

5. Choosing a Gap provider

There are many organisations that offer gap experiences in return for payment. The costs involved and the services they offer vary enormously, so you will want to find one that best suits your needs and aspirations. Building an impressive-looking website is a lot easier than providing a quality overseas experience!

Identifying smaller, local, in-country charities or activity providers can be a more cost-effective way of spending your money and in many cases can mean that the money you spend ends up in the pockets of the people you'd like to help, rather than an international organisation based in the UK or elsewhere outside the country that you're visiting. Most large gap providers use local charities or activity providers anyway, so by cutting out the 'middle man', you might save money and may end up with a more 'authentic' experience.

We strongly recommend that you try and find out as much as possible about the experience you are paying for **before you book or put down an initial deposit**.

To ensure you have a safe, rewarding and worthwhile gap experience, use the questions below to gather detailed information on the project you want to do, and evaluate different providers.

The Year Out group also has a more extensive list of questions that you can use to help you choose a provider www.yearoutgroup.org

Exploratory questions to ask yourself:

- Have I chosen this project just because it sounds interesting rather than because it will help me develop the skills and experience I want to gain?
- How much support and supervision do I want while I am overseas? This varies between organisations, from those who will have their own staff with you for the majority of the time, to organisations which offer unsupervised placements where you will be spending much of your time on your own in a local community.
- What exactly is included in the programme fee? Does it include travel to the project site, food, accommodation, specialist equipment and/or insurance? Are there additional costs that I need to cover?
- Can the provider introduce me to someone who has recently taken part in a similar programme so I can contact them and find out more about their experiences with the organisation?

Other questions to consider:

Provider details

- What is the legal status of the organisation? (E.g. registered charity or commercial business).
- Where is the organisation based? In the UK, host country or elsewhere?
- Is the provider running this project themselves, or using a third party or local organisation?
- What does the programme set out to achieve?
- What will be your role on the project?
- What are the tasks you will be undertaking on the project and will you need and/or receive any training to carry them out?
- How has the project been chosen, planned and vetted?

Group composition

- Will you be alone or in a group?
- How many others will be taking part in your programme and what age are they likely to be?
- Will you be working with UK, international or local people?
- Is there a selection process for programme participants and if so what is the procedure for selection?
- Are there any restrictions on participation e.g. age, health, or previous experience required?

Supervision

- Who is responsible for you at the project location?
- Are you supervised during the project?
- If you are not being directly supervised, where is the nearest representative of the organisation once you are in-country, and what would you do if you had a problem with your work or placement during the programme?
- What are the arrangements for times when you are not supervised (e.g. free time, weekends)? What will your accommodation arrangements be during these periods? Does the provider organise trips or activities that you can join?

Safety management

- If the organisation is based in the UK, ask them if the health and safety management systems for your programme are compliant with the new British Standard BS 8848. By stating that the programme is compliant with BS 8848, the organisation is making a commitment that good safety management procedures are in place for your programme, and that they will share these with you. For further information on BS 8848 see www.rgs.org/bsi
- If a UK organisation says that they are not BS 8848 compliant, please ask them why and make a careful note of their response. It is not necessarily a problem if they're not as it is quite a difficult standard to comply with. You should ask them to provide more detailed information about their safety management systems on the programme however, including the qualifications and experience of the people responsible for your safety while you're there (including their First Aid qualifications)
 - Ask for a copy of their 'Safety Management Plan' and a 'Risk Assessment' for the programme or activity.
 - Do you have access to professional medical help during your placement, if you need it?
 - Does the provider have any procedures in place for your emergency evacuation and possible repatriation back to UK should this be necessary?
 - What insurance is in place for your participation in this programme? Do you need to buy your own or any additional insurance?

Terms and conditions

- Is there a written agreement between you and the gap provider?
- Are the host organisations paid to take you? Do they pay you?
- What is expected of you during the programme? What will be your responsibilities? Is there a code of conduct for participants?
- What does your programme fee include and not include? E.g. food, transfers from airport
- What are the terms of cancellation if you are unable to participate in the programme for any reason?

Contacting Previous Customers

- Have you personally contacted previous customers about their experiences of the provider and project? What were their responses? It is a good idea to contact some past participants directly (obtaining their contact details from the provider or other sources) to ask about their experiences. Remember that the testimonials on the provider's website have been carefully selected (or perhaps in some cases written!) to present the image the provider would like to convey.

Financial protection

- If you are buying your flights through your provider or a travel agent ask if they hold an ATOL license? (ATOL is a financial protection scheme for travellers. If an ATOL tour operator fails, the ATOL scheme ensures customers contracted with the ATOL holder for an air package or a flight, do not lose the money paid over or are not stranded abroad.) Check with your provider if they hold one or check at www.caa.co.uk.