

SHOESTRING

Exploring the world - on a budget

Issue #1 | Free
May 2010

Couchsurfing:

Brian Thacker sleeps around

Work & Travel

Breaking the language barrier

Cowboy School

Learn new skills Down Under

Dreamjob: Tour Guide

“Rule #1: It’s a truck, not a bus!”

Taking a year out

How to plan it properly

Plus:

Volunteering in Ghana * Out in Llangollen * Scuba Diving





G' Day!

You are currently holding the very first issue of Shoestring magazine in your hands! Mark Twain once famously wrote: "Explore. Dream. Discover." He was right, and even though the world has been discovered many times over, there is still plenty out there for you to explore and dream about.

Shoestring magazine aims to give you ideas of where to explore next and what adventures can be had out there. In this issue, we talk to overland guides about working in the road, and

Australian author Brian Thacker answers our questions about sleeping on someone else's couch. Take a look at what Llangollen has got to offer, or go volunteering in Africa.

I believe that where you have been is not half as important as where you are going. We even compiled tips on how to plan a Gap Year so that there's no excuse anymore... Meet you there!

Cornelia

IN THIS ISSUE:



OUT AND ABOUT IN WELSH TOWN LLANGOLLEN
P. 4



WORK EXPERIENCE IN A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE
P. 5



COUCHSURFING INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN THACKER
P. 6



FEEL FREE ON THE OCEAN FLOOR WHILE SCUBA DIVING
P. 8



MAKING A DIFFERENCE AS A VOLUNTEER IN GHANA
P. 9



GETTING PAID FOR GOING OVERLANDING AS A GUIDE
P. 10



LEARNING COWBOY SKILLS ON AN AUSTRALIAN FARM
P. 11



PLANNING A GAP YEAR - YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED
P. 12

ISSUE #1

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cornelia Kaufmann

PICTURE EDITOR

Cornelia Kaufmann

DESIGN & LAYOUT

Cornelia Kaufmann

CONTRIBUTORS

David Simister

Laura Heisig

Skye Macdonald

PHOTOGRAPHERS

Cornelia Kaufmann (CoKa)

Laura Heisig (LaHe)

Skye Macdonald (SkMa)

Vicky Hartley (ViHa)

Joanne Martin (JoMa)

Brian Thacker (BrTh)

Luise Görnitz (LuGö)

Tim Macdonald (TiMa)

Tony Rath (ToRa)

Scuba Gear Canada (SGC)

Opi Resorts (OpRe)

PROOF READERS

Lauren Moore

David Simister

Sonja Kaufmann

CONTACT

kaufmann.cornelia@gmail.com

NEWS / DEALS / FESTIVALS



Sun setting over the Serengeti National Park, TANZANIA

Going to Ireland?

March saw the introduction of the Stena Express Fastcraft between Holyhead (Wales) and Dun Laoghaire (Ireland). Up to 520 passengers can now jet across the Irish Sea in just 110 minutes. If that's not a reason to go...

Never lose your luggage again!
The new Rebound Tag can be attached to suitcases and electronically stores your trip and contact info on two microchips, so it can be sent back to your home address in case you lose it!
Order yours for GBP 19.99 at www.reboundtag.com

The Great Escape Festival
Head down to Brighton between 13th and 15th May for this year's Great Escape. Confirmed acts include Groove Armada and the Young Guns as well as over 350 acts showcasing local talent at over 30 venues around town.



Hanging on for a wild ride at the Reno Rodeo, Nevada, USA

Take the plunge!
Shotover Canyon Swing in Queenstown, New Zealand is launching the world's highest tandem cliff jump. The cliff is 109m high, and it's the highest tandem jump you can do without a plane!
www.canyonswing.co.nz

African airline partnership
Zambia-based Zambezi Airlines and Air Malawi are teaming up to offer travellers more flexibility with twice weekly flights between Lusaka and Lilongwe, and direct flights between Lilongwe and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

Travel Photo Competition
Overland specialist Kumuka Worldwide is now receiving entries for the Travel Photography Competition 2010. They are looking for pics taken around the world in the categories 1.) Kumuka Travellers and Families, 2.) Landscapes, Landmarks and Wildlife and 3.) People and Culture. Three big trips to Africa, Egypt and Central America are up for grabs. Ends 01.09.2010. Find out more on www.kumuka.com

CHECK OUT WHAT FESTIVALS THE UK HAS TO OFFER IN 2010 AT
www.thefestivalcalender.co.uk

New Lake District walk

A new circular walking and cycling route will open along the old Keswick Railway Path in late April. The route will lead from Keswick railway station to Threlkeld and back past the Castlerigg Stone Circle. Ideal for those with limited mobility, as well as everyone who does not want to complete one of the more strenuous walks, the 10km long path will also include short-cuts and viewing areas along the way.

No need for guide books
A new website has been launched, which will make guide books obsolete. Local experts will blog daily about what's hot and what's not, so the information will never be out of date again!
Check out www.simonseeks.com



Taking the plunge from Auckland Skytower's 195m-high platform

Do you have a story to tell?

Have you had the experience of a lifetime somewhere off the beaten track? Discovered something new to do? Or taken a spectacular photo that's just too good to be hidden away? Then get published in **SHOESTRING**.

Send your stories and pictures to kaufmann.cornelia@gmail.com



A Maori warrior challenges visitors to his Marae at Te Puia, Rotorua, New Zealand

“LLANGOLLEN IS A JEWEL IN NORTH WALES’ CROWN”

That’s what one of the town’s former reporters reckons, and thinks you should give it a try as well. After all, there has to be something there, that makes it a top festival town...

The last thing I’d want to suggest is going to the pub but Llangollen’s best view is from the beer-garden.

When you’re perched, pint in hand, on the wooden planking just outside the Welsh town’s Corn Mill pub, you’re presented with all its wonders at once. Immediately in front you’ll catch canoeists getting catapulted along the River Dee, and alongside that the nostalgic charm of trains about to chug their way right up the valley.

It’s a scene surrounded by stunning crests and crags for miles around, including one with an enchanting ruin of an old castle atop it. All that before you turn around and catch the town itself.

Llangollen is one of those hidden gems you can’t help but love; a stone’s throw from the urbanly English cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, but ever so Welsh without wandering into clichés. If the serenely scenic region of North Wales is a crown of Britain’s countryside, then surely this is one of its jewels.

I was lucky enough to actually work as Llangollen’s local news reporter for six months, and I completely fell in love with the place. Chances are you will too, but first you have to get there.

Part of the reason why Llangollen lies unspoilt in the North Welsh countryside is because it’s trickier to get to than Rhyl or Prestatyn, its competitors for tourists in the county of Denbighshire. It was

cut off from Britain’s rail network more than half a century ago, but catch a bus from nearby Ruabon station - itself not far from Wrexham and Chester - and the town is a ten minute trip.

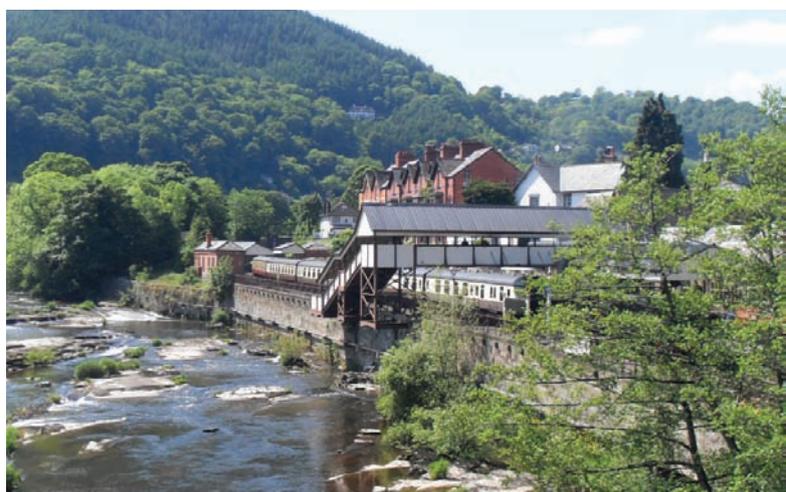
If you’re already in North Wales, another option is to head towards Carrog, park up and take a steam train on the lovingly preserved Llangollen Railway. At £10 per return ticket it’s not cheap, but it does give you the chance to experience a real throwback to the steam heyday of Britain’s railway past, all the while travelling through the breathtaking backwaters of the Dee Valley. Getting off the bus is turning up, but showing up by steam train is truly arriving!

I often arrived in a rush on Castle Street, the town’s main thoroughfare, but it’s worth just stopping to take in the sheer beauty of the place. Lush forests cover the hills surrounding you, and on a summer’s day the water rushing below you in the River Dee is blue, balmy, and inviting. Picturesque hardly does it justice.

◀.....▶
‘Llangollen has some of the most stunning scenery to offer’
 ▶.....◀

There’s a string of shops, cafés and tourist centres vying for your attention, including a fantastic store on Castle Street which blends a bookshop with a bakery. But it’s well worth taking the extra quarter mile trek to visit Plas Newydd, home of the Llangollen Ladies, two Victorian writers who eloped to the town and became its icons.

From the Grade 2-listed house’s delicately-maintained gardens you can catch a glimpse of Castell Dinas Bran, the ruined hilltop overlooking Llangollen, and if you’re feeling energetic it’s well worth the effort. Aside from the inevitable historical charm, you always catch views of the



Llangollen’s old train station sits on the banks of the river Dee. The vintage Llangollen Railway is a major attraction. Photo: CoKa

town at its best, as well as looking further afield to the rolling hills of the Clwydian Range.

It’s just a shame that one of the town’s quirkiest attractions has been consigned to the history books; the national Doctor Who museum closed its doors almost a decade ago, ironically missing out on the popularity of the BBC’s recent revival. Driving around Britain’s only town with Dalek road signs made for a surreal experience!

But there are still plenty of top tips, and not just the bewildering array of arts and music offered each year by the famous International Musical Eisteddfod event. The town’s balloon festival is growing in popularity and attracts visitors from all over the British Isles, and speed freaks will love the town’s affinity with motorcycling, particularly at the Ponderosa café, on the nearby Horseshoe Pass.

What I learned from reporting on Llangollen is that everyone who lives there regards it as one of Denbighshire’s most delightful places, and they’re determined to keep it that way, for everyone to enjoy.

With so much on offer and some of the region’s most stunning scenery, it shouldn’t be too difficult.



From top: Plas Newydd, the home of the Llangollen Ladies; the vintage steam train of the Rheilffordd Llangollen and the historic feel of the town’s train station. Photos: CoKa

Writer Profile

Name: David Simister
 Age: 24
 Journalist on a mission to find the best beer-garden in the British Isles - and doesn't mind travelling to get there.

SUCCESSFULLY BREAKING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Adjusting to a new job is never easy, but doing work experience on the Galápagos Islands in Ecuador, without speaking a word of Spanish, is another game entirely.

Getting off the plane in the Ecuadorian capital Quito, my Spanish skills did not extend much further than “Hola, que tal?”

Although I had taken one year of Spanish lessons, I’d forgotten everything, and even a seventeen-hour flight with just a massive dictionary to keep me company didn’t change that.

While I was in Quito, I could still get by speaking English. But once I got to my far away work place, English speakers would be few and far in between.

For seven weeks, I was the photographer for the Parque Nacional Galápagos and stationed on Isla Isabela, the archipelago’s biggest island. My host family spoke no English whatsoever, and although I didn’t expect them too, they didn’t help me either.

Navigating my way from the airport across an entire island and onto a boat towards Isabela was tricky. Luckily, my hostess in Quito had written me a card that I could show in case I got lost, but I managed to hitch a ride instead.

Isabela itself is a paradise. White sandy beaches, lava outcrops, crystal-clear waters palm trees and sunbathing iguanas. Volcano Sierra Negra dominates the backdrop of the little town Puerto Villamil with its streets of sand.

“Take photos of the fauna and flora on the island, and all others aspects of island-life” - how hard could it be? I liked the job already. As long as I stayed



The Embarcadero of Puerto Villamil on Isla Isabela. Inset: Lonesome George at the Charles Darwin Station. Photo: CoKa

on the paths, and let the rangers know when I wanted to go somewhere out of the way, I could do what I wanted. No office hours, no checks.

‘Interacting with the locals did do me good’

To be honest, I was relieved and disappointed at the same time that I wouldn’t be working closely with the locals. I did go on a few trips with the park rangers, though, observing bird colonies at Isla Tortuga and meeting Lonesome George at the Charles Darwin Research Station outside Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz.

For one night, I even joined the rangers on a horse-trek up Sierra Negra, to an area that’s off-limits to the tourists. We camped up there, and slowly got talking around a small campfire on the lava rocks. Finally, my Spanish started to improve.

A few volunteers worked at the Giant Tortoise breeding centre in Puerto Villamil, and I was welcome to lend a hand. James was the oldest of us, and his beard immediately earned him the nickname “Darwin.”

Tom, an American businessman was going around the

islands to teach the locals about self-sufficiency and sustainability - and gave me the chance to learn some more about the Galápagos culture and speak to farmers who live outside the village.

Interacting with the locals did do me good. I had to do my shopping myself and ask my way around. When my host family sent me to buy “papeles” I was proud to return with 200 sheets of paper; but they were after “papeles higiénico” - toilet paper - and I had to go back and exchange it.

When I got to Isla Isabela, I could only say hello. When I left, I could hold conversations. Basic ones, but in Spanish, and that was all that mattered. Living and working in a different culture and language really forces you to focus, and learn quickly.

I do believe it is best to learn a language by immersing yourself into it, but sometimes a little brush-up doesn’t go amiss.

MORE INFORMATION

National Park Galápagos:
www.galapagospark.org

ELI Photography internships:
www.eliabroad.org

Learn a language on location:
www.languagesabroad.co.uk



From top: Volcanic landscape, James “Darwin” Jessup in Puerto Villamil and a Sally Lightfoot Crab up close. Photos: CoKa

Writer Profile



Name: Cornelia Kaufmann
Age: 22
This travel writer turned into a proper globetrotter during her Gap Year and has had itchy feet ever since.

“A WAY TO BYPASS THE TOURIST TRAP” SEEING THE WORLD — ONE SOFA AT A TIME

Brian Thacker tests couches for his latest book

Couchsurfing connects people and it's the latest tip for backpackers wanting to experience another culture from a local's point of view. Aussie author Brian Thacker went around the world and spoke to SHOESTRING founder Cornelia Kaufmann about his journey.

Backpacking is nothing new to Brian Thacker. Having worked as a tour guide in a previous life, he is well accustomed to being on the road and meeting strangers.

His latest adventure took him to Chile, Brazil, the USA, Canada, Iceland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Turkey, Kenya, South Africa, India and the Philippines within the space of ten weeks. He set off without having booked a single night's accommodation in a hotel - instead, he sent emails asking locals to offer him their couch. And they did.

How did you first learn about the idea?

I met a girl in Kyrgyzstan, who told me about a similar website called Globalfreeloaders. I joined straight away because I liked the idea of free accommodation! But at the same time, I didn't want some stranger staying with me so I said in my profile that I had five kids, lived far out of the city with no public transport and that I had just gotten out of prison. A few months later I stumbled on Couchsurfing. They have full profiles, you can vouch for people and leave references. I joined, but this time I took the kids and prison sentence out of my profile.

What was your main reason for choosing the sofas you slept on?

Ultimately I had to get a book out of my couch surfing trip, so I picked people who sounded 'interesting'. For that reason, I thought it wouldn't be much good if I stayed with someone who got home from work at 7pm and then sat and watched TV all night!

Although you didn't pay for accommodation, your hosts took you out to restaurants nearly everywhere you went.

Is it really a cheap way of seeing the world?

Yes, it is a cheaper way of seeing the world, but free accommodation was not why I did my couch surfing trip. It was the opportunity to bypass the standard tourist routes and be assimilated into local lifestyles and cultures, more than anything.

Did your Couchsurfing trip live up to your expectations?

It was much better than I expected! I thought it might be a little 'uncomfortable' to stay with strangers, but in most cases I was made to feel right at home and, best of all, made some great new friends along the way.

What was your favourite Couchsurfing experience?

That's a hard one. There were really so many. But as far as the couchsurfing part goes, my best couch was in Siquijor, Philippines. I went to stay with Elvie, a girl that worked in a resort on this little island. She led me outside to the beach and I thought I was going to be sleeping on the sand. Elvie took me down a track between huts that were scattered around a picture-postcard-perfect pool, past an empty open-sided beachfront bar and restaurant and onto the beach. 'I have got you your own room, she said. My 'room' was a luxurious thatched beach hut, which also had a large verandah, overlooking my very own hammock that was slung between two palm trees on the water's edge!

What is the worst thing that happened to you on your trip?

I got caught up in a gang fight in Chicago. My host was having a Halloween party and a gang - well four - of hoods tried to crash the party. There was a fight and the hoods ran my host's flatmate over and

broke his leg. Then the cops turned up and did the whole American TV cop show skidding tyres and shouting and guns... Okay, that part was cool.

What characterises a good host for you?

A good host is someone who makes you feel comfortable. And I have to say most of my hosts were like that. It was also really nice to have a host who takes time to show you around and takes you to the places that aren't in Lonely Planet.

In your book you mention you've gone for drinks nearly everywhere. Did you try the national drink in every country?

One of the biggest things I discovered on my trip is that the entire world is fuelled by alcohol! My favourite was Caipirinha from Brazil. On a warm night it was just so refreshing, but very potent at the same time!

How long would you say is the perfect stay?

As the saying goes, 'House guests are like fish; they go off after three days.' I think four or five days is okay, though.

In your book, you keep notes of all the couches and rate them from one to ten. Which couch came out top, and which one was the worst of the lot?

Well, my best couch was the beach hut in the Philippines and I gave

it 10 out of 10 as it doesn't get much better than that! The worst was my couch in Nairobi, Kenya which I gave 2 out of 10. It was so stifling, sticky hot, but the room was full of mosquitoes, so I had to sleep in my very warm sleeping bag as I didn't want to risk malaria.

Did you find all your hosts on Couchsurfing or are there other, similar networks as well?

I stayed with some people from globalfreeloaders, because that was the first network I joined. A few of my hosts had profiles on Hospitality Club. But it is by far the best.



TRIST ROUTES”

DFA AT A TIME

book *Sleeping Around*

Have you hosted someone yourself yet?

Yes I have hosted a few times. I had people from the Netherlands, Taiwan, Canada and the United States crash on my couch. The guy from Canada stayed with me two years in a row.

Do you reckon Couchsurfing is a safe way to travel?

I think it is very safe. If someone has been vouched for by a few people and has a long list of great references on the website, I just can't see how you can go wrong.

What advice can you give first-time surfers?

Make sure you have a detailed profile. Put down absolutely everything and make it interesting, because the better people can get an idea of who you are, the better your chances of scoring a couch, or being chosen to host.

Would you do it again?

Definitely! Couchsurfing is

great! I even went on a couch surfing book tour in Germany last year when *Sleeping Around* was published there. And I stayed with booksellers all around the country! Thank you for the interview!

Brian Thacker demonstrates his take on "couchsurfing"
Photo: BrTh

ABOUT THE BOOK

Who offers their couch to a complete stranger via the internet? And do you have to be a fearless adventurer or just plain optimistic to relax while sleeping in someone else's flat?

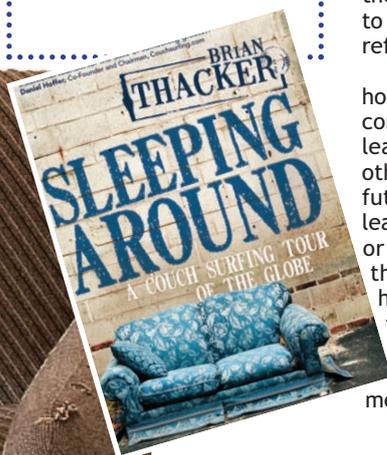
Brian Thacker packed his bag and joined in on the hip trend of couchsurfing, which led him on an adventurous trip around the world. He stayed with an architect, one host was unemployed and others were students. Brian saw the Townships in South Africa, went on safari in Kenya, tried the local beer in Belgium and was invited to family get-togethers in South America, India and Iceland.

In his very funny way, Brian tells of all the sometimes weird, sometimes touching experiences and encounters he had on his couchsurfing tour.

Sleeping Around was published in January 2009 by Allen & Unwin Australia. The

UK release date has yet to be confirmed, but the book can be ordered from online stores in the US and in Australia; straight from the publisher or through Brian's own website.

ISBN: 9781741752106



How does Couchsurfing work?

Couchsurfing is a network of currently more than 1,700,000 travellers all over the world and was founded in 2004.

Their mission statement is "Participate in creating a better world - one couch at a time." The website is not only used for finding free accommodation in all parts of the world, but also to come together for cultural exchange, friendships and educational experiences.

Currently, members hail from 236 countries, over 71,000 cities and speak 317 languages.

PARTICIPATE AS YOU LIKE

Each member can create a profile and include as much or as little information as they like. This includes information about what kind of couch they offer and what activities are offered in town.

Everyone can participate, even those who don't have a couch at the time, or don't want strangers staying with them. They can offer to meet up for a coffee or drink - which will show with a special symbol on the profile - and nobody is obliged to host. If they don't have time, or they don't like the sound of the person asking to surf with them, they can just refuse.

After a successful surfing or hosting experience, it is considered good practice to leave a reference on each other's profiles. That way, future potential surfers can learn something about the host or surfer, and decide whether they want to stay there or have that person stay with them.

Couchsurfing also offers the service of verifying members' addresses. This is a

further step towards participant safety, as the process verifies that the couchsurfers are who they say they are and live at the address that was used to sign up to the network.

Couchsurfer Judith Enders is living in Maastricht, the Netherlands and likes the groups on Couchsurfing.

TRAVEL-RELATED GROUPS

"It's great, there is a group for nearly everything! And most big towns have their own groups as well, with hot tips on where to go and what to do."

Advice is offered on famous routes, cities, backpacking tips, round-the-world tours, as well as travel health. She also says that some cities hold regular couchsurfer meetings.

"Going along to them is a good idea, whether you live or surf there. You'll always find new friends, get to exchange ideas and you might even find a guide who could show you around town."

She confesses that going to the meeting was one of the smartest things she did, when she moved to Maastricht. "I immediately had friends, and learnt about all the hip places to hang out, as well as where to bag bargains!"

WEBSITES

For more information about Brian visit his website
www.brianthacker.tv

Couchsurfing network:
www.couchsurfing.org

Global Freeloaders:
www.globalfreeloaders.com

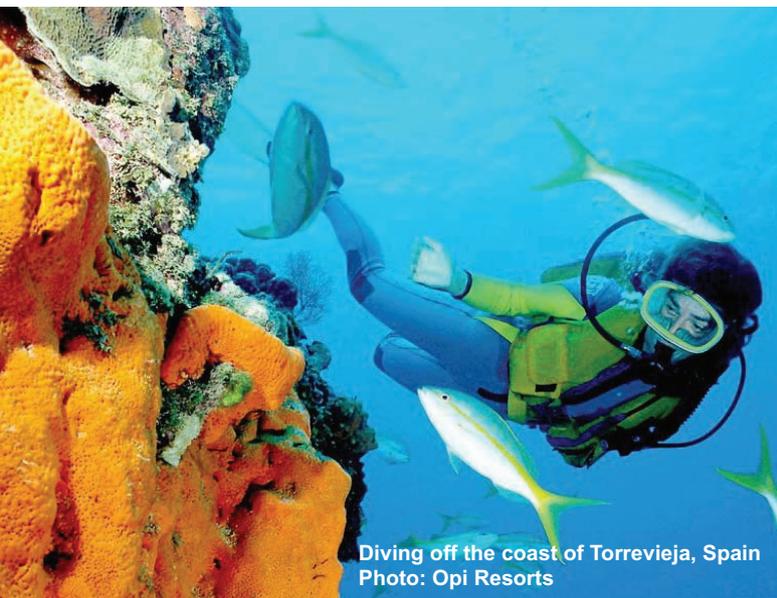
Hospitality Club:
www.hospitalityclub.com

Brian's publishers Allen & Unwin
www.allenandunwin.com

“IT’S JUST LIKE FLYING”

DIVE INTO ANOTHER WORLD

While most travellers only get to glimpse at tropical fish while on a short snorkelling trip, qualified scuba divers get to experience underwater life in all its colours and shapes.



Diving off the coast of Torrevieja, Spain
Photo: Opi Resorts

If you ask any scuba diver what it is that fascinates them about diving, they will all give you the same answer - freedom.

Nothing quite compares to the feeling of floating weightlessly 20 metres below the surface and watching a completely alien world drift by. I've been diving since I was 17 and initially did my open water ticket through my school's sport programme and I have loved diving since the moment I took my first breath under water.

Recently, I have talked a friend of mine into giving it a try, and after his very first lesson he said "You're right! It's just like flying!" Scuba diving has fascinated me so much,

that I wanted to become a marine biologist and decided to learn to dive properly. But although I became an industrial chemist instead, I still love the underwater world. By now, I have my advanced open water qualification with specialties in Wreck Diving and Nitrox - enriched oxygen air - and I'm all set for a Deep Water course later this year. I still get as excited and nervous when I'm about to dive as I did the first time round.

◀.....▶ ‘Something for everyone, from corals to wrecks’ ◀.....▶

Scuba diving has something interesting to offer for everybody; from corals and colourful fish, sponges and seahorses, ship wrecks and reefs to swimming with sharks.

But before you can take the plunge into the cool blue water, you need to get qualified as a diver. Although scuba diving is generally a safe sport, it is important to learn from professionals and get qualified through the Professional Association of Diving Instructors PADI or Scuba Skills International SSI. People have

died because they did not use their equipment properly and overestimated their skills. Both PADI and SSI are both internationally recognised, and follow a similar training pattern.

DIVER TRAINING COURSES

First, you have to pass your Open Water qualification. This allows you to dive to a depth of 18 metres, and the course consists of basic dive safety, learn underwater communication via hand signals, basic navigation skills and what to do in the case of an emergency.

The next course is the Advanced Open Water qualification. Once you've got this you are allowed to dive up to 30 metres. This course is an introduction to the specialty diving courses, and you have to complete five introductory specialty lessons to gain your qualification. Which specialties are on offer depends on your local dive site, but most include a deep dive and a navigation dive.

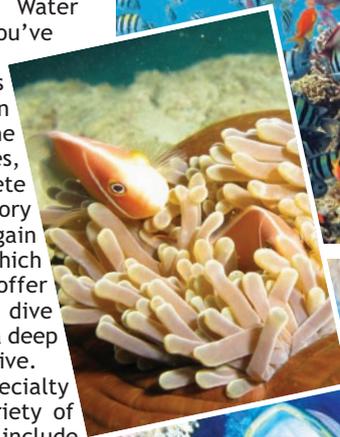
You can take Specialty Diver courses in a variety of qualifications. These include wreck diving, underwater photography and deep diving among others, and it's up to you which one you want to go for.

Above these qualifications, you can continue your training and become a Rescue Diver or Master Diver, or you could go into teaching it yourself as an Instructor.

Courses usually go for two days and include theory and practical sections. Although they are not cheap, you do get the qualification afterwards and can go diving nearly everywhere in the world, according to your abilities.

Most dive shops offer introduction dives, for those who want to try whether scuba diving is their thing before signing up for the course. It's not a formal qualification, but it still is money well spent!

With over 80% of the earth covered by ocean, there are plenty amazing dive sites all over the world. Experts agree, however, that the best are generally located around the Australasian Pacific, as well as off the Egyptian coastline, due to the immense diversity of underwater life and formations that can be found there.



Colourful fish (ToRa); diving in Vanuatu (TiMa) and wreck diving in Canda (SGC)

SCUBA WEBSITES

PADI courses and information:
www.padi.com

Scuba Skills International:
www.divessi.com

Diving hotspots worldwide:
www.scubadivinghotspot.com

Scuba Diving in the UK
www.ukdiving.co.uk

Writer Profile

Name: Skye Macdonald
Age: 24
This Australian woman has been diving throughout the Pacific and got engaged on a scuba diving trip to Fiji.

DISCOVERING THE PASSION OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Teaching pre-schoolers as a volunteer in Ghana's capital Accra in a commune without electricity and running water stirred a girl's desire to help - so she turned it into a career.

Volunteering is a passion but it is not for the faint of heart. It tickled my itchy feet for the first time in 2006 and has since gone on to change my life. I am currently listed as a full-time volunteer with AmeriCorps.

After I graduated, I didn't feel entirely confident about submersing myself into the "working world." I craved new things, a new adventure, a new environment, and new people.

The organisation I went with was Student Travel and Exposure South Africa - STAESA. The price was right, the programme was flexible and I was ready to go. The application process via email flew by, and before I knew it, it was October and I was on a flight to Ghana, West Africa.

I had spent most of my free time inquiring about this country that was so foreign to me. Before departing, I read how I should prepare myself not to eat or greet anyone with my left hand - taboo practices in the Ghanaian culture, as the left hand is considered dirty.

There was a possibility I might be living in less than desirable conditions for average Westerners, without electricity or running water. Even after all my research, I still wasn't sure what to expect, volunteering full-time for 6 weeks, and adapting to my first experience leaving the United States, my family and friends.

I did know, however, that whatever happened, the act of making a difference for the

greater good of somebody other than myself, and fulfilment of what I was about to do would be something that would change me.

The humid air and plethora of new smells invigorated my senses immediately after stepping off the plane.

"Akwaaba!" - Accra greeted me with a large mass of people right outside the airport and I was welcomed by two strangers: my new host-father, a Pentecost pastor and a volunteer from Germany.

They guided me to a car that smoked as much as a campfire and drove to me to my new home on the outskirts of Accra. Children appeared from every corner and it took me a few days to figure out who actually lived in the commune I was staying in.

Living with a family gave me the full experience of becoming truly immersed into their way of life. I was accepted as part of the family immediately, and during Sunday Service, the pastor introduced me as his new daughter, and gave me the African name Akosua.

◀.....▶
'I feel honoured - this project has touched so many lives!'
 ▶.....◀

Having a traditional home-made Ghanaian meal for breakfast and dinner every day and learning to cook the meals was an absolute treat. The local kids took us around the little nooks and crannies of the neighbourhood. Some places and opportunities I may not have seen adventuring around on my own.

My role as volunteer was to teach four-year-olds numbers, the alphabet and some geography at a local daycare centre called Little Angels. With the expected activities that occupied my time, I also ran into opportunities I never thought I would be apart of.

My host family had purchased a plot of land with



plans to build an orphanage and they needed extra support and energy to continue and make the dream a reality. We volunteers; me and a 25-year-old from Alaska as well as a 19-year-old from Germany, pitched in to help.

Together we measured the land, drew up plans for a all the buildings an and underground well for water, no architect needed.

It took a few weeks to get everything in order but when my time in Accra was over, all the bricks were made and the ground breaking had begun.

I feel so honoured to have contributed to jump-starting a project that touched so many lives. A surprise opportunity that was possible because of the wonderful people that I was surrounded by.

Seemingly on a whim I made the decision to go to Africa and volunteer my time and funds to broaden my horizon and experience something out of my comfort zone. I had the time of my life and left Ghana with grand memories, friends, extended family and the fulfilment I would have never found anywhere else if I tried.

Clockwise from top: Laura playing with host-sister Shadé (CoKa); making bricks for the orphanage(LaHe); commune in Accra, and the local kids show their affection (CoKa)

FIND OUT MORE

To see what Laura is up to now with AmeriCorps, visit her blog www.lauraheisig.weebly.com

Student Travel and Exposure South Africa www.staesa.org

For internships abroad, see www.internabroad.com

For volunteering abroad, see www.volunteerabroad.com

Writer Profile



Name: Laura Heisig
 Age: 24
 Loved volunteering in Africa so much that she is now a full-time volunteer with AmeriCorps NCCC.

“RULE #1: IT’S A TRUCK, NOT A BUS”

An overland trip is usually the highlight of a Gap Year itinerary. **SHOESTRING** editor **Cornelia Kaufmann** met three tour guides and asked them what it’s like to work on a never-ending holiday.

Joanne Martin (29), Vicky Hartley (35) and Philip Hendrich (27) started off as passengers on overland trips years ago. They enjoyed their time on the road so much, that they turned it into a career.

“You get to see some of the most amazing places in the world, and you get paid to do it” says Jo, who worked for Acacia Africa. “I like the freedom of being on the move, not knowing what happens next. Waking up in a tent to see the sun rise over Lake Malawi or the Serengeti - it really doesn’t get any better than that.”

Phil, who drives for TrekAmerica loves meeting his passengers. “You get to hang out with cool and exciting people from all over the world, while they are on a holiday. There are so many memorable characters, that you remember for the good and for the bad, but most of them are great and I’d love to put them all on a bus and take them for a roadtrip again.”

Jo agrees and says that she’s made some wonderful friendships over the years, with camp owners and passengers alike. “I know it sounds cheesy, but I actually married my tour partner, who drove the truck.” The two recently stopped overlanding to raise their daughter.

Every guide sets rules for the trip, so that all passengers will get along, and the trip won’t end in anarchy. “My number one rule is “no farting” says Vicky, who works for Adventure Tours Australia.

Phil doesn’t like M&Ms on the floor of the van and insists

on his own music. “There are only so many Lady Gaga and Red Hot Chili Peppers songs you are prepared to listen to.”

Jo and her husband Valdy had a simple rule on their 24-seater MAN trucks. “Rule #1: It’s a truck! Not a bus!” All tour guides also expect passengers to help prepare meals, set up tents, and help each other out.

“Some passengers are really an inspiration” says Jo. “We had this couple on tour, both in their 70s. They were the first ones up and the last off to bed at night.”



‘A passenger set off grizzly mace - that was feral!’



But she also had passengers who couldn’t fit in. “There was this girl who tried to wear six-inch heels in the desert, and was horrified when she couldn’t plug in her hair-straighteners. Another thought it was wise to take all her valuables and walk into a Malawian village at night but however friendly the locals might be, it is never a good idea!”

But it’s not all fun on the road. “One of my passengers accidentally set off grizzly mace in the van, which was feral for everyone” says Phil. “A family relative died while I was on route to New Orleans, and sadly the funeral was held the day I was driving through. I dropped my group off for lunch, went to the funeral, and nobody ever knew.”

Jo’s truck caught fire in the middle of Tanzania. “The following day, we had to drive 18 hours without suspension, and eventually managed to fix it ourselves. But to be honest, I enjoyed these times the most, as that’s what being on the road was all about!” Jo adds that she caught malaria three times while overlanding in Africa, and still managed to guide 24 passengers.

Vicky misses the regular life most, when she’s on the road. “I love being a guide, but it does take over your life.”

She will be working behind the scenes of Adventure Tours Australia for a year. “I’ve missed out on all major family occasions, and I had to give up basketball and volleyball, as I could never be there. After nine years on the road, I just want the chance of a normal relationship, and the luxury to sleep in on Sundays.” But she’s sure that her tour-guiding days are not over yet.

Depending on the tour company, special driving licenses for trucks or buses will be required. Generally, you should have a solid knowledge of the country or region, as well as the wildlife. “You do get in-house training though, and you accompany other guides for route familiarisation before you become a full-fledged tour guide” says Vicky.

“As long as you love being with people, and don’t mind early mornings, tour guiding on overland treks is a dream job!”

Phil adds that hearing from grateful passengers how much they’ve enjoyed the trip is the so rewarding. “It makes putting up with everything that goes wrong worth while!”



Camping at Kings Canyon in the Australian Outback. Photo: ViHa

MORE INFORMATION

TrekAmerica tours:
www.trekamerica.co.uk

Acacia Africa Overland safaris:
www.acacia-africa.com

Adventure Tours Australia:
www.adventuretours.com.au

From top: Driving past the Flinders Ranges in Australia (CoKa); Jo and husband Valdy in Malawi (JoMa); Vicky on tour in Australia (ViHa); Phil at the wheel of his Ford van; Phil and his passengers having a waterfight at Badlands and Outback sunset on the bus (CoKa)

SADDLE UP, COWBOYS, FOR A REAL WORKING HOLIDAY

Jackaroo Schools across Australia prepare willing workers on organic farms for life in the Outback. **SHOESTRING** founder **Cornelia Kaufmann** took the 11-day course to become a Jillaroo find out just how hard the cowboy life really is.

My alarm rings at 5am, but instead of jumping under the shower, I jump straight back into my dirty jeans and top.

My mud-encrusted boots are waiting outside the old homestead's door. It's my turn to yard and milk the two dairy cows so that my fellow Jackaroo and Jillaroo students have milk for breakfast. By 6.30am, we are in the horse yards, getting ready for another hot and long day on the farm. The shower will have to wait.

The horse I ride is a feisty grey called Ralph. Col, our coach and Leconfield's overseer, matched us up according to our riding abilities. My 10 years in the saddle are of advantage, but some of the others have never been on horseback before. We are 24 wannabe Jackaroos and Jillaroes and most of us are on a Gap Year. There is just one Australian among us, who wanted to "go bush" for a while.

Since Leconfield is a working cattle and sheep station, we all have to help run the farm. Set in 4,600 acres of New South Wales countryside, about an hour away from Tamworth, the homestead looks tiny compared to the vastness of the surrounding hills covered in scrubs and dried-up grass.

Mustering on horseback is the only possible way on Leconfield as the terrain is too stony and steep for vehicles and bikes. Therefore, we are out and mustering 100 cows on the second day already. It's a test of communication and coordination, and we have to make a lot of noise to keep the cattle moving in front of us. Soon enough, we sound like we're on a pub crawl.

Although the official trainer on Leconfield is owner Brian

Skerrett, he seldom interacts with us. Col trusts us and our abilities enough to take us on an all-day muster, to get the cattle herded and loaded on the truck for a big sale. Brian however is of little faith, and arrives with the truck - and our lunch packs and water - an hour after we've finished herding, and separating the heifers from their mothers. After eight hours in the saddle, all of us are glad to get back to the homestead.

For our next lesson we have to build a fence. We're glad we're wearing our cowboy hats, because the sun in the bush knows no mercy.

Getting off the horses for a day finally gives us a chance to take in the spectacular scenery. On a muster you concentrate on the horse and on your task. From the ground, we actually noticed the kangaroos jumping across the paddocks.

.....>
'It's definitely not a job for city princesses!'
 <.....

Farm work never stops, but that doesn't mean you can't have a bit of fun while you're at it. Col shows us how to throw calves - that is to pick them up and throw them on their side so they can be branded and tagged for identification. And while we're at it, we have to castrate three bulls as well. Col can't stop grinning, seeing us chasing the young bulls around. It's amazing how fast you have to be once the bulls are on the ground.

One person tags, one brands and one castrates, all at the same time, and it's over in seconds - and then you have to be pretty quick to jump over the fence, as the now-steers do not like you anymore.

It's a dirty and smelly business - definitely not a job



Lunch break on a muster. Right from top: Leconfield's homestead and horse yards; shearing sheep; cattle muster. Bottom: Returning the shorn sheep to the paddock. Photos: CoKa



for city princesses - but if you think cows smell, wait until you've worked with sheep all day. The muster was not as smooth and tranquil as usual, as one of our horses collapsed while we were rounding the sheep up. We even performed CPR, but there was nothing we could do. When we finally got the mob back to the shearing shed, Col, who would describe himself as "one tough mother" was still in tears.

But we know the drill, so we start sorting the lambs out for castration by ourselves. And while all of us would definitely use a knife for the task, Col did it with his teeth - followed by a 24-fold "eeewwww!"

Delighted to get out of the midday heat, we can't get into the cool and dark shearing shed fast enough. I am grateful for the electric shears; although I still end up sweaty, hot and covered in wool and grease.

"Beer o'clock" can't come too soon on a farm. At the end of the day, all you want is a cold shower to clean yourself up, and a cold drink to kick back with.

Becoming a Jackaroo or Jillaroo is probably the most challenging but also the most rewarding course you'll ever do.

Just don't be afraid to get your hands dirty in the process.



FIND OUT MORE

Leconfield's Jackaroo School:
www.leconfieldjackaroo.com

Willing workers on organic farms (Wwoof): www.wwoof.org



How do you plan A GAP YEAR?

Thinking about going on a Gap Year is easy. But a lot of planning and consideration has to go into it, before you can eventually get on that plane and take on the world.

WHAT KIND OF GAP YEAR?

This is the fundamental question. Are you just looking to see the world and travel around? Do you want to earn money as part of a Work & Travel programme? Would you like to volunteer in social projects or wildlife care? Is it work experience you're after? The kind of trip you want to go on will determine how you'll have to plan and prepare.

WITH AN ORGANISATION?

Some projects, such as volunteering and internships can only be organised through organisations. Others, such as Work & Travel can be done by yourself. Organisations are not cheap, but they do give you the advantage of having someone to talk to and help you out when things get rough. You'll also get a certificate at the end of your placement. Doing it alone gives you freedom and saves some money, but if something goes wrong you're on your own.

WHAT KIND OF VISA?

If you want to work in a country and actually make money, you should get a Working Holiday visa. However, this is only issued once in a lifetime, so you'd have to make sure you stay in the country for quite a while. Volunteering work, and some internships can be done on a tourist visa, but you need to check the country's policies. Make sure you have an up-to-date passport and enough time to send it off to Embassies a few times, if you need more than one visa. Some tourist visa can be applied for online.

WHAT ABOUT TRAVEL HEALTH?

Make sure you have up-to-date vaccinations for the countries you go to. Stock up on medicine against headaches, diarrhea and some anti-inflammatories for your first aid kit, and take it with you. You might also want to consider taking sterile syringes with you as well as bandages and plasters.

Books for further information

Gap-Year Guidebook 2010
by Alison Withers, John Catt (publ.)
461 pages, £12.95

The Gap Year Book,
by Joe Bindloss & Charlotte Hindle,
Lonely Planet, 470 pages, £12.99

Your Gap Year
by Susan Griffith, Vacations Work
464 pages, £12.95

The Big Trip
by George Dunford, Lonely Planet
352 pages, £14.99

First-Time Around the World
by Doug Lansky, Rough Guides
336 pages, £10.99

The Backpacker's Bible
Suzanne King & Elaine Robertson
Anova, 336 pages, £8.99

Planning your Gap Year
by Nick Vandome, How to Books
246 pages, £9.99

Work your way around the world, by Susan Griffith,
Vacation Work, 608 pages, £12.99

WHAT KIND OF PLANE TICKET?

Seats can be booked as early as one year in advance, and you should go bargain hunting. Your route will determine whether you can get a round-the-world ticket or whether you'd be better off being a single ticket for each leg of the trip. RTWs only fly specific routes, and your country of choice might not be on it.

HOW TO STAY IN TOUCH?

If you insist on calling home, use local phone boxes or get yourself a SIM card in the country. A cheaper way is Skype, but not every internet café has it installed. Creating a blog or website where you can keep a journal, upload photos and receive comments might be a good idea for you. A blog also lets you set up email notifications, so all your friends and relatives will immediately know when you've posted something new.

HOW TO PREPARE YOURSELF?

Read up on your destination and the customs there. Also, study the weather chart and pack accordingly. Search the internet for forums of people who have been on Gap Years and done something similar to your plans. Get in touch and ask them for advice. They've been there, they know what they are talking about and can even give you tips on where to go and what to do or not, or hook you up with local contacts.

Useful Websites and Gap Year experts

The Gap Year Directory
www.gapyeardirectory.co.uk

STA Travel (Trips, flights etc.)
www.statravel.co.uk

Real Gap:
www.realgap.co.uk

Year Out Group
www.yearoutgroup.org

Gap Force:
www.gapforce.org

Gap Year Jobs:
www.gapyearjobs.co.uk

GapYear (Planning, ideas)
www.gapyear.com

Flights and travel deals:
www.roundtheworldflights.com



Luise went skydiving over Queenstown, New Zealand. LuGö

Less than a year ago, my boyfriend and I watched a TV programme about working and travelling in New Zealand. After talking to a friend who has been on a Gap Year and travels a lot, we booked our Work & Travel year through an organisation. Most people don't bother with organisations, but we now quite enjoy having someone here. It just makes things easier, as they forward all our mail, book return flights, store our luggage etc. So far, we've had a blast!

- Luise Görlitz