

choose the gap year that's right for **you**

by
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www.gap360.com

I took my first gap year in 2000 and have been hooked on travelling ever since. To help continue my newfound wanderlust, once it was all over and I'd returned to the UK, I worked my way up to become a Senior Manager for one of the most successful gap travel companies in the UK, and alongside my team, helped thousands of travellers plan gap years and career breaks to the world's most thrilling locations.

Having visited over 30 countries since taking my first gap year, I've been left with a lifetime of unforgettable memories; of people, places and experiences, all of which will stay with me for the rest of my life. And along with some fantastic memoirs, I've now gained the inspiration to help others take that first exhilarating leap into the unfamiliar, experiencing the joy of travel for themselves.

where to go?

When travelling, some people know exactly where they want to go - I know I did. Having seen places on TV and read about them in magazines and newspapers, choosing my destination was an easy decision to make. However for many people, though they know they want to travel, they don't necessarily know where they want to go. Rest assured, it's totally normal to feel like this! After all, there are so many terrific destinations to choose from!



If you just can't decide however, then consider the following:

is the weather important to you?

The weather in destinations can vary dramatically throughout the year. For example, when it's summer in the UK it's winter in Australia, and some parts of the world will experience heavy rains in the monsoon season. There are also a number of activities that you can't do year-round due to the weather conditions, so you should think about the kind of activities you want to do and see if they are weather dependent before you decide. And of course, some destinations are simply better to visit at some times of the year than others!

do you want to work abroad?

A great way to experience authentic local life and earn some extra money to fuel your travels, if you'd like to work abroad you'll need to choose a destination where this is possible. As some countries have strict working restrictions and some require you to apply for special working visas, you'll need to check whether you are eligible to work before you go.

list the things you enjoy, and the activities that interest you

It's then possible to match up the activities you want with a country that ticks all your boxes. For example, do you fancy learning to dive? Then Koh Tao in Thailand could be a good choice! Have you always wanted to go on a safari to see the Big Five animals? Then you should consider a trip to South Africa or Kenya!

how long you want to be away for?

Some countries require you to have a tourist visa, meaning you may only be allowed to stay in that country for a fixed period of time.

are there any events that you want to go to?

If so, you could combine these with seeing more of the country. Check out www.worldeventsguide.com for a few ideas. This is a really useful site and lists major global events of every description.

do you want to visit multiple destinations?

If so it might be worth investing in a round the world ticket.

how are you planning to travel?

In between your tours and activities you may want to consider following a well-trodden backpacking route. Tried and tested, you know this method of travel will be fun, interesting and accommodating to travellers, plus popular backpacking areas are often cheaper than other areas, as there's more competition between local service providers.

are the destinations safe?

Before you travel, I recommend you check out any potential risks and hazards on the Foreign Office website at www.fco.gov.uk which provides up-to-the-minute tourist information and advice.

remember your budget!

Your budget can massively influence where you go and what you do. Flights to some destinations can be very expensive; others relatively cheap. Again this will vary with the time of year. Do some research to get an idea about how much it will cost to fly to your chosen destination, and remember to consider what costs you'll need to cover while you're away the daily cost of living varies around the world (and after all, the price of a good pint could be a vital factor when you're choosing your destination!).

Specific country guidebooks are an excellent source of local knowledge. My favourites are Lonely Planet and Rough Guide.

When you have decided more or less where you want to go, you'll need to think about what to do there.

what to do?

get paid work abroad

Working while you travel is a great way to fund your trip and is a brilliant way to experience what a country is really like. As the perfect opportunity to blend in, meet the locals and make new friends, experience of working abroad also looks great on your CV!

If you choose this option you'll find a huge variety of jobs to choose from, and your earnings can help fund future travel plans, allowing you to live the local lifestyle. Though it's unlikely that you'll save huge amounts of money, you will certainly be able to cover some of your costs!

take a tour

You can join an organised tour practically anywhere in the world. Tour itineraries are designed to show you the best and most popular parts of a country. The duration, standards and inclusions of tours vary widely with some tours running as short as a couple of days and others as long as a hundred! Accommodation also varies between tours with stays in basic accommodation or in luxury hotels, and while some tours will include everything you could possibly need, some will just include the basics, such as transport and accommodation. It's worth spending some time reading up tours you'd like to do to decide which is best for you.

Tours can make up small parts or even the whole duration of your trip, and several can be incorporated in-between independent travel. It's common for travellers to book a tour at the start of a trip, as it's a great and safe way to become accustomed to new cultures, weather and languages.

A major advantage of travelling on a tour, especially if you travel alone, is that it's an easy and safe way to meet people and make new friends. If you're lucky you may find yourself with a great group of people and end up travelling together after the tour has finished. I know from experience that this happens a lot.

Tours are safe too, because the locations and routes have already been thoroughly researched by the tour operator. For the duration of a tour, you and your group will be teamed up with an experienced leader who should be well trained and have excellent local knowledge. This way, not only will you learn lots about the country, history and culture, but will find a great source of advice on important topics such as the best restaurants, bars and shops are from your guide. On top of great local knowledge guides are generally extremely friendly and very entertaining, which can make your trip even more of a memorable experience!

Tours are particularly good if you are planning on travelling to countries which don't have a good or safe transport network. In some destinations it's simply not possible to explore the country by yourself, so tours can offer a cheaper and safer way to get around.

self-development

There is a growing trend for travellers wanting to learn or develop a skill while they see the world. Popular activities include:

- Learning to speak Spanish, or another language
- Learning to scuba dive or further current diving certifications
- Learning to surf or sail
- Enhancing current sporting skills by attending an academy
- Gaining research for a college or university projects or qualifications
- Gaining experience for a future career

volunteer

During my time working for gap travel companies I have had the opportunity to visit many wonderful and worthwhile volunteer projects around the globe. Having spent a lot of time talking to both volunteers and project staff, I'm well aware of how beneficial these kinds of programmes can be to both parties.

With a wide range of volunteering opportunities to choose from worldwide, most popular volunteering placements include:

- Teaching in schools
- Volunteering with local communities
- Volunteering with wildlife
- Helping with childcare
- Providing medical assistance
- Conservation/ ecology

The average duration for a volunteer placement is around four weeks, however some organisations offer placements of up to a year. This means that you can either spend the whole of your gap volunteering, or combine it with some other form of travelling. After the completion of a placement, many of my customers would then join a tour or travel independently with the friends they'd made whilst volunteering.

Voluntary work can be a hugely satisfying and humbling experience, and many placements will offer you the unique opportunity to live within local communities. It's a fantastic way to get to know the locals and develop a good understanding of new cultures, plus you may even pick up some of the local language along the way! And because of such opportunities to learn and develop new skills, by the time you return home you'll be able to improve, and will have added to your CV!

Volunteers usually return home with lots of fond memories of their time away and hold a great sense of achievement, and a new perspective on the world. Because of this, many even decide to return again in the future.

Before joining a volunteer project, it is important to check out that the one you join is worthwhile and sustainable, and really does help the local community. Before you book a project, ask questions about how many local people are employed by the organisation/ project, and ask where the money goes.

adrenaline adventures

There are many local organisers of adrenaline adventure activities around the world. Adventures include:

- white water rafting
- black water rafting
- tubing
- kloofing
- sandboarding
- kite surfing
- sky diving
- bungee jumping
- hang gliding

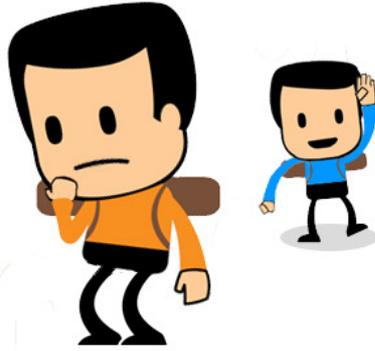
More activities are being dreamed up all the time! If you want to book an adrenaline adventure for your trip, make sure that you do so with a qualified and experienced operator. Check that they have the correct licenses in place, and remember to ask about their liability insurance. Ask how long they have been in business and check that they are members of any relevant local tourism associations. If you are not happy with any or some of their answers, be sure to book elsewhere.

internships abroad

Internships abroad are usually unpaid, though you might get some of your expenses reimbursed or accommodation provided. So why do people join internships if they don't get paid?

- Joining an internship boosts your CV because it shows potential employers that you have the confidence to travel alone to other countries and find a job. Allowing you to learn a lot about work ethics in other cultures, in many cases you will find yourself with unique opportunities to do things you would never be able to do in the UK. For example, some medical internships can get you hands-on experience with patients, even before you have medically qualified - invaluable experience which can help get your CV noticed!
- Working in another culture is also fun! There is always plenty to do and experience in your free time, and you will make friendships with people that could last a lifetime!
- If you choose an internship based in a location that interests you, you'll have a great time living and working in that culture, so may not notice the fact that you're not earning a salary as much. As living costs are often less than the UK in many places, the issue of money can also become less important if you're in a place you love.

travel
alone



or with
friends?

I'm often asked by many of my customers if it's okay to travel alone, and am frequently amazed at the number of people would consider not travelling; purely because they had no one to go with. Though aside from this people often have safety concerns, hold homesickness fears, or just wonder if travelling alone is a bit weird, I'd like to set the record straight once and for all:

Yes, it's most definitely okay to travel alone. In fact, it's a brilliant way to travel and opens many doors to meeting local people and other travellers.

You may be surprised to learn that approximately 60% of people start off travelling alone. That's not to say it's not great fun travelling with a friend or partner, as both ways provide excellent yet different experiences, but the important thing to remember is that you'll meet people as you travel around. If you start out on your own, you won't be alone for long - whether you like it or not! Though I know it's an easy thing to say, trust me it's true. It will happen!

Your personal decision to travel alone or with friends will be based on your current situation, individual preferences, expectations and your reasons for traveling in the first place, and like me, your preferences may change over time. I initially took my gap year with my best friend and since then I've travelled with friends, boyfriends, and taken many trips by myself. Each time is different, but every time is fun.

If you are travelling with a companion it's important to determine what kind of trip you want, and to make sure you have similar expectations. Before you go, consider if the person you plan to travel with has the same interests as you and is travelling for similar reasons. Make sure you both want to visit the same places and do the same things - it's not going to be a fun trip if you want to explore the local culture and your friend's priority is to top up their tan on a beach!

Choosing to share your adventure with someone else can be a lot of fun, and often has many benefits. You know you'll always have company and will never be lonely as you can plan exciting activities together, share the same experiences, rely on each other and help each other out in tough situations - sharing and reflecting on what you've seen and done together for years afterwards.

Then there are the practical advantages of travelling as a pair. For example you can share travel costs like accommodation and food, and can even share your kit (my friend and I shared things like shampoo, shower gel and clothes wash as it helped keep the backpack weight down). Travelling together, there will always be someone to watch your back and look after your backpack while you nip to the loo or into a shop.

On the other hand, solo travel is a different experience but an equally great one.

I love the complete freedom you have to decide exactly what you do and where you go -your time and your budget is entirely your own. With far greater flexibility, with the solo option you'll also be open to a greater range of new opportunities.

In fact you may enjoy being by yourself so much that you want to keep it that way! If you feel the need to be with people however, then it shouldn't take much effort to make new friends. This is especially true if you are on a well-trodden traveller's circuit where you'll have no trouble meeting up with others, so you really don't have to be on your own for long if you don't want to be. Meeting new people is easy and fun, and you'll never have to stick with people that you don't get along with.

But if you are completely overawed by the thought of travelling alone and you don't have anyone to travel with, why not consider joining a programme or a tour for the first part of your trip?

arrange yourself or book with a company?

advantages of booking independently

- **It's usually cheaper.**
Companies make a commission on the fee you pay them, and travelling independently means you'll know exactly where your money's going. You choose the type of accommodation, excursions and transport that best suits you and your budget. As well as this, the money you'll save from not going with a company can be put towards other exciting activities and adventures.
- **More flexibility and freedom.**
As you are free to choose your own itinerary, you can choose to only visit the places that are of interest to you. Plus if you really like a place, you can stay there for longer without worrying about what time the tour bus leaves. Doing your own thing and travelling at your own pace often adds to the adventure and experience, and even if things go wrong, or you have some challenging moments, you invariably learn from them, and they can make an experience even more exciting, making for great stories upon your return.
- **You choose who you spend time with.**
If you meet a great group of people you can make the decision to travel around with them. And if they annoy you, you can simply leave them and move on to a different group.
- **It gives you personal control.**
Organising things yourself can give you greater sense of satisfaction and confidence than if you have everything done for you.

advantages of booking with a company

- **You'll receive expert advice.**
Good companies employ travel advisors that have travelled all over the globe. You are normally given a contact name and number or email address in advance of your trip, so you can ask lots of questions before you even reach your destination.

- **You'll have in country support.**
Many programmes and projects will have in-country representatives who will meet you at the airport, provide you with a local orientation and most importantly be on hand if you experience any problems or need advice and support.
- **You'll have support back home.**
Many companies will offer 24/7 support for emergencies. This will give you (and your parents) the peace of mind that if something goes wrong, you have someone to call for assistance.
- **You won't have to think up or seek out your own activities.**
There will be a wide variety of projects, work placements, programmes and tours to choose from. Some companies can also arrange tailor-made trips.
- **Get a lot done a lot quicker.**
If you are short of time, travelling with a company can be a quick and convenient way to see the country.
- **Get the benefit of local knowledge.**
Some parts of the world are less accessible than others or can be expensive to get to; using a dedicated tour company can make things easier and cheaper.
- **Ideal for first time travellers.**
It's good for first time travellers or travellers going it alone. Often companies put you into groups, giving you the opportunity to meet new people and make friends.
- **A great way to meet new people.**
Some companies will provide you with the contact details of others members of your group so you can get in touch in advance of your trip.
- **Makes planning a lot easier.**
Travelling with a company is less daunting as everything is organised for you, leaving you to concentrate on having a good time.
- **Safety is a priority.**
This can be a much safer option as you are travelling with others and are often accompanied by an experienced guide or have access to local staff. The projects and placements should have been thoroughly researched and risk assessments should have been completed.
- **You'll know before you go.**
You normally receive very detailed pre-departure information which includes lots of useful advice about accommodation, placements, country information, kit lists and details on all the travel essentials so you can be really well prepared for your trip.
- **You won't have to worry about your budget as much.**
Helping you budget, as the fee you pay before you go normally covers most of your major expenses such as accommodation, transport, food and excursions, so you won't have to worry or control your spending as much.

Please note: If you do decide to book a trip with a gap year company, do your research and consider the following:

- Is the company financially secure? Is your money protected? Do they hold an ATOL licence? Are they members of ABTA, ABTOT or another trade organisation?
- Fees and services can vary hugely. Do some research and get advice from other travellers.
- Make sure the company has thoroughly researched all of the individual placements and has done a full assessment of the risks.
- Always read the terms and conditions carefully.

finally...

Enjoy the planning stages, and please feel free to call me (01892 527392) or e-mail (jane.mclellan@gap360.com) if you need any help or advice!