

10 wonders of the world

Exam results are out the week after next. Whether you're running away from resits, broadening your education or just taking a year out from work, Tom Griffiths, of gapyear.com, kicks off our special with some essential escapes.

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The Guardian

It is expected that more than 200,000 18- to 25-year-olds will leave the country to explore the globe this year, a growing trend that shows no sign of abating, while many older people will decide to take time out from a career and head off to sort themselves out. There are some things that you just have to see or do and here are some to consider. So get ready to tick off those once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

Bungee jumping

Plunge off the world's biggest bungee jump at Bloukrans Bridge on Storms River, South Africa. A 180m freefall that takes seven seconds travelling at 193kmph - even the rebound is higher than the Victoria Falls.

Claire Baty, 19, from the Isle of Wight, jumped at Bloukrans earlier this year. She says the terror beforehand was more than made up for by the elation afterwards: "I screamed and screamed but nothing seemed to come out. It felt like I was never going to stop and that I was going to die. But I can honestly say that it's the most awesome feeling in the world."

Websites:

www.faceadrenalin.com - Bloukrans Bridge operators.

www.bungee-experience.com/list.htm - world list of bungee jumps and operators.

www.ajhackett.com - the original pioneers.

www.bungeezone.com - bungee clubs in the UK and around the world.

Climb Sydney Harbour Bridge

Australia is the most popular overseas destination for gap year travellers. The Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb is one of the most exciting experiences on offer. It takes three hours to scale the bridge, and you get stunning views across one of the world's most beautiful cities. Jason Race, 27, from Felixstowe who climbed the bridge in January, describes it as "easily one of the best things I have ever done".

Australian working-holiday visa application: if you are aged 18 to 30 and would like to work in Australia, you are eligible for a working holiday visa. Send an A4 sae with four loose first-class stamps (UK only) to Australian Outlook, 3 Buckhurst Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, TN40 1QF. For more information: www.consylpublishing.co.uk Include a short note stating that you would like a Working Holiday Visa application (form 1150).

The tried-and-tested backpackers' route is a loop from Sydney back to Sydney via Melbourne in the south, Alice Springs in the middle and Cairns up in the tropical north, close to the Great Barrier Reef.

Websites:

www.bridgeclimb.com.au - the official site.

www.e-bility.com/articles/bridgeclimb.shtml - first disabled climb.

www.gids.nl/sydney/info - the facts on the bridge.

www.australianexplorer.com/sydney_harbour_bridge - bridge information.

For a copy of the Australia Travellers Guide, call 0906 8633235 (60p per minute) or visit the Australian Tourist

Commission's website at www.australia.com.

Visit Bangkok, Thailand, and take a massage course

There are many courses on offer in Bangkok for would-be masseurs - do one that looks clean and respectable, or has been recommended.

Most visitors will agree that the capital city epitomises chaos. It also has sightseeing opportunities unsurpassed in South-east Asia. Jon Kahn, 19, from Bourne End in Buckinghamshire, says: "The thing that affected me most about Bangkok is the smells; there are the unpleasant smells of fumes and rubbish, and then there are the shockingly delicious smells of food."

Must-sees include the Temple of Wat Phra Kaeo, the Bridge over the River Kwai (a day-trip away) and the famous markets, floating and otherwise.

Web sites:

www.spasamui.com/classes.htm - Thai massage courses.

www.bangkoksite.com - guide to Bangkok, and other provinces.

www.budgettravel.com/thailand - information on how to travel to Thailand.

www.khao-san-road.com - the definitive Thai backpacker community.

Walk the Inca Trail in Peru

The ancient city of Machu Picchu is the last stop on the Inca Trail, which takes at least three days to complete. The Trail, which starts in the Sacred Valley, is set in the 32,592-hectare Sanctuario Historico de Machu Picchu, a government-protected area of outstanding natural beauty. Tour operators run organised hikes, and you must travel in a group with a minimum of nine other people, camping at designated sites. The stunning vistas of the Andes peppered with the ruins make this backpacker trail one of the most unforgettable. Adventure Bound (020-8842 8612) offers a 14-day trip from Lima to La Paz for £525, excluding flights.

Websites:

[ifip.com/Machupijchu1 .htm](http://ifip.com/Machupijchu1.htm) - personal site with loads of photos.

www.highplaces.co.uk/tours/perupeak.html - tour company.

Get your photo taken outside the Taj Mahal

The trademark sight of the world's largest democracy is much more impressive in actuality than it is in the tourist brochures. Simon Marsh from Wolverhampton had a post-university tour of India. One of his dreams was to visit the Taj Mahal. "It was an unbelievable experience, the most impressive man-made thing I have ever seen."

Websites:

www.taj-mahal.net - for virtual tours and information.

www.travel.indiamart.com/tajmahal - great information and history.

Take a bite out of the Big Apple

New York is the number-one American destination, one of the top 10 most popular ports of call worldwide for young travellers. Working and travelling in America with such organisations as BUNAC, Challenge UK, Council Exchanges and Work Experience USA is not only an attractive option, but a life experience in a city of 7.5 million people crammed into 800km².

Alison Black, a 25-year-old student from London, is currently on a work experience programme with BUNAC at the Statue of Liberty: "The pressure to find work in New York was not helped by the high prices, and I was close to tears as my plan to stay in New York was slowly disappearing. Everything is fine now and worth all the effort. I love it out here, the hustle and bustle."

Web sites:

BUNAC - 020-7251 3472, www.bunac.org.

Challenge UK - 01273 220 261, www.challengeuk.com.

Council Exchanges - 020-7478 2020, A HREF="www.councilexchanges.org.uk" TARGET="_NEW">www.councilexchanges.org.uk.

Work Experience USA - 020-8688 9051, www.workexperienceusa.com.

Traverse Asia on the Trans-Siberian Express

The Russia Experience (020-8566 8846, www.trans-siberian.com) offers 10 days' travel on the most famous railway line on the planet from £339. The opportunity to see so much of the vast continent along the route from Beijing to St Petersburg is ideal for gap year travellers.

Kevin Crampton captures the mood: "The Trans-Siberian Express. For me these words conjured up images of some deluxe turn-of-the-century steam train populated

by Cossacks and characters from an Agatha Christie novel. Caviar, cigars and hot-and-cold running vodka in every cabin as we rattled through a Dr Zhivago landscape of snow, salt mines and silver birch."

No stereotypes apply in reality. The sheer diversity of the journey, from China to Mongolia to Russia, ensures a cross-cultural experience of epic proportions.

Websites:

www.trans-siberia.com - a personal page and a good starting point.

www.interknowledge.com/russia/trasib01.htm - a useful information site.

www.transsib.ru/Eng - a history of the railway, timetables etc.

Scuba the Blue Hole in Belize

Becoming a qualified PADI to enable you to scuba dive is one of the most popular backpacker "must dos".

One of the best-kept secrets in the world is the Barrier Reef off Belize. Similar to the Ningaloo Reef off the West Coast of Australia, Belize is home to a not-widely-known reef which is accessible, magnificent, cheap and less busy than its more well-known cousin on the East Coast of Australia.

With wrecks and all manner of underwater species both large and small, the Blue Hole is the perfect place for everyone from beginners to advanced PADI divers.

Websites:

www.padi.com.

www.belize.com/reef-scuba.html - general information.

www.bluedive.com

Trek the Annapurna Range in Nepal

There are a number of treks you can do on the Annapurna Range, everything from a quiet Sunday afternoon stroll to the full two-week trek. An hour's bus ride from Pokhara and you can simply pick up the well-trodden trails, guided or unguided. Trekking passes are available in Pokhara for a few pounds, the price varying on the size of trek you take on. The most popular treks are to the Annapurna base camp and back or the "Circuit", lasting up to 10 days. October and November are the best months, March and April equally as good for wildlife and flora.

For Nicky Dubery, 28, from London, trekking was a unique, unforeseen experience. "I didn't know anything about trekking when I got to Nepal, but from Pokhara you can see the Annapurna Range and, once I saw the mountains, I knew I had to go and check them out. The best bit was reaching the Annapurna base camp where the

scenery was like being on the moon." Nepal is also superb for rafting and the Royal Chitwan National Park is a must-see for guided tiger and rhino searches on foot.

Websites:

Footprint Nepal Handbook, £11.99, is superb - www.footprintbooks.com.

www.buddhatreks.com/nepal/trekking/annapurna-himal.

Awesome Foursome in Queenstown, NZ

Dubbed "the adventure capital of the world". The six-hour quadruple dose of pursuits starts with a 71m bungee jump off the Skippers' Canyon Bridge. From there, it's on to the Shotover River for a 30-minute waterborne thrill ride on the Shotover Jet, famous for its 360-degree spins and close shaves with the rocky outcrops of canyon walls. Next, there's a breathtaking scenic helicopter ride before the climax of the package, a white-water raft ride down the Shotover. The river has a demanding grade III-IV status - grade V is the highest - and boasts some of the most challenging rapids in the world.

Websites:

www.nz.com/Queenstown - general information about Queenstown.

www.thestation.co.nz/actioncombos.html.

www.rafting.co.nz/crazy.htm .

- Tom Griffith is the founder of www.gapyear.com