

4. Should I travel independently or use a provider?

There are many things to take into consideration when deciding whether to travel independently or with a gap provider. The increasing popularity of gap years has given rise to a burgeoning industry and there is now a huge range of gap companies and projects to choose from. Likewise it is now easier to travel around than ever before in many countries as they open themselves up to international tourism, and there are increasing opportunities for independent travellers for different styles of accommodation, activities, and cultural experiences.

Both independent travelling and using a provider present their own advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately your decision should depend on your own experience, competence, and confidence in travelling, the kind of gap experience you want (including the environments you wish to go to and activities you want to do), and perhaps cost and the time you have available to you for travel. The points below suggest some pros and cons for each to help you decide which experience would best suit you. Of course, many gap students choose to divide their time and experience both!

Independent travel

Pros:

- Independent travel gives you the freedom to create your own schedule and to move on when you want to.
- You can choose your destination(s), when you go, and for how long.
- You can choose who you go with.
- It can be cheaper than using a provider if you research well beforehand and budget whilst away.
- Travel can be relatively cheap using local transport networks, (although these can sometimes be unreliable or even unsafe).
- You can decide where you stay and follow any recommendations obtained whilst travelling. Many hostels are good value for money and are a good way to meet other travellers.
- Independent travel gives you flexibility, allowing you to change your schedule spontaneously to discover places you may not have known about when planning your trip.

Cons:

- Independent travel can feel too unstructured for some.
- Certain environments and activities that require qualified guides may be closed off to you, although sometimes these can be arranged in-country.
- You must carry out your own checks on activity providers to ensure they are safe.
- The costs of travelling around a lot can mount up. You will need to budget carefully and keep an eye on your spending.
- You will not have any medical support, so will need to take responsibility for your own health care before and during travel, and be aware of the procedures for arranging any treatment whilst away.
- Although safety is an issue however you are travelling, independent travellers need to be especially vigilant as have no direct support in an emergency.
- You will need to take responsibility for researching and arranging all the documentation you need for travel, backing up your documentation, and knowing the procedures if it gets lost or stolen.

Travelling with a provider

Pros:

- Travelling with a provider may allow you to have certain experiences (e.g. of extreme environments or cultural home-stays) that may otherwise not be possible.
- Projects can give you experience in an area of interest e.g. conservation or teaching.
- You can gain qualifications e.g. TEFL.
- Much of the planning may be done for you. This can lessen the worry of organising the logistics of a trip as placements, accommodation and transfers are often pre-arranged and many of the costs of travel already paid for before departure (although this varies greatly between providers).
- Providers often give advice on fundraising, kit lists, and preparations before travel, as well as helping with the organisation of the necessary documentation.
- Some organisations provide kit and equipment.
- Activities often take place in a supervised environment.
- Providers often offer medical support during the programme, which can give peace of mind.
- Opportunity to meet like-minded and often similar-aged people in project groups.

Cons:

- Your time will be structured and you will have a set schedule – this suits some people but not others.
- Some programmes may be glorified package holidays.
- Some programmes/providers have been shown not to deliver what they promise – it is important to check them out.
- They are often expensive.
- Presents less, if no, choice in accommodation as it is often booked for you.
- The majority of programmes are short-term and may not be suitable for those looking for a longer experience.