

## Time out, not time off ... gap year projects

Park ranger, parrot keeper or China lover – three very different ideas for a gap year that didn't cost a thing

### Volunteer ranger, US national parks

It's not every day you are labelled a VIP and taken on a tour of a vast area of American wilderness, so that within a few weeks you can lead guided walks in it. But that is one of the privileges of joining the US National Park Service's [international volunteers in parks scheme](#). You pay for flights and food; they sponsor your visa and house you. Imagine spending the summer as a backcountry guide in the Grand Canyon or, as I did, working on the edge of [Kilauea volcano](#) in Hawaii.

I had been on a ranger-guided walk in the Grand Tetons of Wyoming years earlier. I was so terrified of bears that I refused to walk without a guide, and at the start I was less interested in what she was saying than in whether she had some bear repellent spray. Yet I found myself becoming more and more interested in her commentary. It was like nature with subtitles: suddenly, it all started to make more sense. I realised that this ranger's job was to hike around this beautiful place and show it off to visitors.

A few years later, aged 23, I found myself with six months between finishing law school in London and starting as a trainee solicitor. I knew I wanted to work in one of North America's national parks and found plenty of volunteer opportunities, but most required US citizenship. Eventually I found the US Department of the Interior International Volunteers in Parks Program ([nps.gov/getinvolved/volunteer.htm](https://nps.gov/getinvolved/volunteer.htm)), which allows individuals from all over the world to take up volunteer opportunities.

In a grey January, an email from Hawaii arrived headed "Aloha", telling me that I'd been accepted.

I found living on the edge of an active volcano surprisingly relaxed, as well as exciting. My daily commute involved a stroll through tranquil rainforest, past the misty caldera with its mighty steam column connecting the unstable earth with the Pacific skies. At night, the fierce orange glow of lava illuminated the sky and the ground around it.

Mornings began with an "eruption update" and, for me, a crash course in biology, geology and "interpretation". Then I was given the revered volunteer ranger uniform and let loose.

On the first morning I found myself in front of a group of visitors. Suddenly, I was the "authority", delivering a geology talk on the volcanic past and present of the islands, with a smattering of winning ranger-style wit.

Although as a volunteer I was making the park come alive for visitors, it was the people of the park who made Hawaii come alive for me. These warm and generous people have a respect for their land and a genuine pleasure in sharing it. I joined a halau hula dance school, for two months of trying to keep up with the graceful dancers. At the [Merrie Monarch festival](#), the Olympics of hula, I spent a mesmerising evening watching traditional

dancers from all over the Pacific. I also got to grips with Hawaiian paddling, winning a prize in the Hilo regatta. All this as well as getting to go on countless hikes across lush rainforest, deserted plains of solid lava rock, huge volcanic craters and the ocean coast, scattered with silent crescents of sand and palm trees.

As a parks service VIP you can stand in the middle of a volcanic crater, look up at the rainforest clinging to the sides and the myriad steam puffs escaping from the ground you're standing on and shout: "This is my office."

- The [International Volunteers in Parks Program](#), run by the National Park Service's Office of International Affairs ([nps.gov/oia](https://nps.gov/oia)), pays for your visa and helps you through the application process. Some parks provide accommodation.

- Phoebe Kirk

## Parrot breeding, Catalonia - Spain

One of the hyacinth macaws Hal Hodson helped feed on his volunteering holiday.

Photograph: Hal Hodson

After six months of study in London, I wanted to get away for a bit, and I needed it to be cheap. A slightly odd idea popped into my head one evening. My dad is an artist and often does large-scale paintings of tropical birds, including parrots. I'd always wanted to find out more about them.

I found Darryl Unsworth through the [Parrot Society UK](#). Darryl got in touch saying that if I didn't mind helping out with the birds, I was welcome to visit him at his farm in Catalonia, northern Spain. Darryl is a British expat who breeds parrots, selling the birds to a vet in Madrid, one he trusts to find responsible breeders or pet owners. He pointed me to his profile on Help Exchange, [HelpX.net](#), a website listing worldwide opportunities for volunteers, who work in return for room and board.

This website is a brilliant starting point for travellers looking for a cheap way to see the world, while being helpful and learning a thing or two. There are thousands of projects in its library. Unlike Wwoof (Willing Workers on Organic Farms, [www.woof.org.uk](https://www.woof.org.uk)), there is work of all kinds. You could find yourself teaching children in Ghana, working on a ranch in Argentina, or helping one man set up an organic garden on Samoa. Most of the projects take volunteers for free – you just need to get there.

I arrived in the middle of an emergency – a storm had knocked the electricity out, and the generator was nearly out of petrol, but Darryl needed power for the baby parrots' incubators. After visiting several garages we found some and dashed back. "Looks like the temperature's barely dropped below 36.5C, so the eggs and babies are OK. We got back just in time," he whispered, before showing me around.

Darryl has about 30 breeding pairs: African greys, tiny, hooting parakeets, scarlet and green macaws, and hyacinth macaws, as big as human babies. A black eye looked out of a yellow monocle, staring me down as one of the metre-long birds dangled from its aviary. "They can break coconuts with their beaks and they'll take your finger off, so be careful," Darryl warned. I chopped bananas into thirds then used the stem-ends to pass the fruit in to the birds without risking my fingers.

Some HelpX hosts lay down strict rules on the amount of work expected for room and board. The standard is about five hours a day, after which you are free to roam, read and swim. Darryl preferred to set out projects which he wanted my help with during my stay.

Clearing the barn was one of the hardest tasks. The floor was carpeted with seed shucks and the air heavy with pet shop smell. In each corner there were piles of earth under piles of stuff. Darryl said mice dig the earth out to nest under the floor, where they are followed by big snakes. I dragged a feed box out from a damp nook, half hoping for, half dreading a snake encounter. By the time we were done, there were two truckloads of junk, old seed and earth. But a clean barn felt good.

Most of the time, I fed the parrots and helped with DIY. At no point did I feel exploited: Darryl was fun and full of stories. After work we made dinner – always simple, but delicious – tortilla, fried potatoes and a bottle of wine.

When I wasn't working, I read, and wandered the mountains. The farm is remote, but Darryl was happy to give me a lift to the bus station. One afternoon, I took a bus to Unesco-listed Tarragona. There were crumbling walls and arches beside the buzzing market and, as I crested a hill, I caught sight of the Mediterranean. After a long sweaty walk there was sand between my toes and I jumped into the salty sea then floated on my back, bobbing on wavelets. It felt like a real reward.

- [helpx.net](http://helpx.net)

- Hal Hodson

## **Student tour, Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing**

The scent of incense followed us as we walked around the Jing'an temple. Pilgrims were kneeling in prayer before the many statues. We thought the most astounding feature of this temple was its location, amid skyscrapers on one of Shanghai's busy roads. That was until we saw the monk, burger in one hand, mobile phone in the other.

But this was exactly the type of enlightenment the Study China programme hoped to achieve. Now in its fifth year, it is managed by the University of Manchester on behalf of the government, although any student can apply. This year, it ran 17-day courses in Nanjing over Easter and in Shanghai and Beijing in the summer. The aim is to encourage UK students to visit China and equip themselves with skills to live in an increasingly globalised world. Any full-time UK undergraduate who holds an EU or EEA passport (or has indefinite leave to remain in the UK), can apply. You fill in a form explaining why you are suitable. As a student of French with international studies, I knew I would get a lot out of it, and felt lucky to be one of the 250-odd selected from more than 1,000 applicants.

I had to pay for flights, insurance and food; the programme covered accommodation, a 30-hour language course, a Chinese sim card, a metro card and a host of trips. You pay entrance fees for places you visit yourself, but it works out as a very reasonable way to travel.

The first week in Shanghai was similar to freshers' week, with 120 of us forming new friendships. Visiting a new city with people you barely know adds to the experience and relationships quickly developed. I doubt I will soon forget the people I was with when we saw the glorious Bund skyline by night. Or the night that we visited a jazz bar to find that



one of the guitarists was a forensic inspector by day. Or the day a few of us visited Nanjing, in 40C heat.

My most lasting memory will be the spontaneous dancing. In the most unexpected outdoors areas in Beijing or in the most westernised parts of Shanghai, groups of men and women ballroom dance to Chinese pop. We were often asked to be their partners.

- Study China programme ([studychina.org.uk](http://studychina.org.uk))
- Siraj Datoo, third-year student at Warwick University and editor of the Student Journals ([thestudentjournals.co.uk](http://thestudentjournals.co.uk))

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