

A gap in your education

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Why take a gap year? Gwyn Topham offers a few suggestions.

One of the rare, baffling, but wonderful, benefits of late 20th century thinking on education is that having up to 15 months free time spent in some foreign clime is now regarded as a good thing.

Whether admissions tutors genuinely think that travel broadens the mind is debatable; perhaps they simply hope that next year's freshers will get the worst excesses of drug-taking and sexual abandon out of the way on some foreign beach rather than on campus. But such concerns shouldn't cloud the horizon for many gap year students.

Put simply, there are few times in your life when you can doss around abroad and maintain a socially acceptable CV. Career breaks may be possible in theory; in practice, the numbers who get round to taking six months to go travelling later in life are comparatively few. And while money may well be tight at 18, and there's the prospect of mounting student debt to come, most school-leavers will have fewer ties now than in the family/mortgage/career-burdened future.

As for getting abroad, many travel agents offer cheap fares for the under-26s: from round the world air fares to InterRail tickets, the savings are substantial (eg a month's European rail pass goes up from £249 to £355 for the wrinkly 26 plusses).

You can also benefit from the help of various organisations, such as Raleigh International and Project Trust, if you're looking to work overseas on a volunteer basis. You'll need to raise money to cover the cost of the trip but the structure and support they offer, and the environmental and community projects they run, mean you're likely to get something more tangible than a suntan from your trip.

If you don't want to commit to a long-term project abroad, travelling and working as you go is a possibility. The classic Australian working stop on a round-the-world trip is one option, and again, it's much easier to obtain a casual work visa when you're under 26; though if you can find a job at home before you go, you'll save money quicker being paid in sterling.

There's no obligation to make hard and fast plans, but you should be wary of falling into the trap of planning to save and travel and somehow never making it out of that stop-gap job. Having said that, once exams, teachers and careers advisors are behind you it can sometimes be easier to work out for yourself just what you fancy doing and where you want to go.

If you have the chance to travel, do it: pre-university, a year without obligation feels like freedom and opportunity; post-graduation, it's called unemployment. And turning up at college with a bit more experience under your belt than a few A-levels will make you an irresistible source of fascination to greener, doe-eyed contemporaries. Well, maybe.

- For more information on gap years, including full contact details for organisations offering work and projects abroad, see Guardian Unlimited Travel's special report.