cambodia. The travel industry is seeing an increase in demand for gap-year programmes, as more people decide to do something exciting and positive with their time out.

Sarah Hynes, from London, took a year out from her job to work on a conservation programme on the west coast of Costa Rica. For Sarah, this was an opportunity to learn to speak Spanish, experience a new culture and 'make a tangible difference'. She found that while the first couple of weeks in the programme were physically challenging, it was an experience she would recommend to anyone.

'Once I'd acclimatised to it, I don't think I lost enthusiasm for what we were doing at any point. I'd love to go back in a couple of years to see how the long-term projects have progressed', says Sarah.

Do your research

Whichever company you decide to go with, do your research first. Don't be afraid to contact them to ask about their environmental practices and find out which associated companies they work with, to get an idea of their eco-commitments. Consider your personal gain from the work you will be doing, and find out who else will actually benefit from the programme. If possible, get in touch with a few people who have completed placements with the same company to find out what their experiences were like.

However, while the idea of volunteering in foreign countries is an exciting one, there are factors which need to be considered. According to recent research by gap year experts The Year Out Group, the five most popular gap year countries are now India, Peru, Tanzania, South Africa and China. While the benefits of working in such places are great, travelling to such far off destinations creates a very large carbon footprint.

Many placements are as brief as two or three weeks, yet the environmental damage of your trip could potentially diminish all the good you have been working for. It's worth considering a longer stay, perhaps a full year, in places that require international travel. That way you will also be able to see the results of your hard work and witness the ongoing benefits of the programme.

On your doorstep

Even better - why not use your gap year to do some good closer to home? There are plenty of opportunities to bring about real change in the UK. Malcolm Scovil, founder of volunteering platforms LeapAnywhere and LeapCR.com, says 'There is nothing that really drives home the vulnerability





of the human condition like seeing it on your doorstep. We tend to live sheltered lives, and at times volunteering abroad can actually increase that effect, not diminish it. The idea that things like poverty just happen to people a long way away from us simply isn't true.'

Leap Anywhere provides an online community where you can find out about volunteering activities and charitable events in your city and get in touch with other people who are doing the same thing. With over 350 charities in its database there are plenty of opportunities to get involved and you can even keep track of new events via Facebook and Twitter.

Another useful resource is Do-It!, which provides an online UK database for voluntary positions within your local area, searchable by your particular interest. They also offer a list of companies who provide residential volunteering opportunities in the UK, so you can live away from home without going abroad.

Carbon conundrums

If, however, you have your heart set on travelling somewhere new and learning about a new culture, then don't forget that the whole of Europe is on our doorstep, with a variety of new cultures and languages to offer. You can experience the new and exotic, and travelling there will be kinder on the environment. A great place to start is WWOOF (Word Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). With sub-sites for separate countries, each has an online notice board full of opportunities: from collecting honey in France, to picking fruit in the Algarve in Portugal.

Of course, if travelling afar is something that can't be avoided, then by all means follow your dream, but reduce the environmental impact by purchasing carbon offsets. These are measures of carbon dioxide which are generated by renewable energy sources (such as wind farms) and neutralise the equivalent amount of carbon to what your travels will produce. Carbon Catalog is a great website for finding a company to purchase your carbon offsets from.

Mind the gap

When it comes to planning your year off, be informed, and make sure you are using your time and energy to its greatest advantage. Regardless of what you do and how you spend your gap year, you will be learning new skills, meeting new people and forming experiences you will never forget.

As Malcolm Scovil explains, 'The best gap years are the ones that are as far away from your comfort zone as you can manage. It's all about balancing causes and environments you care about with putting yourself out there and allowing yourself to be changed. Like most things in life, you get what out what you put in.' 🙌

Useful contacts:



Leap Anywhere
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Tel: 020 7287 7862

Do-it
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Tel: 020 7250 5700

WWOOF
www.wwof.org/europe.asp

Global Vision International
www.gvi.co.uk/resources/on-a-gap-year
Tel: 01727 250 250

Grown Up Gap Year
www.growupgapyear.co.uk

Year Out Group
www.yearoutgroup.org

Carbon Catalog
www.carboncatalog.org