

Gap year: tales from a mother and son

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Should they stay or should they go? The Ecuador bus crash has once again focused attention on the dilemma that families face when their children demand to go on the now almost obligatory gap-year trip. A mother and her son reflect on conflicting emotions

Celia Dodd

There's a photo of my son Adam in Zimbabwe, beaming with sheer pleasure on top of a slippery mountain, which sums up how his gap year was for me: how glad I am that he was there, taking risks and doing dangerous things, and how glad I am that I wasn't there to hold him back.

By contrast my older son, Paul, now 23 and at medical school, didn't go anywhere more dangerous than Acton during his gap year. Adam's travels in southern Africa were as steep a learning curve for me as they were for him. I didn't mind the first couple of months he spent working in a Swaziland school because Teaching Projects Abroad had a good reputation. It was when he set off travelling alone that my sleepless nights really started. We managed to dissuade Adam from his original itinerary, Angola, but nothing would put him off Zimbabwe. I had learnt to live with a constant gut-wrenching feeling of dread. When he was safely back in Swaziland I was almost sick with relief. The lowest point was an e-mail casually remarking that he had concussion and several stitches after an accident chasing a warthog and that a co-worker had just escaped being raped.

When we met Adam at Heathrow I didn't recognise him. It wasn't just the long hair, but a new way of carrying himself: confident, and ready to take on life. Of course it's a relief that his worst horror stories, of the nighttime train with no lights, the headbutting in Johannesburg and the killer waves in Mozambique, only emerged much later. They'll probably haunt me when Paul takes up a placement in Ghana in June. But at least this time round I will have learnt something about how to survive myself.

Adam Vulliamy, 21

I always saw a gap year as an important part of my introduction into the real world, and that's how it turned out - it's been far more useful than my first 18 months at university. I can't imagine how I'd be if I had not taken a gap year. As well as attempting to teach a class of Swazi children, I earned a living and enjoyed a freedom on my travels I had never experienced before.

To pay for the trip I worked as a security guard in a multi-storey car park working 15-hour shifts. One of the few things I knew about Swaziland was its alarming Aids rate, yet at first I could see no sign of suffering. I was allocated to my "school", a Unicef-built Neighbourhood Care Point. It was wonderful. The kids were delighted by our presence.

When it came to teaching though, I did an awful job. I had no teaching experience, yet

TPA assured me that this would be fine. It got better with time. In my class children ranged from those who struggled with the alphabet to two able sisters who wanted to go to a proper school. One of them, Gcinile, appreciated my teaching and inspired me to keep plugging away. But two months into my stay in Swaziland, her health began to deteriorate. She would lie in the shade, on the dirt floor of the makeshift third classroom, covered in ringworm – she had the virus. About a week before I left she disappeared for good and a fortnight later I received an e-mail saying she had died.

Armed only with a guitar I travelled to Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. I was liberated from my upbringing at a West London independent school.

When you travel the bonds you form are superficial but special. I have a new faith in humanity after meeting so many incredible people. My only regret is not making more of an effort to stay in touch.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/travel/holidays/gapyear/article1803852.ece>