

Broadening the gap

Gap years are no longer exclusive to the young, finds James Ellis

Head to one of Thailand's famous Full Moon parties or leap from a bungee bridge in New Zealand this winter, and in among the skater boys and surfer dudettes you might notice the odd flash of salt-and-pepper hair, because – whisper it – the mature market is taking a gap year. Sales of "grown-up gaps" have risen by 26 per cent in 2011, according to tour operator Bridge the World, as more and more people take a career break, fuelled either by redundancy payouts or the desire to duck out of the rat race.

"We did extensive focus-group research as we wanted to ensure we understood what today's over-fifties traveller wants," says the company's commercial director, James Herbert. "The overall message was that they want to tick things off their 'I've always wanted to... list. This means once-in-a-lifetime wildlife encounters, such as visiting Borneo to see orang-utans, as well as cultural tours that take in iconic sights, including the Killing Fields in Cambodia or the Taj Mahal in India."

Increased demand for longer breaks aimed at the more mature market has prompted one company to launch a new brand specific to the sector. Earlier this year, IUT's specialist and activity sector added Inspired Breaks to its Real Gap Experience and i-to-i brands, popular among those in their early twenties wanting a traditional gap year. "We're looking to complement the brands aimed at a younger audience," says managing director Sam Cox. "Inspired Breaks attracts those who are a little older and looking to give something back or take a career break. We've had people aged up to 70 travelling with us."

Highlights of the company's brochure include two weeks volunteering on a panda project in Xi'an, China, from £749, or three weeks on conservation projects in the Galapagos Islands, from £1,699. Both exclude international flights – ideal for independent travellers.

While the grown-up gap market is increasing, there are also a number of new options for people who want a break with a sustainable element or wish to contribute to a local community. Kuoni has recently launched Ananea – a programme that takes its name from the Greek word for renewal. Holiday options include luxury lodges, ethical tours and volunteering programmes around the world. Itineraries include working with Volunteers Without Borders in Thailand or on sustainable coffee farms in Costa Rica. Prices lead in at £1,289 for seven nights.

ITC Classics has launched a similar programme, ITC Giving. Holidaymakers are interviewed and criminal-record checks run, before bookings for volunteer projects are accepted. The company takes a targeted approach, with only six projects – in Peru, Morocco, South Africa, Thailand, India and, most recently, St Lucia. Seven days on a rainforest conservation project costs from £4,125, excluding flights.

ITC Giving's director, Donna Okell, says: "For a volunteer experience to be effective, it is critical that the needs of the project and the skills of the volunteer are aligned. The needs of the local community must also be respected. We work closely with partners to ensure that all these requirements are met. We use a robust preparation process to help the volunteer understand what their experience will entail and how they will engage with the project and the wider community."



Hit the heights: a trekker accompanied by a Sherpa guide in the Himalayas

What's new in sustainable holidays

Rafting in Sweden

Head to Sweden with Explore for an eight-day family rafting tour. Families build their own rafts, then learn to navigate them through the Klaräven river, fish for their dinner and camp on the forested banks, with the chance to spot elk, roe deer and beavers. **From £1,178pp** (£1,153 per child), including flights, three nights in hotels and four nights' camping. (0844 499 0901; www.explore.co.uk)

Tag rhino in South Africa

Join a team of vets on the Pinndie private game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal to assist with the conservation of black and white rhino with S&Beyond. Take to the skies in a helicopter to locate and dart the rhinos, and then land to help with microchipping. **From £1,686pp** based on a group of eight people. (www.andbeyond.com)

Feed 10,000 in India

Journeys of Distinction has launched a 12-day Summers of the Rai escorted tour, including visits to Delhi, Amritsar, Chandigarh and Shimla, that offers travellers the chance to work in the kitchens of a temple in

Amritsar. The Golden Temple Sikh shrine serves meals to 10,000 poor street dwellers a day. Those who choose to take part have the opportunity to go into the kitchens to prepare and serve food and wash up together. **From £3,595pp**, including flights, accommodation and tours. (0161 491 7616; www.joduk.com)

Track snow leopards in the Himalayas

Planet Wildlife is offering a new 13-day Snow Leopard Experience escorted tour. It starts in Leh, the former mountain capital of the ancient Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh, near Tibet.

From here, guests depart for the Husing Camp in the Hemis National Park, then trek the elevated regions of the Rumbak and Tarbung valleys – areas famous for snow leopards as well as other animals, including the Great Tibetan sheep, Tibetan wolf and Eurasian brown bear, and rare birds such as the golden eagle. **From £1,325pp**, excluding flights. (0845 579 4948; www.planetwildlife.com)

Make a monkey of yourself in Vietnam

Award-winning operator Bamboo Travel has launched a new itinerary, Exotic Vietnam, which

includes a visit to the Dao Tien Endangered Primate Species Centre, operated in partnership with Dorset-based Monkey World. The centre is in the Cat Tien National Park in southern Vietnam (visited between days seven and nine on the 16-day tour) and the company makes a £50 donation for every new booking. The tour also

takes in Hoi An, Da lat, an overnight cruise through the Mekong delta and three nights at a resort on Con Dao Island. **From £2,295pp**, including flights, accommodation and excursions. (020 7720 9285; www.bambootravels.co.uk)

Discover the 'new Maldives' in Mozambique

For a novel Indian Ocean experience, take in an island-hopping tour of the Quirimbas archipelago with Zambezi Safari and Travel Company. The Quirimbas dhow safari includes a light-aircraft transfer to Ibo Island from Pemba Airport, three nights at Ibo Island Lodge, two guided tours of the island with a local guide and four nights' camping with a guide on other, remote islands. **From £1,350pp**, excluding international flights. (01 548 830059; www.zambezi.com)