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Newsweek

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KEEP ON SALE UNTIL OCTOBER 22, 2006



PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN LEE—GETTY IMAGES FOR NEWSWEEK

Pursch in Shanghai

BY SAMUEL PURSCH

I ORGANIZED MY GAP YEAR INTO EUROPE AND ASIA. I started by backpacking, armed with a Eurailpass and the indispensable Lonely Planet Europe guide. From Paris I went to Barcelona, then along the Mediterranean to Venice, north to Vienna and Prague, then on to Germany and the Netherlands. Five weeks later I was back in Paris. It was mind-blowing to visit eight European capitals in a row.

Europe is designed for the backpacker: hostels abound, train journeys are short enough to be bearable and, most important, the Continent possesses a unique travel culture. I met dozens of young people. We'd join forces for a night, go out to eat and to a bar together, exchanging e-mail addresses and bidding farewell in the morning. It's a small world for young travelers: the people I met in Vienna turned up in Amsterdam two weeks later.

In Paris I settled down for two months. I took language classes in the morning, then enjoyed the city. There is nothing like daily routine to discover a place. I became a Parisian, living in a tiny bedroom in the apartment of a French family. I spent my time wandering through the Latin Quarter or getting lost in the Louvre. Sometimes I whiled away days just sitting in a café, absorbing Paris over café express and a novel.

After Christmas back home (and a temp job at a ski resort to refill my bank account), I was off to Shanghai. Through a British gap-year company called Teaching Projects Abroad, I found a journalism internship with Shanghai's main English-language business magazine, BizShanghai. Along with 25 or so other interns around, I experienced life in one of the world's fastest-growing metropolises.

Gap years range in cost. Mine was expensive—about \$14,000—with French courses and three months in Shanghai. But I have friends who've had frugal gap years, traveling through remote parts of Southeast Asia or Northern Africa. In the end, a gap year isn't about place, but about jumping off the diving board and hoping you know how to swim when you hit the water. You can learn about a new country or city, a tiny village, a language or a combination of those.