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5 **This year an estimated 200,000 young people will embark on gap-year travels. Joanna Symons interviews four seasoned adventurers**

Alexa Ramsay: Teaching in Nepal

10 Like many other gap volunteers, Alexa Ramsay, fresh back from a four-month stint teaching English in Nepal, took a year out because she "wanted to experience a bit of the world between school and university".

Taking time out: a huge range of options are open to those looking for adventure

15 "Just about all my friends went off, too," she says. "In the sixth form [at Sherborne School for Girls], representatives from various gap-year agencies came to give talks and presentations and that helped us to choose what to do."

20 In the end Alexa opted to go with Africa and Asia Venture, "because it seemed smaller and friendlier than some of the others - and it only deals with certain countries in Africa and Asia, so I thought it would have a more specialist knowledge of the places it was sending us."

25 She was impressed by the support she received from the organisation - which is run and staffed by former Gurkha officers. "When I was travelling around Nepal, I met up with people who were on gap projects with other set-ups and it made me realise that ours really was well organised. One poor girl was stuck in the middle of nowhere with just one other volunteer, who was deeply religious. They hadn't hit it off - but she had no back-up and was very lonely."

30 Alexa, by contrast, shared a house with six other volunteers (about the ideal number she reckons). Two AAV representatives, who live permanently in Nepal, came to see them at least once a month.

35 "Altogether 30 of us came out to Nepal with AAV [the survivors of a fairly rigorous selection process] and we stayed together for a five-day induction course - learning about the local culture, food and language, and classroom technique."

40 This was all included in the cost of the placement (about £2,800, including flights), which Alexa raised by working, bursaries from her school and Hampshire county council, and saving birthday money. "At the end of the placement AAV organised four days' rafting and a week's safari for us - and we received two payments of £170 during the four months, which we used for travelling and buying presents."

45 It was a real culture shock at first, she admits. "Chris, my teaching partner, and I were the first volunteers to teach at our school - and the children weren't used to Europeans, so they spent a lot of time just staring at us. Most of the teachers were male and, because there's not much socialising between men and women in Nepal, they didn't know how to treat me. But by the end I felt I'd broken the ice - with the children at least. Initially, I sat in with the English teacher, but after a few sessions I was on my own - in front of classes of up to 70 pupils. It was difficult to get them to keep quiet - especially when I didn't understand what they were

50 saying. I'd learnt some basic Nepali, and we taught from a government textbook, which helped.

"There were some good days - and other times when I thought, 'Why the hell am I wasting my time?' A few pupils were quick to pick up the language, but in the end you have to accept
55 that you can only achieve a small amount in four months."

Back-up from friends in the shared house was important. "We got on brilliantly, and I've made friendships that I'll always keep. We were still travelling together in Thailand two months after we'd finished our work in Nepal." What else did she gain from the experience? "I
60 think I've gained more confidence. When I start university this year, I'll be going into a shared house with people I've never met and that would have been hard if I'd gone straight from school. It's also taught me to be more appreciative of what I've got."

65 **Stephen Fabes: Sponsored ride in Chile**

Stephen Fabes, a medical student, gives the lie to accusations of gap-year self-indulgence. He spent his year between school and university planning and undertaking a cycling expedition along the length of Chile to raise money for the Cystic Fibrosis Trust.

70 "It took a full nine months to get the whole thing together, and even then it was a rush to get started by March - before the weather closed in around Punta Arenas [near the southern tip of Chile]."

With help and advice from the Expedition Advisory Service at the Royal Geographical Society and from Tom Griffiths, the force behind the website www.gapyear.com, Stephen
75 wrote a prospectus explaining what he was doing and what help he needed. This he sent to about 80 companies.

"Sometimes I had to write two or three times until it reached the right person. It's a fine line
80 between persevering and being so persistent that you put people off." In the end, 10 companies sponsored the trip, mostly in the form of free or discounted equipment, which he sold at the end to boost proceeds. He also obtained grants from the Rotary and Lions Clubs, Young Explorers Trust and his school. "All the rest came from individuals. I handed out sponsorship forms wherever I went - even my bank manager got one."

85 Stephen was 19 at the time, his brother Ronan, who went with him, just 17. "I was originally going with a friend, but three weeks before we were due to leave, he was knocked off his bike by a car and badly hurt. At the time Ronan was still at school and not sure whether to continue with his A-level course, so he took time off to come with me."

90 The 5,862-mile ride was tough going. "The winds in Patagonia are huge. Things would blow off the bike without our realising and then we had to spend a whole day cycling back to recover them. We managed 70 miles one day in the Atacama Desert with the wind behind us, but at other times, cycling into the wind, we hardly moved at all."

95 "At one point we were stuck on a remote pass in the Andes with no food. We'd stocked up, but hadn't realised how deserted it would be and how long it would take to get through. Luckily, some farmers brought us into their shelter and gave us food."

100 "That was typical - the Chileans we met were incredibly hospitable and friendly. They'd see us putting up our tents and come up to invite us to stay in their homes."

Both brothers feel that the whole venture has given them more confidence. Nor has it dimmed their enthusiasm for academic work (a criticism sometimes levelled against gap travels).

105 Ronan went on to take his A-levels and Stephen found it "surprisingly easy" to resume studying when he started at Liverpool University.

110 He is already planning another sponsored ride, but plays down the do-gooding aspect of the trip. "I'd probably have done the ride anyway, but making it a charitable expedition definitely gave it an extra dimension."

Sarah Challands: Round-the-world trip

115 Australia is the most popular destination among gap-year travellers, according to research by the website gapyear.com - partly because it is seen as a "safe" option. But Sarah Challands, whose own experience of travelling there was anything but, gives warning that it's important to be wary of potential risks, wherever you choose to travel.

120 "I was 24, had been to university and was working in the oil industry when I decided to take a gap year," she says. "I'd become a bit disillusioned with living in London, so I bought a round-the-world ticket and took off."

125 After three months travelling around India and Nepal, Sarah moved on to Australia, working briefly in Sydney, doing the rounds of Kakadu, Ayers Rock and other popular sights.

130 "Then I joined an organised excursion to Fraser Island off the Queensland coast, where the only pure-bred dingoes in the world live. There were eight of us in a four-wheel drive. We'd been given a map and an itinerary and we camped out - being careful to lock away in the car anything that might attract the dingoes.

"The next morning two of us got up to see the sunrise - as recommended on the itinerary. It was incredibly beautiful and I remember seeing a tiger shark swimming in the clear water.

135 "When we got back to camp, we went to wash our hands in the sea - and that's when the dingo attacked."

140 Sarah was badly bitten on her legs and had to spend a week in hospital and a further week in a hotel because she still couldn't walk. "That was when it was hard being on my own. I had to telephone my parents to tell them because I didn't want them to hear it on the news. But I played it down so as not to worry them."

145 Despite her injuries, "coming home wasn't an option for me - I just never considered it. There was such a feeling of relief that I'd survived the attack that it probably hid other emotions. I went on to New Zealand, where I stayed in hostels - so I never had to be in a room on my own. I still had problems walking and I was a bit worried about going down the street alone in case I saw a large dog, but otherwise I felt fine."

150 There was a final stopover in Fiji - and then home, a year after setting off. "The experience has made me more cautious - about everything. It changes your perspective. But something like that would never put me off travelling; I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I do feel, though, that we should have been more thoroughly warned on Fraser Island. It was the breeding season, when dingoes are more aggressive.

155 "My advice to anyone setting off now would be to have a healthy respect for the country in which they're travelling - both its culture and the natural habitat. Britain is a controlled little world; it's easy to be complacent."

Alex Wager: Working in the Alps

160 Not all gap travellers are taking a break from studying. Alex Wager was five years into his career as area manager for a horse-feed company when he decided to throw it up for a winter working in the Alps.

165 "I loved my job and the people I worked with, but I'd started work straight after A-levels and I began to think, 'If I don't do something now, I'll be stuck going off to work every day for the rest of my life.' Once you've got a mortgage and other commitments, it's very difficult to break away."

170 A friend had just spent a winter season working with Skiworld, so Alex applied. "Originally, they offered me a job as a host - a polite way of saying dogsbody - but after an initial training week I was made manager of a 72-bed hotel in Courchevel 1850 [a chic resort in the French Alps].

175 "I dithered about whether to take on the responsibility - I wanted to go out there to enjoy myself - but I decided that it would look good on my CV and went for it. I'm glad I did."

Chalet staff can have a rather gadfly reputation, but Alex had to manage the hotel accounts and a staff of 10. It was a steep learning curve in customer relations.

180 "The trickiest time was when a 15-strong Scottish stag party arrived at the hotel, which was otherwise full of families. The guys were very noisy and very drunk - and simply failed to realise that the other guests were a bit upset. They never really sobered up, so it was difficult to reason with them. In the end I had to be quite tough, but we sorted it out."

185 Alex became so attached to living in the mountains that he decided to stay out there this summer, working with his girlfriend Tor, for the tour operator Scott Dunn, which recruits older, more experienced staff. His parents had been less than enthusiastic when he gave up his job. "But when they came out to stay and saw how beautiful it was, they were completely won over."

190 So, evidently is Alex. "The great thing is, you meet so many different sorts of people from so many different walks of life that it's really good experience. There aren't many jobs where you do that. It's also been good for my French. Best of all, I've perfected my [snowboarding] backflip. That made me very happy."

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