

A full-page background image showing the silhouettes of three people jumping joyfully against a dramatic, cloudy sky at sunset or sunrise. The person on the left is in a dynamic pose with one arm raised. The person in the center is jumping with both arms raised. The person on the right is also jumping with arms raised, one higher than the other. The overall mood is one of freedom and adventure.

the
leap

Gap Year Guide

GAP YEAR & SUMMER LEAPS



Dear reader,

I'm Milly—co-founder of The Leap and mum to two boys who have both embarked on their own gap year adventures. So when I say I understand the excitement, nerves and endless questions that come with planning a gap year, I really do.

For over 25 years, we've been helping young people gain confidence, independence and real-world experience through meaningful adventures built around Challenge, Culture and Contribution. Along the way, they develop the skills, experiences and stories that help them stand out in university applications, interviews and future careers.

Whether you're a student planning your next chapter or a parent exploring the options, this guide will help you make the most of the opportunity ahead.

Let's dive in...

Milly Whitehead



The Structure & Timeline

Most gappers don't travel for the full year. Typically, they're away for 3–4 months within the 15-month window between finishing school and starting university. Here's how it usually unfolds:

01 *Initial Summer:*

Like their peers, gappers start with leavers' parties, summer festivals, and family holidays.

02 *Autumn (Sept–Dec):*

As friends head off to university, it's an ideal time for your gapper to find a job and save money for their travels.

03 *Structured Leap (Jan–Apr):*

This is the most popular time for gappers to start their travels. Many begin with a structured 4-week Leap, providing a smoother transition into their travels and helping them get acclimated before embarking on independent adventures for the next 2–3 months.

04 *Onward Travel (Mar–May):*

Having gained confidence, valuable life skills and real-world work experience through their Leap, many gappers continue their journey independently, exploring new destinations and embracing the freedom of solo travel. Hostels are bustling with fellow travellers, making it a great time to meet new friends.

05 *Summer (Home Again):*

Returning home for the summer allows for some interrailing, family holidays, and time with friends before heading to university in September.

This approach ensures a fulfilling, well-balanced gap year that combines work, travel, and personal growth, preparing them well for their university and future employment.

Why Start with a Structured Leap?

It's easy to think a gap year is all about backpacking, hostels and seeing the world. While travel is certainly part of the experience, the most successful gap years usually start with something more purposeful.

That's where a Leap comes in. For many young people, it's the perfect launchpad into independent travel, providing the support, community and real-world experience needed to build confidence before heading off on their own adventures.

Together, these experiences help young people develop the confidence, independence and life skills that universities and employers increasingly value.

In fact, around 80% of our Leapers go on to travel independently after their programme ends.

*A Leap isn't the destination,
it's the launchpad.*

*Every Leap is built
around our Three Cs:*



Challenge

Stepping beyond comfort zones through adventure and new experiences.

Culture

Embracing different ways of life and developing a global perspective.

Contribution

Making a meaningful impact through conservation and community projects.



Summer Leaps

For students heading straight to university who still want to stand out, build confidence, gain meaningful work experience and have an incredible adventure, our July Costa Rica Leap is the perfect option.

This is the very same 4-week Leap that forms part of many students' gap year journeys. The difference is that its July departure makes it ideal for those who want to experience all the benefits of a Leap without taking a full gap year.

Over four weeks, participants develop the confidence, independence and real-world experience that universities and employers increasingly value, while making a genuine contribution to conservation projects and local communities.

Built around our Three Cs – Challenge, Culture and Contribution – it's an opportunity to step outside your comfort zone, experience a new way of life and gain stories, skills and memories that will stay with you long after university begins.

Best of all, the programme is carefully scheduled to fit into the summer break, with students returning home before A-Level Results Day and ready to start university in September.



Personal Development & Future Employability

A Leap isn't just about taking time out. It's about gaining the experiences, skills and confidence that help young people stand out long after they return home. *Today*, universities and employers are looking for more than academic results. They want evidence of initiative, resilience, teamwork and adaptability.

Confidence & Independence

Learning to navigate new situations and take responsibility.

Problem-Solving & Adaptability

Finding solutions when things don't go to plan.

Resilience & Maturity

Growing through challenge and new experiences.

Communication & Teamwork

Working alongside people from different backgrounds.

Leadership & Initiative

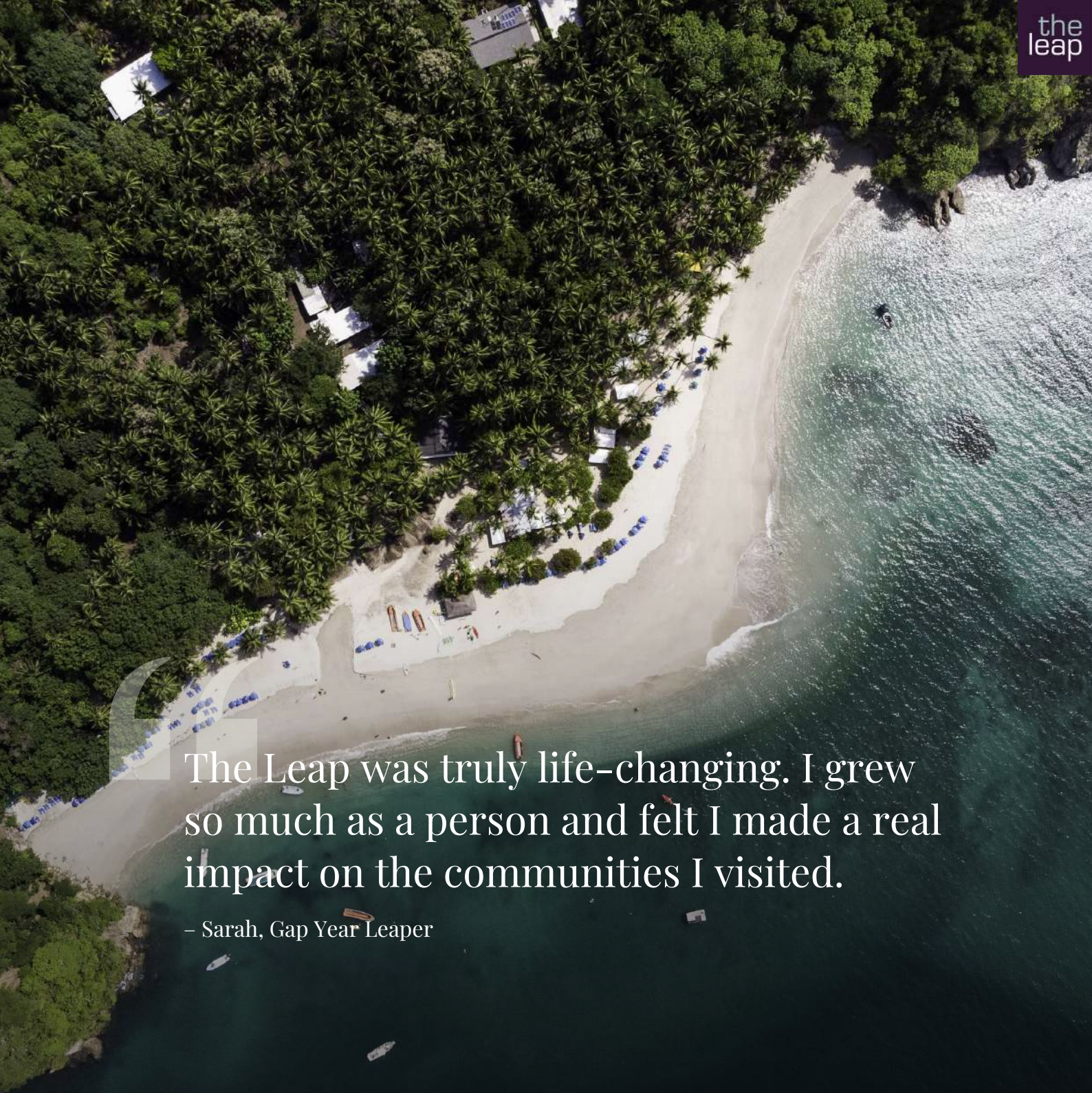
Stepping up, contributing and taking action.

More Than Just Skills

Most importantly, students gain something many applicants lack: real stories and examples.

Anyone can say they're resilient or a good team player. A Leap gives students genuine experiences they can draw on in personal statements, university interviews and future job applications.

“They left home a teenager and came back a young adult.”

An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The left side of the image is dominated by a dense forest of palm trees. A strip of white sand beach runs along the edge of the forest, where several blue lounge chairs are laid out. The beach curves along the shoreline, meeting the turquoise water of the ocean. A few small boats are visible in the water, and a person can be seen swimming. The overall scene is peaceful and idyllic.

The Leap was truly life-changing. I grew so much as a person and felt I made a real impact on the communities I visited.

– Sarah, Gap Year Leaper



The Questions Every Parent Asks...

By now, hopefully you can see why so many families choose a Gap Year or Summer Leap. But once the excitement settles, the practical questions inevitably start appearing:

"Will they be safe?"

"How often should we expect to hear from them?"

"Should they take a backpack or a suitcase?"

"Which destinations are right for them?"

Trust me, I've asked every one of those questions myself.

So before we wrap up, here are some of the most common questions we hear from parents, along with a few tips we've picked up over the last 20 years.

Let's get into the details...

Places To Go, People To See...

One of the most exciting parts of planning a gap year is deciding where to go. Over the last 25 years, we've taken much of the hard work out of the decision by carefully selecting destinations that offer both an incredible Leap experience and fantastic onward travel opportunities.

Central America (Costa Rica)

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 (Peru)

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. .

Asia (Cambodia)

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 (Kenya)

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

Costa Rica, Peru, Kenya and Cambodia each offer something completely different. The question isn't which destination is best – **it's which one *feels right* for your son or daughter.**



Safety & Support

A Leap is designed to help young people build confidence, independence and travel skills within a supportive environment. For many, it's their first experience of travelling without parents – and that's exactly why a *structured start* can make such a difference.

How We Support Our Leapers

24/7 Support

From our UK team and in-country staff.

Experienced Leaders

Dedicated coordinators and local teams on the ground.

Trusted Partners

Carefully selected locations and long-standing relationships.

Safety Briefings

Comprehensive preparation and ongoing support.

Travel Insurance

Mandatory cover for every participant.

Building Independent Travellers

By living and working alongside their peers, navigating new cultures and learning how to travel responsibly, students gain the experience and confidence needed to continue their journeys safely and independently.

We want every parent to know their child is in *safe hands* while still being stretched and challenged in all the right ways.

How Best To Communicate Whilst They're Away...

Hard as it may be, sometimes we just have to let our gappies get on with it. Yes, they'll probably make silly decisions, almost certainly message home asking for money at some point, and invariably come back with a dodgy tattoo and a few near misses.

So, what can you do to help?

Travel Aid

Is a brilliant service 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 will calmly talk them through their immediate priorities and raise the alarm with local emergency services.

Texting home

Before they go discuss your expectations/what will keep you calm whilst they're away. For example, will you be hoping for a message every day (spoiler alert, that almost certainly won't happen), check in once a week, or will the odd message here or there suffice?

Tracking

Now I know this is a tempting one, but **do not download one of those 'find my friends' type apps**. 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 is bliss.*

Embrace the silence

If they don't message as often as you'd like, try not to panic. They're probably busy making friends, embracing new experiences and enjoying their independence – exactly what a gap year is designed for.



The Nitty-Gritty

All the insights and details you need to know about your gappies's adventure.

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
- 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)



The Nitty-Gritty

Passport

Many countries require at least 6 months on a passport before it expires to enter, so worth checking before they head off.

Vaccinations

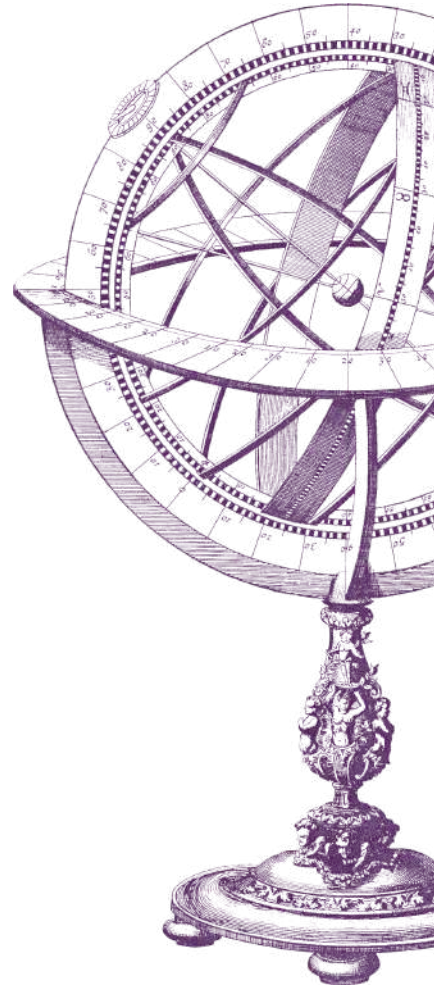
I get asked a lot of what vaccinations are needed for travel, and of course it totally depends on the destination and the best person to guide you is your doctor. However, in general hepatitis A, tetanus, and typhoid are universally recommended.

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 or no transaction fees compared to a regular debit card.



The Nitty-Gritty

Suitcase or backpack?

Always go for a backpack or soft-sided duffel. Hard-shell suitcases might seem practical, but they're heavy, awkward to carry on dirt tracks or boats, and tricky to store in hostel lockers. A decent backpack with compartments and packing cubes wins every time.

Book in advance or go with the flow?

A bit of both. Flights are best booked early to lock in good prices and secure availability, especially for peak seasons. But once abroad, leave room for spontaneity. Your gapper's plans will likely evolve as they meet people.

Budget?

A rough guide is £1000 a month for budget backpacking - this covers food, accommodation, and transport. But factor in big-ticket experiences like safaris, diving courses, or trekking Machu Picchu, which can add several hundred pounds.

When to book a Leap programme?

Ideally 4-6 months ahead to secure your preferred dates and flights. But don't worry if you're running late, we're pros at pulling together last-minute plans when needed.



the leap

Final Words from Me

Gap years change lives. I've seen it time and time again - nervous teens flying out and returning home transformed: more self-aware, mature, and ready for what's next.

We're proud to be part of that journey, and if we can help your son or daughter leap into life, purpose, and adventure, then our job is done.

Warmest wishes,
Milly

Milly Whitehead

P.S. Every gap year is different. If you'd like help creating the right adventure for your son or daughter, we'd love to chat.

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