Your essential guide to taking a gap year

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So you're thinking of taking a gap year?

This could be one of the most important experiences in your life. Gap years aren't just about having a holiday. Or getting a tan. They're a chance to learn about the world and learn about yourself.

"But I already know myself," perhaps you're thinking.

And maybe you do. But I bet there's a lot you don't know. Like how you'd react when you're picked up and plonked in a completely alien culture. Or how to buy a ticket for an Indian train. Or what it's like when you go six months without seeing a single familiar face. Or how it feels to do the tango in Buenos Aires. These are new and unfamiliar experiences you will recall for the rest of your life. And they are the kinds of things you may experience on your gap year.

But gap years don't have to be just about travel. They can massively help your future career. I had an experience on my first gap year that set me on the path I'm on today. When I was 19 years old I volunteered as a journalist on a newspaper in central America.

And it changed the course of the rest of my life.

Since I launched Start Me Up I've met more young people on their gap year and asked them what they found most valuable on theirs. You can find their stories, and an essential checklist of what you need to know to plan yours, in this pack.

Enjoy!

Where to go

If you're lucky, you've got a burning desire to visit a particular region or culture. If not, the options can be overwhelming.

Beyond sticking a pin in a map, we have some suggestions for refining your options down.

Planning your trip

First, make a list of what you are looking for - is it mountains, jungles, isolated beaches, cityscapes or cultural hubs?

If it's all of the above then you can visit a travel agent, such as STA, who will be able to help you plan out your route in the most logical way.

However, using agents is not always the most cost-efficient option as they are not able to quote you budget airlines. We find that using a combination of agents and handy websites such as Skyscanner is the best way to plan your route.

Skyscanner often lists the cheapest destination to fly to so you could even let the purse strings dictate your route.

**Top tip* Be sure to look up the visa requirements in each place before you book in order to avoid finding yourself unable to return or renew a visa in the place you have chosen to spend a significant amount of time in.*

Picking the sunniest. cheapest. safest, any-est destination

We love nomadlist.com as it helps you refine your choice based on certain parameters. Here's just a few for you to consider...

Gimmie sun!

If you like the sun (but not unbearable heat) then South East Asia is always a winner, with Vietnam, Indonesia, South Korea, Laos and Cambodia consistently rated highly.

In the northern hemisphere you can't beat southern Europe's summer months. The region has almost guaranteed sunshine and blissfully warm evenings. You can't go wrong with Spain and Portugal, with Barcelona and Lisbon being our favorite cities. Italy or France are also incredibly beautiful and generally not too expensive.

For paths less well-traveled, then Eastern Europe is a fantastic option. In addition, Croatia and Montenegro's coastlines take some beating.

Keep my costs down!

Once again, South East Asia remains affordable, despite its popularity. But with air fares predicted to fall this year and some airlines announcing some CRAZY cheap flights this year - Norwegian Airlines, London to Singapore, $299 one way, whaaaaaat - then there are some great unconventional destinations opening themselves up to travelers.

Forbes.com just voted Mazatlan, Mexico as a fav spot on their "30 cheapest places to travel in 2017", citing cheap eats, favourable exchange rates and inexpensive hotels as the perfect storm for cheap travel. South Africa (we LOVE Cape Town), Puerto Rico, Chile and Bali are a few more destinations on their brilliant list.

Gimmie fast internet!

Budapest, Bangkok, San Diego and Stockholm rate highly when it comes to internet speed and access to comfortable cafes to Skype or work from. If you want to combine that with affordability then Chang Mai, Lviv in Ukraine and Phuket are also great options.

Keep me safe!

The thing that will keep you safest is common sense but if you're looking to minimise risk then Yerevan, Armenia features highly in the top few (who knew?), along with Berlin, Sweden and South Korea.

I'm gotta be by the ocean!

Not surprisingly Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam have some of the best beaches and snorkeling/diving in the world. Australia's coastlines are stunning and offer everything from tourist favorites to empty beaches. New Zealand even has a 90-mile beach (although it's only actually 55-miles but hey, who's counting?).

If you want to explore some relatively untouched beaches then South Africa and Mozambique offer this in combination with incredible vistas, backdrops and diving, so you can live your best beach life.

I wanna dance all night long!

We love Berlin, Budapest. Prague and Bali's Seminyak. NomadList tells us that the top three best cheap nights out can be found in Ho Ci Minh, Phuket and Kuala Lumpur. But rest assured, most of the popular gap year destinations are absolutely brimming with fun.

I gotta breathe fresh air!

Pollution has been hitting the headlines a lot recently so if clean air is important to you then go to the high hills of Ecuador - Quito is a very popular destination - or get yourself to a remote beach in Mexico. Phuket remains a great all rounder with this being rated the top affordable, but also clean air, destination on NomadList.

I want a bit of everything!

TripAdvisor has done the hard work for us and collated all of its reviews to give you the best place to travel to. And the answer is.... Bali! We may be biased, as it's one of our favorite internship destinations at Start Me Up, but we completely agree.

Planning your trip

There's often a lot to think about when you go abroad for a long time. And it can be easy to get carried away with organizing leaving parties and buying new outfits when you should be arranging things like insurance or study financing.

Here are a few things you should probably be thinking about before you head off on your travels:

Two months out

Check the visa situation

Google it. No more complicated than that. Just make sure you leave plenty of time to apply for visas before you fly or bring money to pay for visas on arrival.

There are often agents that can do the majority of the leg work and help you avoid any nasty refusals, so research trusted providers of these services.

Book your flights

Once you understand the visa requirements, you are ready to book your flight. Flight prices vary depending on when you book, but often the best deals can be found around two months ahead of your departure date.

Pay a visit to the doctor

Many generic versions of different medicines will be available abroad, but you may want to stock up on identical medicine to the kind that you use at home.

Visit your doctor to see if you need any specific vaccinations or medications ahead of your travels. Some require boosters across a number of consecutive weeks so make sure you allow plenty of time to receive the full course.

Look into cards that offer free withdrawals

Some bank accounts offer free withdrawals abroad and allow you to add credit to them and withdraw funds at no cost. Do your research to save $$.

One month out

Getting insurance

Okay, we admit the topic of insurance is about as exciting as watching paint dry but boring or not, you need it. Double check that your insurance allows you to spend a prolonged period in another country, not all travel insurance policies do. Also make sure that your valuables and medical expenses will be sufficiently covered.

Is the excess excessive?

Check that the excess on your policy is reasonable. Look at insurance options for belongings and activities. Many policies will cover you for say, mountain biking, but what about other extreme sports? And what about driving a car or a motorcycle? Are there any restrictions on the size of the vehicle?

Make sure you prepare for the worst

Ensure your insurance covers an emergency flight back if something happens to a member of your family and you need to get back home quickly.

Tell your bank you're going away and ask how much withdrawal fees are in the country you are going to. Check if your bank card is set on 'international'. Check with your bank if you are not sure. Do you have a credit card? Or a debit card with a limit? Know before you start splurging.

Get licensed to drive

Are you planning to ride a motorbike, scooter or car while you're away? As well as making sure your insurance covers you on the mode of transport you'll be using, you might need to obtain an international drivers license.

One week out

Get some dollars

If you're American, this should be pretty straightforward. Even if you're not, it should be easy. Dollars are useful - especially if you have to pay for a visa on arrival and you haven't yet encountered an ATM at the airport.

Practice packing

It may sound dumb at first but it's a useful habit to get into before a big trip. Don't leave yourself with a backpack that is impossibly heavy (those excess weight fees can be killer). You also want to avoid buying more than you need. You may think you need three jumpers, but you will quickly realize you'd prefer to take your portable speaker over that cuddly blue number you even forgot you had until now.

Light sleepers: be prepared

Traveling is stimulating in many ways. And some things take some getting used to - like the morning chorus of roosters in Bali, for example. They don't care whether you're a light sleeper. So don't be surprised if from 4 am, you're having your sleep interrupted by these boisterous neighbors. Want our advice? Industrial strength earplugs: you'll sleep like a baby.

Essential travel hacks

We've compiled a list of extremely helpful travel hacks that will make doing things on-the-move much easier.

Hopper analyzes billions of flights to help you find the best deals and the best times to fly and buy.

Monzo and Resolut are digital banks that allow you top up from your another account and do not charge you withdrawal fees.

TripAdvisor's app helps you easily book and review on the go. **Yelp** is the best alternative in those countries where TripAdvisor is not common.

FlightStats is a free real-time flight status and airport tracking app.

LoungeBuddy allows you to access airport lounges around the world. While this may sound baller, you can find some reasonable day passes which allow you to access to showers and a bed for only $20.

TripIt organizes all your travel plans and itineraries in one place, giving you useful prompts and reminders when you have an upcoming trip.

Mint is a personal finance app that makes budgeting easy. The only negative is there's no hiding from how much you are spending on tattoos.

TransferWise allows you to transfer money abroad quickly and cheaply.

Google Translate's app is pretty cool. You can use the scanning tool to translate a menu instantly.

XE Currency Converter is a free currency and FX calculator.

WhatsApp and Skype are essential for keeping in touch with family and friends. Even if you buy a local sim, you can keep your UK number associated with your WhatsApp and continue all your conversations.

Google drive and Slack are excellent remote working tools if you fancy freelancing or interning while you are away. Slack provides real-time messaging, archiving and search for communication between modern teams.

How to fund yourself and stay out for longer

We all know those people that seem to be independent and travel without needing money from study financing or parents. If it feels like a massive secret they are keeping from you, then we are here to burst the bubble.

It is actually increasingly easy to bankroll yourself. As well as getting informal jobs on the road, there are a number of options for young people who don't want to deplete their funds while they're away (without having to break the law).

Do an internship

When it comes to CV building, learning new skills and gaining work experience, there are few better ways than doing an internship.

Wherever there are companies, there are internship opportunities. So you can combine working with travel.

There is a growing number of companies, especially startups, that move to tropical places such as Bali or Phuket for the lower living costs and higher quality of life. Start Me Up, for example, has internship opportunities at startups based in emerging startup hubs abroad. This is a great chance to learn about entrepreneurship or setting up your own business while living in paradise.

Working for a startup is hard work, but it gives you the freedom that you'll never get in a 9-to-5 job. It gives you a chance to grow together with the company and learn skills you can start to get paid for. Quickly.

Looking for something broader than that? Global Placement has all sorts of internships all around the world from agriculture to telecommunication. They are trying to reduce international trade barriers with their internships, all of which have an international focus.

Do a course

Enrolling on a course can be very beneficial for future job prospects or for your application for Uni. It shows that you're truly interested in the subject and will give you a lead over other students. Courses are often more specialized than study in a university which makes it a great opportunity to see if it captures your attention and helps with your chances of landing a job.

You can take a course at a university or a there are plenty of free, online courses that can help you develop skills that are in demand, such as coding and digital marketing.

Go freelance

With the skills you've acquired with the internship or course you may take, you can launch yourself as a freelancer, go to co-working spaces around the world to network and quickly pick up additional skills from their multitude of workshops and skill-shares.

Launch your own business

Startup accelerators, such as the one Start Me Up offers, can get you up to speed on how to quickly and efficiently fast-track a business idea. With remote working a viable option these days, being in an office does not need to be the first requirement of launching your business idea.

What to expect

We believe combining life-changing experiences, breath-taking views with opportunities that will enhance your CV is the best way to make the most of your gap year. Don't take our word for it. We have collated some stories from our interns on how they spent their gap years and what they learned.

"My time abroad, whether studying in China, doing my internship in Bali or traveling, taught me valuable skills. And I don't just mean – versatility and adaptability – although I now have plenty of that, but marketable career skills."

Jaime van der Peijl, The Netherlands
read Jaime's story on page 15

"My favorite part about interning abroad is meeting new people from different countries. Not only have I learned about the culture in Bali, but I've been able to learn about the cultures of other people I'm working with."

Haley Johnson, US
Read Haley's story on page 16

"I've learned a lot in an incredibly short space of time and had more responsibility than I could have ever expected. I never expected I would get the chance to learn these skills in this kind of environment."

Ollie Rodney, UK
Read Ollie's story on page 17

"In addition to interning for a startup, I've been enjoying my weekends. From mountain biking down volcanoes and walking through rice fields to checking out beautiful beaches. I'd never be able to have weekends like this if I was interning somewhere like London."

Tim Doughty, UK
Read Tim's story on page 18

Jaime's story

Before I knew what I wanted to study or do with my life, I went for a year abroad. Once I started doing, as opposed to studying, I really started to understand what made me tick. And often, I found, the things that piqued my interest weren't necessarily the jobs that seemed sensible, respected or prestigious.

I spent part of my gap year in Thailand, where I started to learn what I was actually good at – beyond passing exams. I rebuilt an orphanage and studied eastern philosophy. And I soon learned that I preferred being on my feet, as opposed to sitting at a desk. I also learned, after working at a school, that I was a better at soccer coaching than English teaching.

During my travels, I wrote a monthly column for a Dutch-Indonesian magazine, which I loved. And I found out that traveling and meeting new people from around the world was something I wanted to keep doing. And so after spending time abroad, I finally found my perfect field of study: international communication and media.

At college, I made friends across the globe. And in my third year, I had a compulsory semester abroad which turned into another year overseas. I chose to study in China, learn Mandarin and get business experience abroad. I found most of the subjects so interesting that, for the first time in my life, I did extra work, finished my assignments and read all the books (and more). I finished the semester with an 8.5 average and won third place in a Chinese language competition.

I found out that if I was actually interested in the material I had a lot more fun studying. And my grades went through the roof. I was amazed (and so were my parents). It was a far cry from my high school days.

After the semester was up, I wasn't ready to go home. So I went to Bali for another six months where I interned for an educational startup. During this placement, I learned about entrepreneurship and it opened my eyes about what's possible in terms of traveling and managing a business at the same time. Again I was motivated, I worked 14 hour days, learned marketing, and picked up freelance clients along the way.

I really believe there's never been a better time to take a gap year. My generation will spend more years of their life working than perhaps any other in history. So we better spend our lives doing something we enjoy.

Haley's story

Being from America, the idea of a “gap year” was rarely discussed or encouraged. I didn’t even realize I was on a gap year until someone pointed it out. I discovered gap years are much more common amongst people from Europe and Australia and I was excited to have created this opportunity for myself. I've had some amazing experiences so far. From living in Australia and New Zealand to interning with a startup in Bali.

Traveling during your gap year will make you grow and become more mature. If you’ve just graduated high school, this might be the first time you are away from your normal support system of family and friends. You will be responsible for your travels, health, safety and overall well-being. There will be times when you need to make quick decisions and move on if the result isn’t what you hoped. It’s a time of pure growth and self-discovery.

You also get a crash course in new cultures. During my gap year I spent time in New Zealand and Australia, and even though they are overall fairly similar to America, it was fascinating to learn about their unique culture or the different vocabulary and phrases. When I went to Bali, it was an entirely new culture to me and I’ve had a great experience learning the language and cultural norms.

I found that interning is a great way to learn new things and meet people from all over the world. When I was in Bali, I interned with a startup there. Choose an internship program that invests in you and encourages you to learn new skills. One of the best parts about working for a startup has been learning every aspect of running a company – from marketing to coding to copywriting. Plus, we work from a coworking space that offers multiple classes and skill shares each week. Be sure to ask what opportunities the company has for personal development and upskilling.

Ollie's story

I think gap years can be valuable for pretty much every part of your development. As well as being lots of fun, they can be an amazing educational experience. I have just returned to the UK after an eye-opening two month program for young entrepreneurs in Bali run by Start Me Up.

While there I developed my own startup idea TX, an app which streamlines the way people buy and sell second-hand event tickets.

Through the program, I got access to top mentors around the world and met fascinating people. I developed countless new skills, built some amazing networks, and achieved some really big things.

As well as getting an amazing educational experience, I also had some incredible adventures, I've trekked up a volcano, mountain biked down a volcano, surfed some of the best waves on earth, partied in Kuta, relaxed in Seminyak, eaten fresh tuna in Uluwatu, explored an abandoned theme park in Sanur, been diving around the Gili islands and watch people dance in fires (yes really.

I'll never forget this experience. And I think all of the skills I've been developing during my time in Bali are incredibly valuable life skills, regardless of which career I end up pursuing.

Tim's story

Like many young people I wanted to spend my gap year learning new skills that would make me more employable in the future. But I also wanted to travel.

I found out about an opportunity to intern for a San Francisco-based startup in Bali and signed up for a one month internship program.

I really enjoyed how international it was. Every day I was in touch with the founder in San Francisco. I approached investors and advisors in Silicon Valley, created a podcast for the company and developed a marketing strategy along with the head of marketing, within the first couple of weeks.

The coworking space is a great place to be when working for a startup or even launching your own business. It's located just down the road from a monkey forest, which means you sometimes get visited by monkeys (some of them are very cheeky). Outside there's a beautiful view of a rice field.

The coworking space also organizes social events like 'social hour' (or more accurately five hours) on Fridays. These events are a great opportunity to get to know all the inspiring and interesting people who also work at the coworking space.

There are many events, but the two that stand out for me are the skill shares and the think tanks. Skill shares are workshops on a specific topic or area such as e-commerce, equity or copywriting, for example. People get together to get advice on your idea and/or contacts to enable you to progress your idea.

In addition to interning, I've been enjoying my weekends. From mountain biking down volcanoes and walking through rice fields to checking out the island's beautiful beaches. In all, it's been an amazing experience: I'd never be able to have weekends like this if I was interning in London.

What to tell your parents

Gap years are often perceived to be for the lazy or directionless. And let's be honest, not all parents like the idea of a gap year. They worry that their offspring will never make it to college or do something with their lives.

Then there are the concerns of traveling abroad - far away from parental oversight.

We know what you can say to reassure them:

Gap year students have higher grades

Not only do most gap year students have higher grades, they are perceived to be 'more mature, more self-reliant and independent' than non-gap year students, according to an Australian research paper and the American Gap Association.

Taking a break between learning institutions allows motivation for study to be renewed.

Internships and language courses abroad give you in-demand skills

If you plan to take a course, do an internship or learn a language while you are away, then it will increase your chances of studying at the university that you want and make you more employable in the future.

Volunteer work and internships will help you be sure of your choices

Increasingly students are taking gap years in order to discover if they are pursuing the right path.

Whether you are rebuilding a school in Nepal or interning for a startup, it's a great chance to find out whether the job that you dreamed about and the course you chose to study at Uni is actually a right fit for you.

If your parents are helping you fund your next step, then they will be glad to know you are making the right decision.

Living among different cultures will teach you valuable life lessons

“The general experience of 'being in a new and different environment' was the most meaningful element of the overall gap year experience” according to the American Gap Year Association.

Try living alongside locals and see what they do in their daily lives; try new food and join in some ceremonies; learn about a new religion and make new friends. The most important is to be curious and open minded, ask questions, join in their routines and learn from what they do differently.

Packing list

- Simple first aid kit
- Mosquito repellent (with deet)
- Travel towel (these are handy lightweight towels if you're going to be doing lots of traveling)
- Phone
- Laptop + case (for interning or writing your blog!)
- Good quality sun block
- Shampoo, conditioner, soap/shower gel
- Photocopies of your passport
- International drivers license
- Pair of walking boots (if you intend to go hiking)
- A pen (handy for completing arrival cards)
- The address of the accommodation where you're staying
- Adaptors - you can buy these overseas but the ones at home may be better quality -=o=