

Gap Year Guide

For students & their families



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A guide to gap years for school leavers, career changers, or anyone else looking for some time off. Created by Study Work Grow Pty Ltd in 2026.

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Due to the ever-changing nature of local and international travel, some of the advice listed in this Guide may be subject to change. We always recommend that you do your own research and contact organisations directly. You'll also need to double-check any requirements for visas, border controls, vaccinations, identification, etc. with the relevant authorities.

SCHOOL LICENSED EDITION (APPROVED FOR SHARING WITHIN A SCHOOL)

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What is a gap year?

A gap year is traditionally when students who have just finished high school take a year off before starting further study or full-time work.

But while it's most popular with school leavers, the truth is anyone can take a gap year.

Essentially, a gap year is simply taking some well-deserved time to rest, recharge, and reorient as you move from one phase of your life to the next.

You could take one after finishing your first degree, between changing jobs, or just because you need a change.

Done right, a gap year can support personal growth, independence, and resilience, as well as help you to decide what your next steps should be.

If a year sounds like a long time (or not long enough)...

The term 'gap year' is commonly used, but in reality the length is totally up to you - which is why you might also see it referred to as a 'gap experience'.

You might only need a couple of months before you find yourself itching to get back into study or work. Or maybe you need more than a year to decide what path to follow.

There is no right or wrong time or length. At the end of the day, it's all about finding what works best for you.



The benefits of a gap year

If you or someone you know aren't 100% convinced that a gap year is a good idea, here are some of the reasons it might be.

Build valuable skills

Participants in the [Gap Year Alumni Survey](#) (GYAS) reported that their experience had helped them build some key skills, useful for both work and life.

Explore your passions

More than half of all respondents in the [National Survey of Education Abroad Alumni](#) said their experience had a very important influence on their career path.

Grow as a person

[Research has found](#) that taking a gap year can help you understand yourself better and increase your interpersonal skills, empathy, and decision-making.

Boost your motivation

[Many students](#) who take a gap year actually end up returning to study feeling even more motivated than those who went to university straight out of school.



Is a gap year right for you?

Here are some of the most common reasons people take a gap year:



To take a break



To prepare for study



To travel and grow



To save money



To build skills



To gain experience

Do any of these sound like you?

If not, it doesn't mean a gap year is totally off the cards - but it might be worth taking some time to step back and re-evaluate your options and priorities.

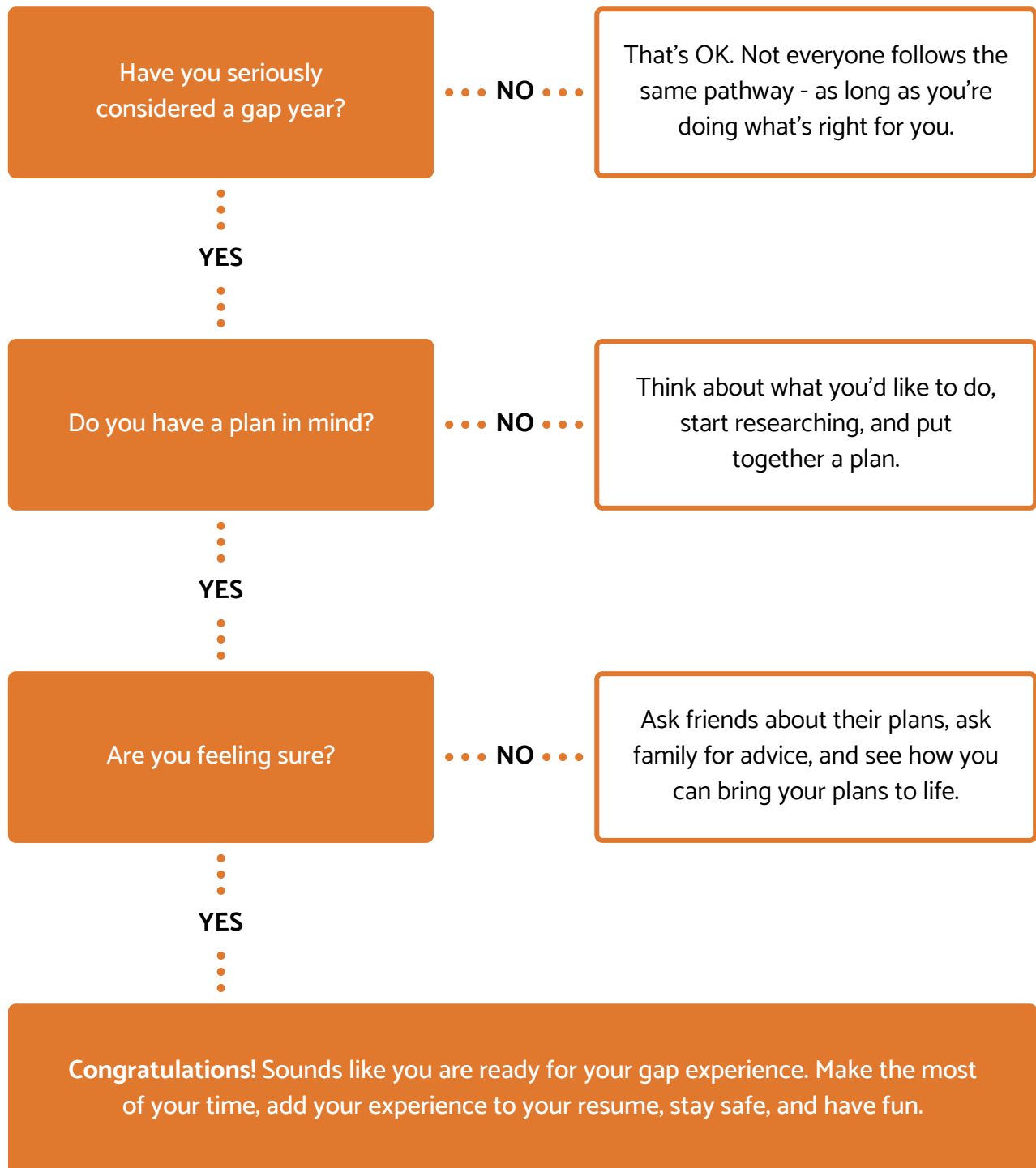
If they do, a gap experience could be ideal for you. Later in this guide we'll take a look at some of your different options. We've broken them down into a few categories to simplify matters, but if there's something you want to do that's not in this guide, that's totally OK.

Still not sure? You might like to take the [Gap Year Quiz](#) on our website.



The gap year flowchart

Need some more help to decide if you're ready for a gap year? Take a look at the flowchart below and see if it might be right for you, or if you need to do some more thinking.



Planning your gap year

Before diving in and committing yourself to anything, it's worth taking some time to figure things out and ensure you have all your bases covered.

1

Reflect on your current situation

First, work out if a gap year is the right option for you at this stage of your life. Start with one question: what do I want more of in my life right now? More money? More experience? More adventure? More rest? Your answer can point you in the right direction.

Rather than feeling pressured to make the “expected” choice, honestly assessing your goals, circumstances, and mindset can help you make the decision that's right for you.

2

Do your research

Even if you already have something in mind, it's a good idea to research all your options. Take notes as you compare programs, read reviews, or attend information sessions and webinars.

Talk to people who've had a gap experience before. Ask them what they loved, what they'd do differently, and what advice they have. Speak with your parents, teachers, or other trusted adults too - they might have concerns or suggestions you haven't considered.

3

Think about finances

Once you've narrowed down your options, work out how much money you're going to need and where it will come from.

If you do need to work, where would that be? At home, elsewhere in your country, or overseas? Are you eligible to work in your chosen location? Will there be other things to consider (such as obtaining a visa or paying tax, for example)?

We've created a template you can use to prepare your budget and track your savings - you can find it at the end of this guide.

4

Plan for future study

Want to study after your gap experience? Check if you can apply and enrol now, then defer your studies for as long as you need so you'll have a spot to come back to.

Keep in mind that deferral is usually not available for competitive courses, and that some institutions might only offer it in specific circumstances or for a limited amount of time.

If deferring isn't possible, make a note of key application dates and set reminders to apply once your gap experience is over.

5

Talk to your current employer

If you're already working and want to take time off for a gap experience, you'll definitely need to discuss this with your employer.

Consider your options when it comes to leave and how much you have available, or think about whether you would be OK with taking unpaid leave. If you need or decide to resign as a last resort, know what obligations you have to your employer (such as giving reasonable notice) as well as what they might need to do for you (like paying out any unused leave).

Before making any big decisions, do some reading on the [Australian Fair Work Ombudsman](#) or [Employment New Zealand](#) website, and ask a trusted adult for advice.

6

Know your limits

Do you have any health-related needs (either physical or mental)? Keep these in mind when you're planning your gap experience. You may not have to rule anything out, but it could help you to be better prepared and set realistic expectations.

You'll also need to decide the maximum amount of time you can commit to a gap experience. This will impact what you can do, how much money you'll need, and other future plans, such as study or other commitments.

Funding your gap year

Even if you're already working or plan to live at home rent-free during your time off, you'll need a financial plan. Without one you could use up all your hard-earned money and may not be able to achieve your post-gap year goals.

Travel and most gap experience programs have costs associated with them. You'll need to figure out how much those costs will be, right down to the smallest details, then figure out how you're going to save up that amount.

If your parents or other family are helping you out, that's great. But you still need to know what costs you're going to incur, then create a budget to make sure your money will last as long as it needs to.



Try to avoid getting into debt for a gap year. Paying back the costs (potentially with interest) could set you back once your time out is over.

Our top tips for funding your gap year

Plan

Research what you want to do, where you want to go, and for how long. You'll need these details so you can work out how much everything will cost.

Budget

Once you know how much you need, write a comprehensive budget that lists every item. You'll need to know how you're going to pay for absolutely everything, from travel costs to daily expenses.

Save

It's time to set some goals and start saving. Having a backup plan is also a good idea in case you don't manage to save enough.

Finding support

If you're over the age of 18, you're an adult, regardless of whether you're just finishing school or not. And that means you are in control of your life.

Some people can find this time in their lives liberating and exciting, while others might feel overwhelmed, uncertain, or even a bit scared about their next steps. It's totally OK to want some extra support, especially when making such a big decision.

Talk it out

We recommend that before you even start planning your gap year, the first step should be to talk to your family, friends, or other trusted adults. Let them know what you're planning and tell them why.

They might be 100% supportive straight away, or they might be a bit worried. Either way, it's a good idea to be honest and make sure you're all on the same page.

Why? Because you'll feel more confident and happy about your choice if you have some support. They'll also be able to help you plan, save, and stay on track.

Starting the conversation

Gap years can be a tricky subject to bring up, especially if you feel unsure. Here are some positive ways to start a conversation:

- Have some idea about what you'd like to do or achieve, and how you plan to afford it.
- Show that you've thought about the pros and cons.
- Let them know about some successful people who have also taken gap years.
- Explain that many universities and employers view gap years as a good thing - you'll gain life experience and return rested and motivated for what's next.



Gap year ideas

Ready to start planning your gap year or need some inspiration? We have all the information you need on the following pages.

Explore some of your options, find tips on making the most of your time, and discover ways to be more prepared.

Travel

Work

Volunteer

Learn



I want to travel

Whether you've always dreamed of backpacking across Europe, hiking in South America, driving Route 66 in the US, seeing wildlife on safari in South Africa, or just immersing yourself in another culture and experiencing something new, there are lots of options to consider.

No matter what you want to do, you could make independent plans, or book tours or programs with an external provider.



Some of the benefits of travel include:

- Seeing the world
- Experiencing different ways of life
- Meeting new people
- Gaining valuable new skills

If you're planning to use a third party, it's really important that you:

- Choose a reputable company. Check their reviews and testimonials, as well as their business registrations and insurance.
- Read all the fine print before you sign anything.
- Ensure before you book that they will refund your money if the trip is cancelled by something out of your control.
- Find personal travel insurance that could help you recover any costs if things don't go to plan (just note that change of mind isn't usually covered).

Organising your own trip? Here are some tips:

- Make sure you have insurance that will cover all elements of your trip, from flight delays and lost luggage to illness or injury - it's well worth the money for the extra peace of mind.
- Check the recommendations and updates from your government regarding safety, vaccinations, visas, and ID requirements before you book, then again before you travel.
- Work out how you'll stay in touch with friends and loved ones while abroad.
- Do plenty of research on your chosen location(s), from day-to-day living costs to how you'll be getting around.
- Carry the contact details of your home country's consular services with you and know how they can support you when overseas.
- Have copies of your passport and important documents kept safe at home.

I want to work

Unless you're one of the lucky ones, chances are you're going to need to consider working during your gap year. This could be casual or part-time work when you need it, or periods of full-time employment where you save as much as you can.

Some gap years include work as an integral part, like working at the ski fields in Japan, fruit picking around Australia, or working in a US Summer camp.



Spending a year working might not be the first thing you think about when you're considering some time off, but for many it's a necessity. The good news is there are plenty of benefits.

You'll have the chance to:

- Learn new skills
- Build valuable networks
- Experience different jobs
- Earn money
- Add experience to your resume
- Gain professional references

There are plenty of ways you can find work. Some gap year specialists provide working holiday programs, or you can apply for jobs yourself. Look online, in local newspapers, on job boards, or start networking to find them. Even consider signing up to an agency who will find opportunities on your behalf (just check their reputation first).

Here are just a few job ideas to consider:

- Working as a ski instructor
- Mentoring at a holiday camp
- Teaching a language or tutoring
- Looking after children as an au pair
- Working as a tour or adventure guide
- Working in hospitality
- Starting a travel blog
- Working (and living) on a cruise ship
- Picking fruit and other seasonal work

Before you apply, you can prepare by:

- Creating or updating your resume
- Writing tailored cover letters for each application
- Practising your interview skills
- Having a valid working visa organised (if required)
- Being aware of any tax obligations
- Setting up a bank account
- Knowing your rights and responsibilities

I want to volunteer

Volunteering can be a fantastic way to make the most of your gap year. The best part is there are typically no requirements to start, as well as no or limited costs - all you need is a bit of time and a lot of dedication.

You could learn a lot about yourself, gain valuable skills, immerse yourself in different cultures and environments, and make a positive impact on communities and causes in genuine need of support.



Whether you're keen to explore the world, make a difference, or just take a break from study or work, volunteering offers plenty of positives:

- Step outside of your comfort zone
- Develop your global perspective
- Become more independent
- Learn new skills
- Meet like-minded people

Many organisations run specialised volunteer programs for gap year seekers. If you choose to go this route, you might need to pay to take part in the program. Costs can vary a lot, so do your research and plan how you'll save enough money.

Check the organisation's history before signing up and handing over money. It also pays to read up on what's included in the costs and what's not, particularly if the program requires travel and accommodation.

You can also contact charities, not-for-profits, or other organisations directly to see if there are any opportunities available. You won't have to pay, but you'll need to take the initiative to search and apply, just like you would for a job.

You can volunteer in almost any field - here are some popular examples:

- Childcare
- Teaching
- Environment and conservation
- Medicine and healthcare
- Law and social services
- Humanitarian causes
- Animal welfare
- Community development

Another bonus is that you can choose where you want to volunteer, so you could either stay on home soil or travel and explore the world.

I want to learn

On your gap year, the chances are high that you'll be learning no matter what you do. But if you'd like to dedicate yourself to some learning on your own terms, there are plenty of choices to satisfy every passion.

And remember, learning doesn't necessarily mean study, classrooms, and assessment - it also includes things as simple as picking up a hobby or exploring new skills.



If you have ever been tempted to do a short course, intensive program, or weekly workshop, a gap year is the perfect time.

If you're not sure about university and there's a short course in a similar area to one you're considering, why not give it a go? There's no better way to get a taste of a subject area you're tempted by.

Or maybe you'd like to upskill before moving into a new career - a gap year could be the perfect time to upgrade your skills and learn new things.

Perhaps you'd love to deep-dive into a hobby and see if it's a potential career in the making or just have some fun.

Learn how to speak a new language, cook fancy pastries, ride a horse, refurbish a vintage car, code an app or website, or knit yourself some new clothes.

Looking for a free or low-cost alternative? Download an app or find tutorials online that can help you learn how to draw, play an instrument, plant a vegetable garden, or just work on your life skills.

Want to combine your options? Look at microcredentials or online courses that are easy to do while you work or travel. These will give you knowledge and help you build skills to add to your resume.

Still not sure what you'd like to do? Speak to lots of people, from family and friends to teachers and organisations, or start an online search. You'll find out what's out there and maybe find a new idea that sparks your interest.

Don't underestimate where your passion could lead you. You could end up writing an award winning novel, heading off to the Olympics, or inventing a life saving device.

During your gap year

Even if you have the most memorable time, it's easy to forget some of the smaller details. During your time away you might consider keeping a journal or blog. Future you will appreciate the reminders, but it could also have practical applications. Keep track of:

Places you visit

People you meet

New skills you gain

Jobs and tasks you do

Notable events you're a part of

Things you want to do again or explore further

Things you really enjoy (and things you don't)

All of these details could help you later when you're thinking about what to study, need to apply for a job, or want to plan your next holiday or adventure.



After your gap year is over

We know it's hard to think about your gap year being over before it's even started, but thinking ahead could help you make the most of your experience. Live in the moment and get every last bit of fun, adventure, and learning you can, but keep in mind that it will eventually come to an end, so be prepared.

Coming back from a gap year could have you excited, motivated, and ready for what comes next, but you could also find it hard to leave behind all that fun and freedom.

Here are some ways to settle back in and make the most of what you learned and experienced.

Update your resume

Add in all the new skills and experience you gained, roles you worked in, and contacts you made.

Reflect

What were the highs and lows? What went well or could have gone better? How could you have planned or reacted differently?

Knowing the answers could be great for your next adventure, but it'll also help you better prepare for applications and interviews.

Reconnect

Talk to friends, family, and other people you missed while you were away. Catch up and share your adventures while they're still fresh.

Make changes

Find a way to incorporate some of your favourite elements of your gap experience into your everyday life, no matter how small.

This can help you find a purpose (or even possibly a career) that fulfils you.

Be kind to yourself

Adjusting back to a "normal" routine can be difficult, so take your time and ease back in to things one day at a time.

What's next?

Looking to study?

- If you deferred an offer, contact the institution and prepare to enrol or clear up any final details.
 - If you didn't have an offer or didn't apply before your gap year, contact the institution you'd like to study at and find out how to apply.
 - Make sure you have any financial aid or scholarship applications completed, and know how you're going to pay any fees.
 - If you're leaving home you'll also need to organise your accommodation, redirect your mail, and start packing.
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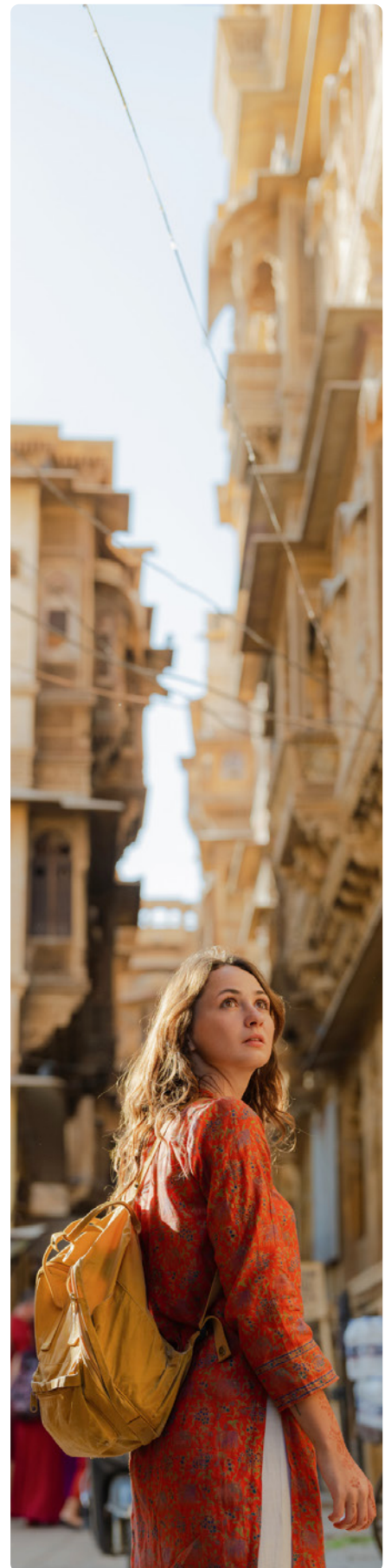
Starting or returning to work?

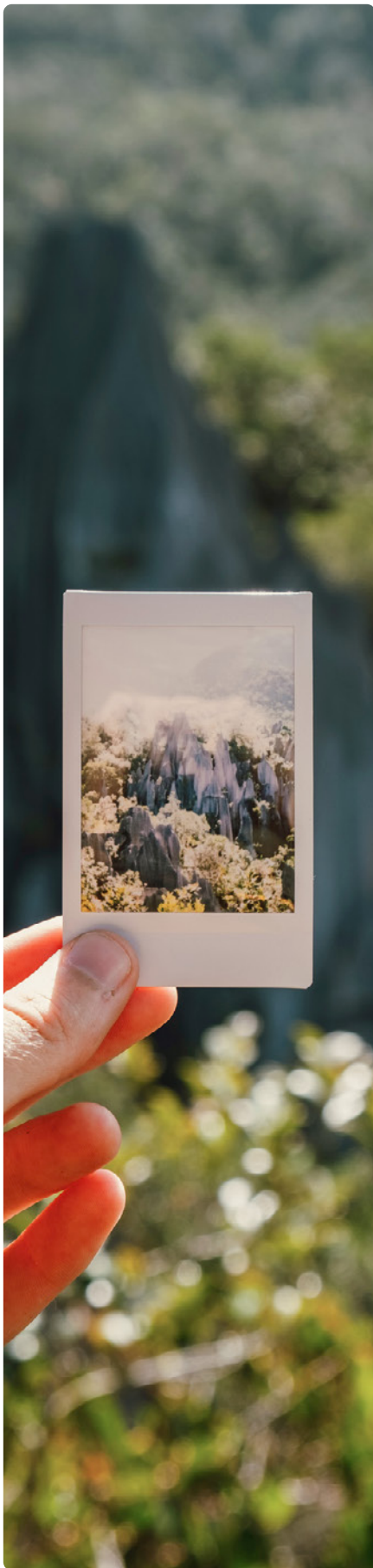
- Dive into to job searches and spend a decent amount of time crafting each application and cover letter.
 - Make sure you're contactable - you'll need a current phone number and email address.
 - Ensure your banking, tax, superannuation, and other financial details are all up to date.
 - Sort your professional wardrobe, and don't forget to organise your transport and accommodation.
-

Not sure what to do next?

If you didn't have a plan before you left or things have changed, that's OK. Now is the time to decide what the best next step is for you, then work out how to get there.

Whatever experience you decide to have and whatever path you choose after that, be safe and have fun.





Life is not a dress rehearsal - this is probably it.

Make it count. Time is extremely limited and goes by fast.

Do what makes you happy and fulfilled.

Don't do stuff that doesn't make you happy.

Don't let yourself make excuses for not doing the things you want to do.

SAM ALTMAN



Gap year budget

One-off expenses

Item	Cost

Daily living costs

Savings

Total amount needed:

Savings so far:

Savings to make:

Savings tracker

Date	Amount	Total

Planning your gap year

If you're thinking of taking a gap year, here are some pointers to help you with planning.

- ☐ Define your goals, e.g. travel, work, volunteer
- ☐ Research all of the opportunities available
- ☐ Work out the costs you'll need to cover
- ☐ Create a budget and start saving
- ☐ If travelling: check visa, health, insurance, and other requirements
- ☐ Plan everything you want to do/experience
- ☐ Know how you'll stay in touch
- ☐ Keep notes and records for future reference
- ☐ Have a plan for when your gap year is over

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