

Here to Help; How to Plan a Gap Year

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This year's college admissions season is nearing its close. Acceptances in hand, many future freshmen will eagerly enroll for the coming Fall term. Some, however, might want to pump the brakes.

"A gap year is about taking a time out after being in school for so long to do something different, usually in another country," said David Stitt, a founder of Gap 360, a gap-year trip planning company based in Britain.

The custom is common in Britain, where more than 200,000 students choose to take a gap year, according to Ethan Knight, a founder of the American Gap Association, a Portland, Ore., nonprofit that gives free advice on planning a gap year. In the United States, on the other hand, only 30,000 students -- less than 1 percent of those graduating from high school -- take the route.

For those tempted by the idea, Mr. Knight and Mr. Stitt share their top tips on how to have a successful gap year.

RESEARCH YOUR OPTIONS WELL

There are many ways to spend a gap year -- volunteering, working abroad or learning a new skill are just a few -- and it's best to survey all the choices before settling on one. "You can't even imagine the cool options that are available until you start reading about them," Mr. Knight said. "Who knew, for example, that you can volunteer with animals at a wildlife rehabilitation center in Bolivia while learning Spanish?"

EXPECT THINGS TO GO WRONG

Your gap year, particularly if you're in a developing country, won't be seamless, Mr. Stitt said. "You're going to go through a bit of a shock, but embrace it," he said. Trains and planes won't run on schedule, the electricity may go, and the phone lines may not work well.

These glitches are exactly the point of a gap year, according to Mr. Knight. "You build resilience and also get an insight into another culture and how things work in that country," he said.

A GAP YEAR DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A YEAR

Data from the American Gap Association shows that 70 percent of students in the U.S. who go the gap year route actually take only a semester off. "Don't sweat it if you can't take a year off. Even a few months is enough to have a life-changing experience," Mr. Knight said. Conversely, he added, you don't have to limit yourself to a year, either.

For more life tips, look for Smarter Living at nytimes.com.

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