

Niquesa Travel's year-long itinerary stops off at some of the best diving spots in Guatemala and Belize



The Super Sabbatical

A week-long fly and flop doesn't quite cut the mustard – these days experience is everything. **Christopher Silvester** investigates the rise of the grown-up gap year



ABOVE: Niquesa Travel offers expeditions to far-flung parts of Chile
BELOW: Celebrity Cruises has partnered with Ben Fogle to present the Great Adventures series

Whoever just goes on holiday any longer? Once upon a time, the emphasis was on simply having a period of fun and relaxation with your partner or family, away from back-breaking or soul-destroying toil. Now we seek ever-increasing spiritual rewards from our travels. Self-improvement is our watchword. The quest for mere pleasure has been replaced by the quest for meaning. We expect to learn more about indigenous communities or about the sustainability of our planet, and therefore more about ourselves. Meet the super-sabbatical.

Last December I was travelling on the *Celebrity Edge*, the latest cruise liner from Celebrity Cruises, where I met Ben Fogle, the explorer and TV presenter, who has been a global destination ambassador for the company for the past five years. ‘What do you see as a forthcoming trend in travel?’ I asked him. ‘I think you’re going to see more and more people taking super-sabbaticals,’ he replied. Fogle’s Great Adventures series for Celebrity Cruises arose from his perception that cruise companies should concentrate on destination activities as much as shipboard activities, whether it be hiking volcanoes in St Kitts or fjord snorkelling in Norway. For cruisers, of course, time spent in any one place is limited, but what Fogle means by super-sabbaticals is immersive, experiential travel, whereby a couple or a family spend a lot of time in one particular place or on a round-the-world journey.

Having spoken with several tour operators, I’ve discovered that Ben is not alone in making this assumption. Indeed, such is the demand that one London firm, Original Travel, has launched a special division dedicated to organising super-sabbaticals.

Another company, Natural World Safaris, specialises in safari and wilderness adventures with an emphasis on sustainability. ‘Over the



past few years, we have seen an increase in enquiries for an extended sabbatical trip,’ says Nick Wilson, Natural World Safaris’ head of product. ‘Today, travellers want to experience, learn and discover more. Travelling for a longer period of time allows them to get under the skin of a destination to gain a deeper understanding of the place, wildlife, people and culture. Alternatively, it enables the inclusion of an increased number of stops and experiences along the way, valuable when travelling further afield or off the beaten track, when travelling times need to be considered. We are finding extended journeys appeal to those in high-level executive roles who may be on three-month gardening leave before starting a new position. They may also appeal to a retiree sitting on various company boards, who is able to take extended time out and dedicate themselves to the experience.’

An example of the sort of super-sabbatical the company offers, albeit at the eye-watering price of between £65,000 and £85,000 per person, is the immersive 90-day primate and gorilla-binge expedition, which starts with tracking western lowland gorillas in Gabon, then goes into both the Republic of Congo and Central African Republic, seeing gorillas and exploring Odzala-Kokoua and Dzanga-Sangha’s national parks and rivers. The next leg, tracking eastern lowland gorillas and summiting the active Nyiragongo volcano in the Democratic Republic

of Congo, is currently out of bounds owing to travel restrictions. (If the FCO relaxes these, the trip will also include a stop at the island idyll of Tchegeza Tented Camp, in the middle of Lake Kivu.) Continuing the route via Rwanda, the land of a thousand hills, you will track mountain gorillas in both the Volcanoes National Park and Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, before exploring the forests of Kibale, Kyambura, Budongo and Murchison Falls, to encounter many of Uganda's 24 species of primate, including chimpanzees, baboons, mangabey, colobus, galago and more. Pausing at Wildwaters Lodge, on a unique private island midstream on the mighty River Nile, you will next travel to Ethiopia's Simien Mountains to encounter the gelada monkeys. Finally, you will fly to Madagascar, where your last three weeks will be spent traversing the island from east coast to west coast, encountering at least 20 lemur species and spending time with the lemur-monitoring researchers at Kianjavato.

If that seems too much like a walk in the park, why not try the full one-year itinerary devised by high-end specialists Niquesa Travel? In the summer you will join your yacht in the Caribbean and sail to Panama by way of Cuba, Mexico, Belize and Costa Rica, before travelling south to Ecuador/Galápagos, Peru, Bolivia and Chile, while your yacht re-locates to Tahiti. Winter will be spent in the Pacific, New Zealand and Australia, while spring will see you heading for Indonesia and Cambodia, rejoining your yacht in the Indian Ocean before visiting Kenya and Tanzania. It's topped off the following summer with a tour of the Greek Islands, Croatia, Italy and the Balearic Islands. Depending on the yacht and crew involved, this whole trip will cost upwards of £750,000 per person.

'We are increasingly finding that young families see the value of a sabbatical as a means of reconnection and self-development,' says Mark Allvey, Niquesa Travel's managing director. 'Technology has all but eradicated obstacles like education and communication, giving busy families the opportunity to create enduring memories through travel. Clients seek our expertise in curating their entire experience, from careful route planning to creativity, learning and destination knowledge built up over decades. We help them to immerse themselves completely in a particular destination, sharing life experiences while enriching and maximising their precious time together and taking the stress out of what can be a complicated planning process.'



Natural World Safaris isn't monkeying around with its 90-day primate expedition

Ski seasons aren't just for gap years, says Oliver Corkhill, CEO of Leo Trippi



Some couples or families might prefer the different approach offered by Arksen, the expedition yacht brand. By reinventing the modern explorer vessel, Arksen hopes to inspire a new generation of sailors. Costing around £5 million each, and designed with sustainability in mind, Arksen yachts are well suited to long trips to remote areas. The Arksen Explorers' Club assists owners who wish to undertake more challenging trips by sorting out the logistics for them.

'One of the greatest inspirations for building Arksen was my children,' says CEO Jasper Smith. 'The world is a complex place today and while I have sailed extensively with them in the Med and around the UK, I began to dream of taking them on some of the much longer passages I did a few years ago. I then thought how wonderful it would be to take them on some of the extraordinary journeys of our role models. Following part of the explorer Fridtjof Nansen's 1890s Fram journey north, sailing in the wake of Bill Tillman, diving some of the sites Jacques Cousteau discovered and following the Kon-Tiki route. Life is short, it skips by. I thought, if there's one thing I can do for and with my kids that will allow them to see the world in a profoundly different way it is perhaps to show them the world at its most natural and complete.'

And why should skiing be the exception to this new rule? As Oliver Corkhill, CEO of Leo Trippi, explains, while ski seasons are typically considered as activities for gap year students and university graduates, in recent years there has been an increased demand for people in a higher age demographic wishing to spend an entire season in the mountains. 'These clients are taking a midlife career break to embark on a once-in-a-life time sabbatical, usually four months in length, and they have the finances to really make the most of it. With today's "experience economy", there has been a substantial shift in what clients desire – it's no longer just about a high-value product (such as an extravagant St Moritz chalet) but instead it's about the experimental activity offered. To meet this demand, we combine luxury accommodation with exhilarating high-altitude experiences, from snowshoeing in a beautiful national park to exploring thousands of miles of heli-skiing terrain in Iceland's Troll Peninsula. We take huge pride in our knowledge, experience and contacts across Europe's leading ski destinations and we are thrilled to share this in order to create truly bespoke and memorable experiences such as sabbaticals.'

And if you're worried about the impact of taking your children out of school for a year, specialist agencies can arrange for tutors or retired teachers to accompany you on your journey.

So, what are you waiting for? ■