



CALLING ALL GAPPER PARENTS

5 conversations you need to have to help guide the gap year planning.



Dear Parents,

My name is Milly and I run The Leap with my husband, Guy, and my brilliant team. We've been in this business for over twenty years now, and as a parent myself to two boys, I think I can confidently call myself a gap year expert. After all of these years, I thought it might be helpful for me to amalgamate this knowledge all into one place, hopefully being a useful resource for the parents of the next generation of gappers.

You might be the parent of a gapper who knows exactly what they're doing (if so, lucky you!), or you might have a gapper sitting in front of you who has no plans at all, and just knows they want to take a gap year. Either way, fear not as I've seen it all, and I'm fairly sure we've been asked just about every question under the sun by now.

So, without further ado, here are the 5 things you need to discuss around the kitchen table to help your gapper plan the best gap year ever, from the gap year structure, which continent, challenges, costs, to common concerns...

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

STRUCTURE

Breaking down the year into bite-sized chunks



Let's talk about the structure...

If you haven't had experience of sending your son/daughter off on their gap year then you might be surprised to hear that most gappers don't actually end up travelling the entire year, most only travel for 3-4 months of the 15 months or so that they have from finishing school to starting uni. So why does it end up looking this way? Well, most gappers start their gap year just like everyone not taking one – leavers' parties, summer festivals, and family holidays. In September their friends will head off to uni, and it's the perfect time for your gapper to look at getting a job. **Most gappers work from September to end of December, in order to save like crazy for their upcoming travels.**

January/February is the most popular time for gappers to kick off their travels, and who could blame them? January is unfailingly cold, dark, and miserable, and is the perfect time to go searching for sunnier climes. This is also a great time for meeting other gappers on their travels, whether they're on a team trip or going independently, as hostels are often bustling with travellers coming and going.

Many gappers kick off their travels with a more structured programme, which could be anything from an art history course in Europe to volunteering in South America. The advantages of this are that they have a softer landing than if they just touch down in a foreign country with no plan. For example, when our Leapers land we make sure they're picked up from the airport, shown how to buy local SIM cards, and given a thorough briefing on safety and in-country customs. Then they have ongoing support of team leaders, the UK team, and their fellow Leapers. During this time they grow confident with navigating the region, ready to then independently travel afterwards.

If they've done a structured programme then they often go on to travel for two or three months afterwards. Then it's home again for summer to maybe squeeze in some inter-railing, a family holiday, and fun with friends before heading off to uni in September. Gap year smashed.

FYI One of the common mistakes I see is gappers trying to do too much in too short a space of time; my golden rule is one month, one country.

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

THE HOW

Hostel hopping, volunteering, or a programme?



Let's talk about the how...

In the past I've spoken to gappers who are confident jumping on a flight, and heading off totally solo, and I've also spoken to gappers who have never left the UK before. The beauty of a gap year is that absolutely anyone can take one, whether you're a seasoned traveller or not, some just need a little more support than others.

So perhaps your son/daughter has a gang of friends and they've got plans to hostel hop around Asia together. Fantastic. But if those plans fall through (as I've sadly heard all too often) or what if they want to travel off grid safely? That's where a team programme comes in; I might be biased because that's what we specialise in, but we've found that gappers often get a lot out of travelling with a team. Not only will they have a ready-made social life, but the logistics and planning are sorted for them, meaning that they don't have to stress about anything. It's reassuring for parents back home too; you know that there's some structure and someone looking out for your son/daughter.

Something else to think about is the *type* of team programme they want to do. If they're wanting a volunteer programme for example, then they need to ask how many hours a day will be actually hands-on volunteering. Will all the volunteers arrive and complete the programme together or will they come and go? How old are the volunteers (some companies class "gap year" as 18-30, so your gapper might be surrounded by people considerably older than them)? Food (meals & quality included vs buy their own at extra cost), accommodation (family homestay vs Leap house) & transport (public vs Leap private hire), varies hugely.

There are also varying levels of support that different companies and trips provide, for some the gappers are very much left to their own devices and expected to sort any issues themselves, for others they have 24/7 structure. You tend to get what you pay for, and there's nothing wrong with that, just as long as you and your gapper know what to expect going into it.

A savanna landscape at sunset. The sky is a gradient of orange and red, with a large, bright sun on the right side. In the foreground, there is a large, dark silhouette of an acacia tree on the left and two giraffes on the right. The giraffes are standing and looking towards the left. The background shows rolling hills and more trees in silhouette.

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

T H E W H E R E

What level of challenge?

Let's talk about the where...

Your gapper might be unsure on where exactly they want to go in the world, but as a general rule I would recommend they plan for one month-one country. Each continent comes with varying levels of challenge, so discuss with your gapper whether they want relaxing beachy vibes or hardcore gritty vibes.

Asia: A backpacker's dream, with cheap transport, food, and accommodation. Easy to navigate and packed with breath-taking cultural sites, beautiful beaches, and some of the best food in the world. This is a great continent for even the most inexperienced traveller, the least challenging.

Africa: Not as easy for a newbie backpacker, as the countries are not set up for backpacking logistics. I would definitely do a set programme here and cluster the countries up – such as Kenya – Tanzania – Zanzibar or South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Central America: Fit-to-bursting with adventure and excitement, Central America has seen a huge rise in popularity in recent years. Easy to navigate and packed full of bucket-list places and an amazing mix of contrasting experiences.

South America: It's super easy to connect Central and South America due to the relatively inexpensive cost of flights. However, gappers shouldn't overestimate just how vast South America is, and how long it takes to travel around it. Some countries are easier than others to navigate as a backpacker, but overall it's much safer to travel around than it used to be.

Australia: A great place for gappers wanting to get a job whilst they travel. Many gappers are drawn to the chilled beach vibes and relaxed way of life, but it's great to also consider then heading over to SE Asia to experience a cultural contrast. Australia itself is expensive, and it costs a lot to get there, so perhaps not the best option for a backpacker on a budget.

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

WHILST

THEY'RE AWAY

What are your expectations?



Let's talk about whilst they're away...

Having sent both of my boys to the other side of the world on their gap years, I totally understand the anxiety that can accompany waving your child off at the airport. So, what can you do to alleviate the anxiety?

1. Before they go sit down and discuss your expectations from them whilst they're away. For example, will you be expecting them to message you every day (spoiler alert, that almost certainly won't happen), check in once a week, or will the odd message here or there suffice? It's finding a compromise that means they won't feel like mum and dad are looming over their shoulder each day demanding to know what they're doing and where they are, but that you're not sat anxiously worrying that you haven't heard from them for weeks.
2. Send them somewhere you know they'll be in safe hands. If they're going to join a programme of some sort, then research what the back up and support looks like. If there's an emergency helpline, then where is it based? What happens if they need medical attention? Has the company done thorough risk assessments? These are all questions to have in the back of your mind when researching gap year companies.
3. If it would make you feel happier then you could take out something like Travel Aid, which provides 24/7 telephone travel safety and personal security advice for independent travellers. Your gapper will have access to a team of highly experienced professional incident managers who can provide practical advice and support to help maintain their safety while far from home. Incident managers will calmly talk them through their immediate priorities, raise the alarm with local emergency services, update your emergency contacts if agreed necessary, and open a case with your travel insurer if helpful.
4. Now I know this is a tempting one, but do *not* download one of those 'find my friends' type apps that allows you to track your son/daughter whilst they're away. I speak from experience when I tell you it brings nothing but stress as you wonder what they're doing heading down a Peruvian backroad at midnight. Sometimes ignorance really is bliss.
5. Hard as it may be, sometimes we just have to let them get on with it. Yes, they'll probably make silly decisions, almost certainly message home asking for money at some point, and invariably come home with a dodgy tattoo and near misses.

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

T H E N I T T Y

G R I T T Y

Details to know



Let's talk about the nitty gritty ...

The Fridge File:

I know what you're thinking, what on Earth is the fridge file? The fridge file is a collection of information that you need to have a copy of back home before your son/daughter heads off on their travels, which can then, should you so wish, be stuck to the fridge for safekeeping. Then if something were to go wrong (stolen wallet, lost passport etc), you're on hand to help. Things to include in the fridge file are:

- A photocopy of their passport
- A copy of their insurance policy and details
- How to get into their bank accounts – if their cards are stolen then you can cancel them from home
- Details of their phone service provider, and details of how to access their account – again, if their phone gets lost/stolen then you can deal with it from your end (lucky you)

Passport:

Many countries require at least 6 months on a passport before it expires to enter, so worth checking before they head off. If they do need to renew it, give it plenty of time because it can take months to get back.

Vaccinations:

I get asked a lot what vaccinations are needed for travel, and of course it totally depends on the destination and the best person to guide you is your doctor. However, in general hepatitis A, tetanus, and typhoid are pretty universally recommended. Get these out the way early as there can be long wait times.

Travel insurance:

You should buy this as soon as possible, don't leave it until the day before your gapper is meant to depart. Best to get it as soon as you've paid for any big-ticket things such as flights or a course/programme.

Pre-paid debit cards:

Lots of gappers choose to take a pre-paid debit card such as a Monzo or Revolut card with them, as they often have lower transaction fees than a regular debit card and provide a back-up in case cards get lost/stolen.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Frequently asked questions

1. Should my gapper take a suitcase or backpack on their travels?

A backpack is best, or a duffle-type bag. A hard-shelled suitcase will be hard to transport, hard to store, and is likely to get damaged. Packing cubes are a must to make packing easy.

2. Should my gapper book everything in advance or can it be left more last minute?

Flights tend to only increase in price the longer you leave them, so if possible they can be booked early. However, your gapper's plans will end up changing once they arrive and get going, so they don't want to book everything so far in advance they can't go with the flow and change their plans once they're out there. But note that many countries require a proof of exit before entering the country.

3. How much does my gapper need to budget for their gap year?

Expect to spend around £1000 a month if they're independently budget backpacking, but to also factor in big-ticket items, e.g. Machu Picchu treks which will come with a hefty price tag.

4. Will universities be put off by my son/daughter doing a gap year?

Absolutely not. In fact, universities often like to see that applicants have taken one, just as long as it's been used wisely. A year sat on the sofa isn't going to cut it. There are plenty of soft skills a gap year can teach you, and if they manage to fit in some sort of volunteering experience then even better.

5. If my gapper wants to book a team programme with you how far in advance do they need to book?

Whilst most gappers book between 6-4 months in advance, we're also pros at getting people away last-minute, our current record being a week before departure. We know that plans fall through last-minute, but during our busy periods we do get teams that fill up, so always worth getting their name down early.

TIME FOR
THEM TO
GET GOING



Time to get them on the plane

Planning a gap year might feel like a daunting task but I promise it doesn't have to be. My main piece of advice would be to remember that you and your son/daughter are on the same team. There will be compromises you both need to make along the way, but at the end of the day you want them to have a fun and fulfilling gap year (even after they call you for the third time to tell you they've lost their debit card yet again and could you please send them a hundred quid).

If you're still at a complete loss, then get in touch with us here in the office. Myself and my team are very used to speaking to parents who don't have any experience of planning a gap year, as well as kids who aren't 100% sure what they want to do, they just know they want to do something. The amount of information that's out there can be overwhelming, so if you want to speak to a human being with many years of experience in this field and has seen how gap years have evolved over time then give us a call. I personally love seeing Leapers grow over the course of their time away I've had so many parents tell me that their son/daughter has come back a different person – confident, independent, responsible, and self-assured.

My final pieces of advice for you and your gapper:

- Be prepared to go with the flow
- Encourage them to do something meaningful and give back to the communities
- Push them out of their comfort zone
- Make the most of it, they will never get this time back again so make it count

That's all from me, I hope this has been helpful, but as I said, get in touch if you have any questions about anything, they don't call us the gap year experts for nothing...

Happy planning,
Milly