The Big Trip

Gap years and extended overseas adventures used to be the sole domain of recent school graduates. The history of such forays dates back to the 17th century, when upper-class British kids would complete their education by taking the ‘Grand Tour’ in Europe. The goal was a simple one: to experience the museums, paintings, culture and, more importantly, wines that they’d 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 memories to last a lifetime.

Fast-forward a couple of hundred years. Cheap flights and open minds have meant that even more people are taking a year off to embrace a world outside of their own. Of course, graduates still take the chance to celebrate the escape from school books and dull history lessons, but now everyone from couples with young kids to those in middle-age and even retirement are also making the exciting leap into the unfamiliar. No matter what demographic you may be part of, there are more options than ever to fill your time with rewarding experiences, whether backpacking or taking part in exchange programmes, working holidays or volunteering placements.

This seemingly endless list of options from around the globe can be as daunting as it is exciting, but making sense of it all is what this book is for – The Big Trip is designed to help you unite your dreams with distinct destinations and

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inspirational experiences, and to provide you with all the expert advice needed to get you on the road and back again. After that, all that’s left to be done is to let the life-changing trip begin.

WHY GO?
There is only so much you can understand about the world from school, documentaries, the news and your circle of friends on social media. There’s no substitute for getting out there to see, hear, taste, touch and smell the realities of what the world is. And, most importantly, there is nowhere better to learn about yourself than from outside your comfort zone.

Travel in foreign lands, away from the securities of home, friends and family, certainly has the power to take you there. Along the way you’ll open yourself up to be enthralled, inspired, amused, amazed, bemused, enriched, empowered and – yes – even scared. It’s a heady mix of emotions, but one that few people ever get tired of. When was the last time you heard of someone looking back at their life and wishing they’d travelled less?

The reason for this is that travel has the power to change your life for the better, often in ways you’d never imagined. For some travellers, such as Matt Phillips, it was coming to the stark realisation that fear was playing too large a role in his life. His lesson: dying wouldn’t be his life’s greatest tragedy, not truly. It’s the icing on the cake. My experience working and living in Thailand was so fantastic that even if my next role had been making fruit shakes, I’d do it all over again.’

It’s not all about life-changing realisations or your career. Just like those 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 the music business ever since. Similarly, Amanda Allen-Toland, who volunteered to work as a youth ambassador in Bangkok on an international development programme on AIDS, could not have predicted the positive impact her volunteering experience would have on her career. Upon returning home she moved on to work as a programme manager for the Asia Pacific Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS in Melbourne, Australia.

‘It’s paid dividends for me. It led me into an area I wanted to be in with a higher level of responsibility, excellent pay and job satisfaction. It’s the icing on the cake. My experience working and living in Thailand was so fantastic that even if my next role had been making fruit shakes, I’d do it all over again.’

The big trip
For many travellers it may be more practical, 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 make changes to itineraries later, but let them know when you do veer off the itinerary to save the grey hairs on the trip. You can always make changes to itineraries later, but let them know when you do veer off the itinerary to save the grey hairs 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:

• Phone home Create a schedule for phoning home, texting or whatever (there are more tips in Part One, p71). Make sure it’s reasonable (calling every hour is crazy, but only ringing once a month whatever (there are more tips in Part One, p71). 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 how to do 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 reassuring 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 demonstrably aided or improved by travel.
ESCAPING FROM WORK

Negotiating time out from work (or resigning) is the most important, and potentially hardest, obstacle to overcome for many travellers. If you’re keen on staying within the same organisation it’s key to plan your conversation with your employer carefully, especially if you work for a company that doesn’t have a policy on extended leave or where no precedent has been set. Here are some tips:

Do your homework
If you work for a large organisation, consult your company’s staff handbook, staff intranet and human resources department to get yourself up to speed on its leave provisions. Investigate if anyone else has taken time out and, if so, discreetly sound them out. Find out the company’s general attitude to people taking extended periods of leave: is it openly supportive or the reverse? Armèd with this information, you can plan your negotiation strategy accordingly.

Know exactly what you’re asking for
How much time away are you requesting? Will you settle for less? Do you want the same job once you return? Are you willing to quit? If so, are you going to be upfront about this, or will threatening to resign be the secret weapon that will give you leverage in your negotiations?

Offer solutions
Draw up ways in which you can be replaced temporarily so that continuity is ensured and minimum expense incurred by the company. In this way you will be making life as easy as possible for your boss by doing the thinking and planning for them.

Sell the benefits
Put forward your case for how your time abroad is going to benefit both your company and you: in many cases, such as volunteering, you may return with new skills that will benefit the workplace.

Play by the rules
When negotiating it’s wise to stick with well-worn tactics such as listening, expressing your wishes without being aggressive and showing that you can see things from your employer’s point of view. Even if you’ve decided to quit if you don’t get what you want, leaving on good terms will pay dividends in the future. On your return it’s possible the company will reconsider its position, but not if you’ve burnt all your bridges and made enemies by telling them where to shove their job.

Get any agreement in writing
If you’ve been successful in getting an agreement in principle from your employers, get it in writing. Make sure this includes the dates of your leave of absence, what position (or level of position) and salary you’re entitled to and whether your pension or other company benefits are affected.

Negotiating voluntary redundancy
If during your homework you get wind of the fact that your company is looking to cut costs and staff, get in first and offer to take a voluntary redundancy package and you might just leave with a nice fat cheque to help fund your adventure.

WHY NOT GO?

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 Kenya you’ll remember marvelling at the great wildebeest migration in the Masai Mara, or if you meet a New Zealander, Canadian or Scot you’ll be able to regale them with stories of exploring their beloved mountains and meeting their fellow citizens. These intangibles will stay with you your whole life.

WHY NOT?

We’re going to be honest: no trip is always easy. Travel brochures can turn out to be studio-shot trickery and there may be times when you’re sick, broke 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 volunteering can come with a pretty big price tag. We’ve got a few tips on making your dollars, pounds, euros and baht go further (see p32), but you may have to prioritise and work out how long you can afford to be away. Would you rather spend your winter working at a ski resort in the Alps, leaving your summer free to journey around Europe by train and budget airline? Or would you rather volunteer in Nepal helping rebuild homes after an earthquake? 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, and from the way much of the world’s dangers are sensationalised in the media, it would be easy to find a reason not to visit most places, be it Addis Ababa, New York, Rio de Janeiro or Paris. However, the situation on the ground – particularly in relation to travellers – often bears no resemblance to what is being depicted in the news. Your best guide to determine a level of safety that you are comfortable with is via government agencies, such as the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the US Department of State, which produce up-to-date travel advisories on every country on the globe (see p40).

And then there’s the environmental concern. Although modern aeroplanes are producing less carbon emissions than previously, their pollution is still an issue, as is the potential for tourists to bring problems to sensitive regions. However, if travel is done responsibly it has the power to provide great benefits, both to the hosts and the visitors. This book will show you how to keep your carbon footprint tiny and prevent damage to fragile environments and cultures (see p76). At the risk of getting overly sentimental, travel should bring the world closer together.
Diving the Great Barrier Reef (Australia, p188) An underwater nirvana, this incredible reef stretches more than 2000km along Australia’s northeastern coast. Dive (or snorkel) below the surface and share its tropical waters with 400 types of coral, 1500 species of fish and numerous sea turtles, whales, dolphins and porpoises.

Soaking up the ancient history of Rome at the Colosseum (Italy, p163) There’s nothing like a feisty Roman monument to rev up your inner historian, and the Colosseum performs brilliantly. A testament to raw, merciless power, this massive 50,000 seat amphitheatre is the most thrilling of Rome’s ancient sights.

Trekking to Machu Picchu (Peru, p277) Gawping down at Machu Picchu from the Sun Gate after a lung-busting four-day hike along the Inca Trail is a rite of passage for travellers.

Walking the Great Wall of China (China, p203) Not a single wall, but an awe-inspiring maze of walls and fortifications that stretch for an astonishing 8850km.

Finding peace and perfection at the Taj Mahal (India, p241) It might be the most recognisable building in the world, yet it still hides plenty of secrets.

Hiking in Grand Canyon National Park (USA, p263) This mile-deep canyon is nature’s cathedral. To hike down to its floor is to walk through two-billion years of geologic time.
How will you work out your route? With RTW ways to touch down on several continents, but from budget and major airlines are both good guidebooks and start planning your global spread out the maps, break the spines of those. The most exciting part of any trip is when you take some of the grunt work out by helping to sort out a RTW ticket for you. However, more complex (and pricier) routes might have to drop a few of your choices or take side trips via an add-on flight or overland trip. If you have a RTW ticket that drops you in Sydney, for example, you could get a budget flight to Darwin before heading south to see Uluru, then loop back to Sydney via the wineries around Adelaide. Try to work out how long you want to stay in each place including side trips, so you can look at getting visas (see p26) for the right length of time.

Sounds too complicated? A travel agent can take some of the grunt work out by helping to sort out a RTW ticket for you. The basic RTW loop generally includes London–Singapore–Sydney–Los Angeles (LA). However, more complex (and pricier) routes could look like this:


You might also like to plan a few ‘surface sectors’ by going overland to explore places in depth. It can be the legendary road trip, a camel ride or a long hike. We’ve listed some popular surface sectors here.

- Africa Nairobi (Kenya) and Johannesburg (South Africa); Johannesburg and Cape Town (South Africa)
- Asia Bangkok (Thailand) and Singapore; Bangkok and Bali (Indonesia); Beijing and Hong Kong (China)
- Australia and New Zealand Sydney and Melbourne (Australia); Perth and Brisbane (Australia); Cairns and Sydney or Melbourne (Australia); Adelaide and Darwin (Australia); Auckland and Christchurch (New Zealand)
- The Indian Subcontinent Delhi and Mumbai (India); Delhi and Kathmandu (Nepal)
- North America LA and New York (USA); San Francisco and LA (USA); Vancouver and Toronto (Canada)
- South America Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Buenos Aires (Argentina); Quito (Ecuador) and La Paz (Bolivia); Lima (Peru) and Santiago (Chile)

CLIMATE

Hitting your destination at its sweetest time means working out the weather and making sure you get there in the right season. The thermometer of each hemisphere has different seasons, with the northern hemisphere’s enjoying spring from March to May, summer from June to August, with autumn running September to November and winter sinking in from December until February. In the southern hemisphere’s temperate zone, summer runs from December to February, autumn runs from March to June, winter from June to August and spring from September to December.

Not surprisingly, many travellers opt for summer and spring, when the days are long and the temperatures warm in many destinations, so each hemisphere is popular during these seasons. Days get longer in summer the closer you get to the poles, so places in northern Scandinavia experience the ‘midnight sun’ where the sun is partying for most if not all of the night. This is balanced in the depths of winter with the ‘midday dark’, when Scandinavians look to sunbeds to supplement their lack of solar rays.

As well as checking the When to Go sections of the destination chapters, you can look up some of these sites that give average temperatures in several world destinations:

- World Climate Guide (www.worldclimateguide.co.uk)
- World Travel Guide (www.worldtravelguide.net/destinations) Useful descriptions of seasons and advice on what to wear.
- Yahoo Weather (www.yahoo.com/news/weather/)
- YR (www.yr.no) Norwegian site with a global reach on weather

Wet, Dry & Hurricane Seasons

Different regions experience very different weather systems. The simplest pair are the Arctic (in the extreme north of the world) and Antarctic (in the south) regions which both suffer long winters and very short summers. At the other end of the extreme are the tropics, the broad band that surrounds the equator (roughly between the latitudes of 23º30’N and 23º30’S, if you want to get technical) and includes Africa, India, South America as well as southern parts of the...
 DIRECTORY  PART FOUR

BRITISH & IRISH TRAVELLERS

PAPERWORK
GETTING A PASSPORT
- UK Passport Service [www.gov.uk/browse/abroad/passports]

VISAS FOR TRAVEL
- CIBT Visas [http://cibtvisas.co.uk]

INSURANCE
- Blue Bear Travel Insurance [www.bluebeartravelinsurance.co.uk]
- Columbus Travel Insurance [www.columbusdirect.com]
- Insure and Go [www.insureandgo.com]
- STA Travel [www.statravel.com]
- Staysure [www.staysure.co.uk]

MONEY & COSTS
- World Nomads [www.worldnomads.com]
- Travel Insurance
  - Columbus Travel Insurance [www.columbusdirect.com]
  - Blue Bear Travel Insurance [www.bluebeartravelinsurance.co.uk]
  - Staysure [www.staysure.co.uk]

GETTING A PASSPORT
- UK Youth Hostels Association [www.yha.org.uk]

HEALTH & SAFETY

VACCINATIONS
- Fit For Travel [www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk]
- NHS [https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/travel-vaccinations]
- Travel Doctor [www.traveldoctor.co.uk/vaccines.html]
- World Health Organization [www.who.int]

FIRST-AID & OTHER TRAVEL-SAFETY COURSES
- Adventure Lifesigns [www.adventurelifesigns.co.uk]
- British Red Cross [www.redcross.org.uk]
- Irish Red Cross [www.redcross.ie]
- Objective [www.objectivegapyear.com]
- St John Ambulance [www.sja.org.uk]
- Wilderness Expertise [www.wilderness-expertise.co.uk]
- Wilderness Medical Training [www.wildernessmedicaltraining.co.uk]

TRAVEL CLINICS
- Globetrotters Health Clinics [www.globetrotterstravelclinics.com]

GETTING A PASSPORT
- UK Youth Hostels Association [www.yha.org.uk]

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TRAVEL CLINICS
- Globetrotters Health Clinics [www.globetrotterstravelclinics.com]

GET PACKING
Good outfitters (most with online stores) include:
- AlpineTrek [www.alpinetrek.co.uk]
- Blacks [www.blacks.co.uk]
- Cotswold [www.cotswoldoutdoor.com]
- Nomad Travel & Outdoor [www.nomadtravel.co.uk]
- Pyramids [www.pyramidtravelshop.co.uk]
- Travel clinics all over Britain.
- Nomad Travel Clinics [www.nomadtravel.co.uk] Clinics in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, Bath and Bishop’s Stortford.
- Tropical Medical Bureau [TMB; www.tmb.ie]

GETTING A PASSPORT
- UK Youth Hostels Association [www.yha.org.uk]

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