

“Where
are you
going
next
year?”

*A year to learn
all that can't be
taught in class*

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“Where are you going next year?”—the single most frequent, presumptuous and uncomfortable question I was asked in the months preceding the fall of 2014. Each time I was asked, I was reminded that I had attended a university preparatory school, and had elected to take a gap year instead. This was a foreign concept to the majority of the Brentwood population and its ever-growing alumni group. Yet I had chosen this path, and I knew it meant awkward questions and constant justification.



^ Sunset in Lisbon, Portugal

I was also joining the highest number of students electing to take a year away from school in Brentwood’s recent history. Perhaps we were an outlier year, a particularly large collection of vagabonds and layabouts, or perhaps like Europe, the gap year trend has become progressively more fashionable in North America. In a globalized world and a country, according to Stats Canada, with nearly 2,000,000 students enrolled in Canadian universities and colleges annually, it should be of little surprise that increasing numbers of students are searching ways to

differentiate themselves on resumes, in schools and in the workforce.

Ever the busy bee, it was extremely difficult for me to fathom that it was possible to drop everything, pack up and just leave, especially in a society that often holds negative connotations about gap years. For a while I felt like I had failed, which, in hindsight is a ridiculous concept. I had tried my utmost in school, and had been accepted into every university I had applied to, most with scholarship—a feat that I

sincerely attribute to Brentwood and the opportunities it provides. I was not a failure, but rather free to spend a year devouring books by choice, to watch documentaries for enjoyment. I was free to travel, to experience the exact hues of a sunset on the Portuguese coast, the scents of a market in Marakesh, the rush of discovering a hidden corner in a city well explored.

So, on September 17th, 2014, I hauled my swollen Deuter backpack through YVR security, and departed headlong into the unknown. I flew to London first. There, I met with several contacts provided by family members, most of whom I’d never met but all crucial in helping me find my footing in a world I knew so



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little about and longed to discover.

Eventually, I found myself volunteering at a refugee camp in Munich. It hosted hundreds of people, mostly hailing from Syria, Nigeria and Eritrea. There, I worked with the Bavarian government to take care of children, to send families to doctors and dentists, and to organize and distribute clothing donations to those staying with us—most of whom arrived with only the clothes on their backs. Having for a long time been interested in international relations and development, with a particular focus on conflict resolution in the Middle East, this opportunity could not have come at a better time, nor could I have been more honoured to be involved.

I was told abhorrent and unimaginable stories of torture and loss, and yet from the very same people I was privy to the most loving and gracious of demeanours; over dinnertime, I was taught rudimentary Arabic by an eager group of Syrians; I learned traditional Somali dances while a Nigerian husband and wife played bongos; I laughed and played chess with two Palestinian brothers while nibbling chocolate that I had snuck in for them. All of these people taught me that happiness and love are feelings that we choose to exude every day, despite horrors of the past.

It would be dishonest if I said that my six months away from Canada came without challenge or loss, and a blatant lie were I to say that I would change a single aspect. Yes, the sightseeing and gallery frequenting were splendid, but I learned little from the tacky tourist traps and overly photographed monuments (except that Starbucks can be found within a one kilometre radius of almost any historic site in Europe). However, wandering cities alone provided moments when



There need not be a return on every act of altruism

I discovered the most about myself.

The true tests came when stomaching the heartbreaking tales of plight from the refugees, watching some be pulled off of trains by police and left feeling helpless. The challenges came after missing a transport connection and being stuck in the Zurich train station for five hours, with no food, no Wifi, no Swiss Francs and a credit card that wasn’t accepted in any of the station’s stores. They came when I was alone and missing home, pining for the feeling of community and the ability to communicate with those around me.

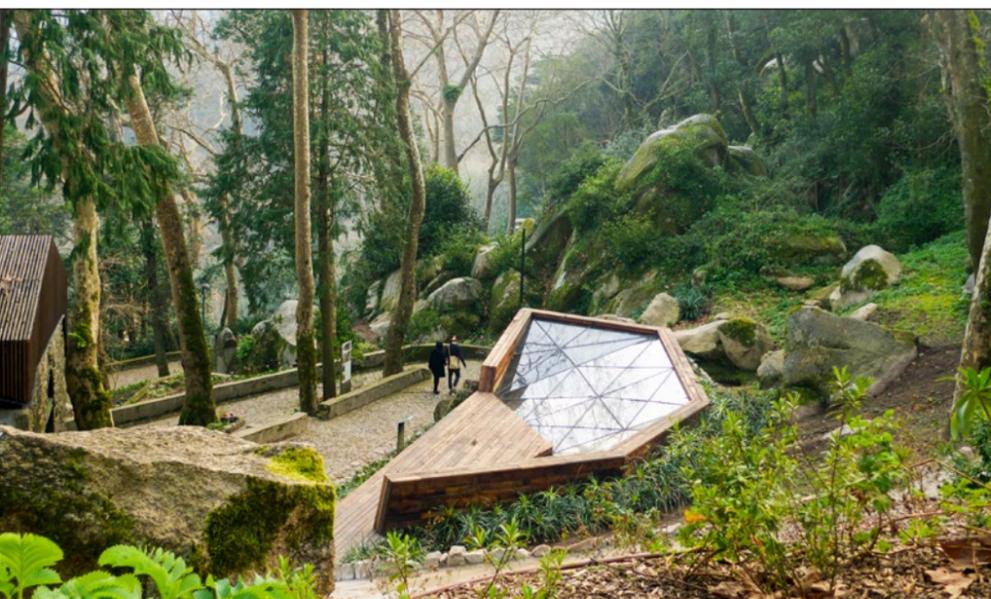
The thing about living out of a backpack is that there is an unspoken bond with other dirty, exhausted travellers. I met fantastic people in every hostel I stayed in, all with an understanding that perhaps we might only know each other for a few hours, for a day or a few weeks, but that each of us had something to offer

one another. This created an honest and open atmosphere full of supportive and fascinating people, the likes of which can scarcely be found in other environments.

Between appalling crimes against humanity and widespread disease, the world events in the past year have, I think, disillusioned many people to the idea of generosity of others and the kindness of the human spirit. I can say wholeheartedly that the welcoming nature of my hosts, and the love of and for everyone I met changed my perspective on hope and connection. There is infinite beauty in culture, tremendous love in loss. So, no, I didn’t take a gap year. I took a year to learn all that can’t be taught in class, the words that can’t be found in textbooks, the names of individuals involved in the largest mass migration of humans since WWII.

In high school, I prided myself on helping others and on returning every favour done for me to the best of my ability. On the road, I was surrounded by daily reminders that there need not always be a return on every act of altruism for the naïve Canadian girl lost in Prague at midnight—only the understanding that it will be passed on to future generations, *De Manu in Manum*.

v Sintra, Portugal



Chateau > Versailles

