



# TAKE THE GAP

A gap year can give you the edge to stay ahead of the pack.

Whether you've just finished school or university, or you've reached a point in life where you don't know what to do next, a gap year could be the answer. From earning travel money to making friends and gaining life experience, confidence and independence, the benefits of taking off time to work abroad are innumerable, reckons Kirsty Thompson, owner of gap-year specialists Chilli Adventures.

'According to statistics, there are currently 200 000 unemployed graduates in the country,' says Kirsty. 'Employers are looking for something that sets you apart from the other hundred CVs they have on their desks – that's where work experience abroad gives you a massive advantage. And it doesn't necessarily have to be an internship or something relating to your chosen career path; just the fact that you went on your own across to the other side of the world says a great deal about you.'

A stint working abroad definitely gives you the edge, agrees Charlotte Quenet-Meintjies,

the SA head of USA-based staff-recruiting company Workaway International. 'Leaving your comfort zone to live and work abroad shows courage, maturity and independence – these are traits potential employers look for,' explains Charlotte. 'University placements are very oversubscribed and we're finding that a reference from a gap-year employer often makes all the difference to get you into varsity.'

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For Kirsty and Charlotte, one of the biggest perks of the job is seeing how the experiences change participants. 'They're more confident, more motivated, and they realise that life owes them nothing,' says Kirsty. 'We recently did a presentation at Stellenbosch University and a past participant stood up to give a talk on his experiences. Another staff member reminded me that this is the same boy who, a couple of months back, was so shy we almost couldn't find a placement for him. That's what working abroad did for me too. I was a very shy 18-year-old who wouldn't speak to two or three people at the same time, but today I find talking to large groups is one of the best parts of my job.'

Other than the opportunity for personal growth, there are financial rewards, adds Charlotte. 'A lot of our people come back with enough money to study, buy a car or even put down deposits on homes.'

## WHAT TO DO, WHERE TO GO?

Chilli Adventures has an impressive number of options available. Teaching English abroad is popular, with placements offered in China, Thailand, South Korea, and even Guatemala or Mexico. 'Many people intent on a professional career take that gap year, go to China to learn the language and come back with business skills that can open all sorts of doors,' explains Kirsty. Teaching English is also one of the few options available for older gappers (depending on the country, you can be as old as 45).

Teaching not for you? Why not sail the high seas on a cruise ship or a swanky super-yacht as a stewardess or deckhand? Participants can earn up to R25 000 a month, tax-free, but it takes a certain type of person, says Kirsty. 'People get starry-eyed when thinking of super-yachts and the glamour and the money, but you're working hard, for long hours, and have to perform to a really high level of service. But the right person will thrive.'

While young South Africans can't hop on

a plane and go work in the UK as easily as before, you can still get a visa to study there while working at the same time. 'Many people don't realise this, but studying at private colleges in the UK is no more expensive than universities in South Africa,' says Kirsty. Once you've graduated at a degree level you can also get a post-study work visa that allows you to stay in the UK to gain work experience. Chilli Adventures has also established a New Zealand study and work programme that's very much along the same lines as the UK one.

Another popular option is the Work and Travel USA programme, which allows full-time university students to work in the States during their December holidays. Other options include working at summer camps, au pair programmes and a Career Training USA programme offering internships in the States to recent university graduates.

You could also opt to work in a swish country club. Workaway International specialises in recruiting young South Africans (age 18-29 – chefs and waitrons can be up to 35) to work at country clubs in the US. They spend about six months (October-May) working in Florida as hosts, waiters, junior waiters, golf attendants, tennis attendants or chefs. After six months in Florida, they can extend their visa to work in country clubs in other US destinations like New York, Chicago and Pennsylvania.

A major advantage of the programme is that it's very structured, says Charlotte. 'You know exactly what to expect, which country club you're going to, which position you'll be placed in, what you're going to be earning, and where you're going to be staying.' The company has offices in SA and in Florida, so there's a South African staff contingent to act as a support structure and assist you when you get there.

## TIPS FOR THE ROAD

'Look at different agencies and decide which one meets your needs, and make sure it's a reputable company,' says Charlotte. 'Talk to people who've been on the programme you're interested in. Make sure you know where you're going, what you'll be doing, where you'll be living, what the visa process is and what you'll earn. Google the employer's website to check that it's all authentic.'

Kirsty advises doing background checks, too. 'Check the company's status with the relevant consulate or high commission,' she says. 'Do they have a good track record in terms of visas granted? Check the paperwork – for example, what is the refund policy if you back out or fall ill? And so on...' It's also a good idea to make sure they have a support network in place.

'Each programme offers a different experience, so make sure you really understand what your chosen programme is all about,' adds Kirsty. And don't go into the experience believing that everything is going to be easy. 'These aren't tours or trips; they are experiences. You'll be challenged, you'll be homesick, but if you have the right expectations it will be worth it.'

## DON'T LET THE CHANCE PASS YOU BY

'I think that every young person should work and travel,' muses Kirsty. 'There's a short window of opportunity before work and family responsibilities take over. Whether you take a gap year straight after high school, after university or even a little later – get out there and experience the world, because it will completely change your life, positively, in every way.'



TEXT: ILZE HUGO; PHOTOGRAPHY: THINKSTOCK

## Case studies

### PHILANI NDWANDWE, 22

**THE JOB:** I worked as a food runner at a country club.

**THE BENEFITS:** I think the experience helped me grow as a person. You learn a lot living on your own, far from home. You face difficult challenges and learn how to deal with things you would previously have asked your family for help with. The experience also made me think about where I wanted to be in life.

**ANY ADVICE?** I wasted money for half a year studying something I didn't really want to do before going over, so my advice is that, if you don't know what you want to do right after school, rather travel, see more of the world, and get a better idea of exactly what you want. And when you come back you'll focus on that.

### QUINTON ARENDSE, 32

**THE JOB:** My first experience working abroad was as a chef in Ireland. I've also worked in London (on the two-year working-holiday visa), on a cruise ship and at a country club in the US.

**THE BENEFITS:** My time in Ireland was an eye-opener. Before I went over I was introverted and didn't want to try new things. After I came back, I saw things differently. The opportunities were there. I was only in the trade for two-and-a-half years and I was offered a good position at a well-known hotel right after coming back. Whenever I speak to younger people I say go for it, take the opportunity and go see what's out there – especially in the hospitality industry. It really helped me a lot.

**ANY ADVICE?** Do your homework. Research the company and make sure it has a trusted track record.