

THE BIG TRIP

**YOUR ULTIMATE GUIDE TO GAP YEARS
AND OVERSEAS ADVENTURES**



THE BIG TRIP

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AUSTRALIA Locked Bag 1, Footscray, Victoria 3011

USA 150 Linden St, Oakland, CA 94607

UK 2nd Floor, 186 City Road, London EC1V 2NT

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to provide information you need to turn your travel dreams into concrete plans. The first part, *Travel Smarts*, looks at everything you need to know to get started, including what to expect when you arrive in your destination and all the paperwork you'll need to organise beforehand. The *Tailoring Your Trip* section is about organising your trip in a way that works for you and suits your interests – do you want to work to make some travel cash, volunteer in a community or take on the festival circuit? It's worth reading to see what's out there.

For more specific planning there are the destination chapters in the book's third part. These chapters look at the regions of the world and are a good place to start if you can't make up your mind where to go. Finally, there's the *Directories* chapter, a list of contact information for useful organisations, divided into sections: *British Travellers* for Brits, *North American Travellers* for US citizens and Canadians, and *Australasian Travellers* for Australians and New Zealanders.

We've made this book as up-to-date as we can, but remember that prices do go up, currencies fall and a million other things can happen before this book even hits a bookshelf. But the secret of good travelling is to stay flexible and stay up to date.



INTRODUCTION

It started with the Grand Tour. Way back in the 17th century, upper-class British kids would complete their education by heading over to parts of Europe to experience museums, paintings and, more importantly, wines that they'd only studied or read about in school. For a few months they'd tour the continent, though most only went as far as Italy (probably something to do with the wine). All of them returned with enough stories, souvenirs and sores to last a lifetime.

Fast-forward a couple of hundred years. Cheap flights have meant that even more people are taking a year off and seeing a world outside of school books and dull history lessons. Whether it's a gap year, an overseas experience (OE), an exchange program, a working holiday, a sabbatical, a year out or a year off, people want to head off to India, Italy, Israel or a thousand places in between to see what the world is really like. Today there are even more reasons to head overseas.

WHY GO?

But hang on, can't you just see all of that on TV or find out everything you need to know about the world

on wikipedia? Only if you want to fake it. There's no substitute for getting out there seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling what the world is. Some of the smells and tastes won't be good BTW, but at least you'll have done it. You can shut the most boring book-smart expert up at parties just by saying 'Have you actually been there?'

For many travellers, what starts out as a vacation ends up a vocation, a passion becomes a profession. Take the economics graduate who thought he was bound to work in an accounting firm but did a stint with a music distribution company during his gap year. He was so inspired he's been in music business ever since, so his year off changed his future entirely.

Sarah Bruce was a traveller who didn't just have a year off but used the time to check out a field she might be interested in. 'I volunteered overseas for five months with Trekforce Expeditions. This really changed my perspective and my priorities and it opened a door for me to work in the charity sector, doing marketing.'

The jobs you do, the people you meet and the experiences you have can show you careers and

ESCAPING THE PARENT TRAP

So maybe your parents aren't so keen on you going away for months on end. They're probably making noises about going to university, settling down or getting a good job in a bank. They really need to move on. Here are our best arguments to stop them fretting and get them shelling out for airline tickets:

✦ **PROTECTIVE RESEARCH** If you can tell them about the place you're visiting, it can be reassuring. Everyone's going to freak out when they don't know where someone's going, but if you can explain your itinerary it will seem more real. Helpful facts ('They all speak English.', 'There's more than 30,000 tourists every year and they all seem okay.' or 'It's one of the safest cities in Central America.') can also be useful. You can even get them to read a few chapters of this book so they can see you're taking this trip seriously.

✦ **GET INVOLVED** Get your parents to help out with the planning and show them a detailed itinerary – they can even check progress on your blog. Show them you've got a budget and you have a time limit on the trip. You can always change itineraries later, but let them know when you do veer off the itinerary to save the grey hairs and panicked phone calls.

✦ **PHONE HOME** Create a schedule for phoning home, texting or whatever (there are more tips in Part One, p70). Make sure it's reasonable (calling every hour is crazy but only ringing once a month could lead to parental tears) and stick to it.

✦ **ON COURSE** Prove you're committed to the trip by doing a course (see Part Four, Directories, for more clues on this). Learning to speak a language, taking a first-aid course or even picking up some basic travel skills are all good ways to show that you're taking this seriously.

✦ **INSURANCE IS REASSURANCE** Show them you're prepared for the bad stuff by getting good travel insurance that will cover any emergencies.

✦ **CAREER BUILDING** This is your trump card. Explain that this trip could help your career and point to a few people whose careers have been helped by travel.

life choices you never would have seen back home. Opportunities open up when you're travelling. But as Tom Hall warns us, 'The trip didn't answer my questions about what I wanted to do with my life but it remains the source of some of my happiest memories.' Today Tom manages Lonely Planet's London office, so perhaps travelling did nudge him slightly in the direction of a career choice.

But it's not all about work. Just like those Grand Tourists of hundreds of years ago, you'll also gather friends and experiences that will be valuable for the rest of your life. Whenever someone mentions Thailand you'll remember a full-moon party, or if you meet a New Zealander, Canadian or Scot you'll be able to tell them stories of drinking in their pubs and laughing with

people from their country. These intangibles will stay with you your whole life.

Then there's the confidence building. Just to know that you've worked out how to catch a bus in Prague or protected yourself from malaria in Cambodia makes the problems you'll face back home at university or work seem simpler. As Amanda Akass sees it, 'Once you have trekked through the Andes in the freezing cold, scared off muggers in Rio, or been lost in a jungle at night, you feel you can do anything!' Fighting off muggers isn't a must-have skill for many gigs, but if you mention it in a job interview, they'd be too scared not to give you the job.

Plus after being in school since you were five, you've definitely earned a bit of time off.

WHY NOT GO?

We're not going to bullshit you: no trip is always easy. Travel brochures can turn out to be studio-shot lies and there will be times when you'll be broke, sick or just lonely and homesick. But with a bit of preparation you can minimise the lows and maximise the highs.

Before you go there's always the money to think about. Travel can be expensive and even studying at university comes with a pretty big price tag. We've got a few tips on making your dollars, pounds, euros and baht go further (see p33), but you may have to prioritise and work out how long you can afford to be away. Would you rather spend your time working in a London pub with a few short hops over to Europe? Or would you rather volunteer in Laos helping street kids? Or do you just want to trek to Machu Picchu then take your sore feet home? After balancing up time and money, should your gap year really be a gap month? Either way, we've got you covered and can help you come up with a budget that will make it work.

Lots of travellers worry about personal safety. You only have to switch on the news to know that there are some places in the world that you don't want to visit. And we want to steer you away from the really dangerous places in the world (see p43). For everything else, we'll prepare you as best we can by giving you the word on some of the everyday dangers.

And then there's the environmental concern. Aeroplanes do produce hefty carbon emissions and tourists can bring problems to sensitive regions. This book will show you how to keep your carbon footprint tiny and how to respect the countries you're visiting to prevent damage to fragile environments and cultures (see p75). We also believe that travel can help developing nations if it's done responsibly – not every visitor needs to be an invader. At the risk of getting all Brady Bunch on you, travel should bring the world closer together.

STILL GOING?

Despite the worries, millions of people are still hitting the road every year and discovering what the world is

really like behind the headlines and outside the school books. You'll find out that all the clichés about travel changing you are true, and you'll come back with memories that are worth more than any holiday snaps or souvenirs.

The practical tips in this book aim to get you from dreaming to doing and back again. From planning to coming home, we've pulled together enough tips from travellers to inspire you and get you there safely. There are world highlights so can you plan an itinerary to suit. There's also advice on job hunting and visas.

But in all the planning and preparing the best advice we can give you is from Lonely Planet's founder, Tony Wheeler, who left everything he knew in Britain to go overland from England to Australia and ended up turning travel into big business. After years of travelling the world what would Tony say? 'Just go.'



20 BIG TRIP TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

OUR AUTHORS HAND-PICKED THEIR FAVOURITE SPOTS IN THEIR FAVOURITE REGIONS.





SCALING THE SUMMIT OF MT KILIMANJARO (TANZANIA, SEE P272)

The famous snows may be thinning, but the rooftop of Africa still affords stunning views, probably because it's the highest peak on the continent.

HAVING A ROYAL KILT'D KNEES-UP AT EDINBURGH FRINGE FESTIVAL (SCOTLAND, SEE P169)

Imagine the maddest Scots getting all their friends over for a week of comedy and kooky arts. That's what you get with Fringe – the wild and weird all crammed into a medieval city that never sleeps.



DAVID MOIR / REUTERS

DONKEY TREKKING INTO THE GRAND CANYON (USA, SEE P243)

With only the slap of saddlebags and your own footsteps you could be in a Western movie, not at the biggest and busiest canyon the world has to offer.



LEFT: DALLAS STIRBLEY / LONELY PLANET IMAGES FAR LEFT: ROBERT HARDING / PICTURE LIBRARY LIMITED / ALAMY IMAGES

COMING TO THE CHILLED OASIS OF THE TAJ MAHAL (INDIA, SEE P225) Even the bustling touts hold this ancient mausoleum in awe and as you get closer, the lotus design, the gold spire and the sacred Muslim moon are all drawn in detail.

INVENTING NEW COLOURS IN THE CORALS OF GREAT BARRIER REEF (AUSTRALIA, SEE P182)

The world's largest coral reef can be explored by glass-bottomed boat, but if you strap on the snorkel you'll see the colours up close and feel the tickle as rare fish get friendly.



ROBERT HALSTEAD / LONELY PLANET IMAGES

CHANNEL-SURFING THROUGH NEW YORK CITY (USA, SEE P243)

From the *Seinfeld* deli to the fashionista fantasy set of *Zoolander* to the Empire State's memorable turn in *King Kong*, New York is just waiting for you to shout 'Action!'



RIGHT: DOUG SCOTT / AGE FOTOS/STOCK; FAR RIGHT: PETER WILSON / ANIM



HIKING TO JAW-DROPPING IGUAZÚ FALLS (ARGENTINA, PARAGUAY, BRAZIL, SEE P258)

Most impressive are the gargling waters at Garganta del Diablo (Devil's Throat) that divide Argentina and Brazil, but you're bound to be impressed anywhere along this stretch of cascading water.

GETTING HISTORIC AT THE ACROPOLIS (GREECE, SEE P166)

The great 'sacred rock' has towered over Athens for thousands of years in tribute to the ancient Greek gods, so explore it early in the morning to get a feel for the majesty and to avoid unholy crowds.



HEATING UP AT THE BURNING MAN FESTIVAL (USA, SEE P245) Black Rock Desert in Nevada is overrun with hippies, artists and all the right kind of rabble for this trippy festival that includes nude cycling and incinerating a big wicker dude.



TAKING A CAMEL RIDE TO THE PYRAMIDS OF GIZA (EGYPT, SEE P272) Seeing the mythical pyramids bouncing before you as your dromedary crosses the desert is the only way to arrive at the ruins that were the world's biggest buildings in their day.

TAKING THE PLUNGE DIVING AT KO PHI PHI (THAILAND, SEE P213) Clear waters and plentiful coral make for some of the world's sweetest snorkelling, plus scuba divers can go deeper with the *King Cruiser* wreck and there are some impressive limestone formations to explore.



RIGHT: JO MARSTON / DIGITAL RAILROAD. FAR RIGHT: PANORAMA MEDIA / AGE FOTOSTOCK



HIKING THE DEPTHS OF TIGER LEAPING GORGE (CHINA, SEE P198) Follow the roughest stretch of the Yangzi River in the shadow of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain through the hamlets of the Naxi people.



ROMAIN CINTRACT / HEMIS.FR

MARVELLING AT THE LIMESTONE KARSTS OF HALONG BAY (VIETNAM, SEE P214) Whether you soak it up from a beachside restaurant or take on the waters in an old-school junk, you'll have to visit a couple of times to see the many colours of the limestone.

MAKING A FRENCH CONNECTION IN THE ROMANTIC CAPITAL OF PARIS (FRANCE, SEE P161)

Pack your beret for amorous strolls along the Seine, rendezvous at the top of the Eiffel Tower and perhaps fall for the centuries-old belles who still beguile in paintings at the Louvre.



TREATING THE WHOLE CITY AS YOUR FANCY DRESS PARTY WITH COSPLAY GANGS OF TOKYO (JAPAN, SEE P198) From the latest manga superheroine to old-school Goths, get your kookiest duds on at Harajuku and other hotspots throughout Tokyo.



BOAZ ROTTEM / AGE FOTOSTOCK



ELAN FLEISHER / LOOK-FOTO

EXPLORING THE ARTSY TREASURE HOUSE OF THE HERMITAGE (RUSSIA, SEE P298) Possibly swiped at the end of WWII, these St Petersburg treasures have been hiding out in the Paris of the East just waiting for you to discover them.



RE-ENACTING CHE GUEVARA'S *MOTORCYCLE DIARIES* THROUGH SOUTH AMERICA (SEE P265)

Rev an old bike out of Buenos Aires and head south through Chile, draw inspiration at Machu Picchu (pictured) and finish by volunteering in Peru (Guevara visited a leper colony). Witnessing all this inspired young Che to become a revolutionary.



RUBBING NOSES WITH MAORI AT A HANGI IN ROTORUA (NEW ZEALAND, SEE P183) Rotorua might be crowded but the traditional feast cooked in the geothermal heat of the earth will soon make you feel at home before traditional dancing kicks off.



MIKE POWELL / GETTY IMAGES

WILDLIFE-SPOTTING ON THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS (ECUADOR, SEE P258) The islands that evolution forgot have the unique giant tortoises, but there are also some pretty freaky iguanas, cute penguins and flocks of weird birds to discover.



CLIMBING TO THE TOP OF ANGKOR WAT (CAMBODIA, SEE P213) From up the top you can see the scattered pieces of the Khmer empire's history in dozens of temples, palaces and monuments buried in the jungle.

LEFT: JERRY ALEXANDER / GETTY IMAGES FAR LEFT: TUI DE ROY / JINNDER PICTURES