

We took a sabbatical from our lives!

Looking for a new adventure? Take inspiration from these women who all took a break from their daily lives – with life-changing results...



“VOLUNTEERING ABROAD MADE US FRIENDS FOR LIFE”

AMANDA WILLIAMS, 49, from Hertfordshire, left her job as customer care director for a health company to volunteer in St Lucia. Sophie Charles, 29, is an outreach co-ordinator from London.

AMANDA SAYS Last October, I was at a crossroads – I wasn't sure what I wanted my life to look like. All I knew was I didn't want to be in a corporate role any more, and wanted to work in youth development and live abroad for a while. I was a single parent of two grown-up children, so nothing was holding me back.

I'd volunteered for a couple of weeks in Haiti after the earthquake and then for another few weeks in India, but this time I wanted to spend more time volunteering abroad using my knowledge and skills. I booked a three-month stay in St Lucia through the

organisation People and Places, which was £3,500 minus flights.

I ended up staying for over seven months. While I was there, I worked for CARE (Centre for Adolescent Renewal and Education), where kids from difficult backgrounds are referred for skills development. I created a six-week workshop encouraging them to think about setting up a business.

Before setting off, People and Places had put me in touch with Sophie, who'd worked in the same school the year before. It turned out she was due back to St Lucia a week after I'd arrived. We learned a lot from each other and the experience made it easy for us to bond and become friends for life.

I'm now back home and setting up my new consultancy business, 30,000 Ft, which my time in

St Lucia inspired me to do – and looking forward to a night out soon with Sophie!

‘I was at a crossroads so I quit my job. Now nothing was holding me back’



SOPHIE SAYS Volunteering meant I could give something back. I found working for CARE so rewarding.

Amanda and I realised straight away that we are so similar and share the same views. We've built a lovely friendship underpinned by this great experience.

Amanda and Sophie both travelled with People and Places (travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk)

How to volunteer abroad

Not sure where to start? Assess your skills, how long you would like to go for and what you hope to achieve.

✦ **If you want to work with animals...** There's a wealth of opportunities available, from tracking giraffes in Africa to monitoring bees in Nepal. Gapforce offers a 4-10 week course in the Bahamas where you learn to be a qualified PADI diver while caring for the reef; gapforce.org/gb

✦ **If you want to help the planet...** Join the Earthwatch community, which aims to create "citizen scientists". An 11-day trip to help measure evidence of global warming in Hudson Bay, Canada, costs about £3,000; earthwatch.org

✦ **If you want to help young people...** You don't need teaching experience but enthusiasm in sports, music and drama is highly valued. At Aventure, you can work at a school in Nepal for 12 weeks for approx £3,000; aventure.co.uk



“MY PILGRIMAGE MADE ME RETHINK WHAT I WANT IN LIFE”



SARAH PACKWOOD, 47, lives in Warwickshire with her husband Brett. She took unpaid leave from her job as a humanitarian aid worker to take care of her mother. After she passed away, in 2015 Sarah walked the Camino de Santiago in her memory.

I was never the sporty type – before walking the Camino, my biggest worry was whether I was going to finish it, but I was so determined to do it for my mum.

Over 42 days, I walked 900km from St Jean Pied de Port in France along the Camino Frances route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. I wanted to do this pilgrimage the right way – on my own, carrying my own bag and finding my way with just a map.

‘It was a spiritual journey for me – I ended up changing my life’

The first few days are spent going over the French Pyrenees mountains. My body was aching and I got a bad cold, which made me almost give up. But then I gave myself a good pep talk and got into a rhythm walking 20km a day.

This was a spiritual pilgrimage for me. I went thinking I would grieve the loss of my mother but I ended up having a good time, making new friends and changing my life. I'd always loved my job as an aid worker, but being in the middle of natural disasters or conflict situations takes its toll on you. Walking the Camino gave me the opportunity to rethink how I want to live my life. I'm now a freelance humanitarian consultant and have also trained as a reiki master.

“WORKING WITH ORANGUTANS GOT ME OUT OF MY RUT”



Complementary therapist ANNE FRANCES MANSBRIDGE, 52, from Hamilton, volunteered to work with orangutans in Malaysia.

The first time I saw orphaned orangutans in the flesh, my heart skipped a beat. I'd wanted to work with animals for years. Then last May I watched a documentary with the presenter Paul O'Grady on the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre in Malaysia, and knew that's where I had to go. Looking back, I was in a bit of a rut. I hadn't done anything adventurous for years.

I booked a two-month stay – because I'm freelance, taking time off work wasn't an issue. The trip wasn't cheap though at £3,000. My partner Charles was supportive; my 81-year-old mum thought I was mad but she knows I love animals.

En route I met some of the other 11 volunteers, by chance all

female but of very different ages. We talked through our concerns – mainly the heat and the insects – and I made friends for life.

You can't interact with the orangutans straight away as you might be carrying germs that they could catch. So my first sight of these lovely animals was from a viewing platform. It was magical. We were taken to the rainforest to look for orangutan nests and map the local population. Then we began working with the older orphans aged four to eight. Orangutans don't leave their mothers until this



‘It's made me grateful for what I have but I'm saving to go back’

age, so they still need lots of care.

As the weeks went on, we were trusted to help with the two and three-year-olds. They need to be fed milk and taught to climb trees. But you can't cuddle or kiss them because they mustn't be humanised. The aim is always to release them back into the wild.

When the time came to leave we all cried. I felt unsettled when I returned to the UK and felt changed by the experience. I feel more aware of how fragile our planet is now and how materialistic our society is. It also made me grateful for what we have here. Now I'm saving up to go back. Mum still thinks I'm mad! *Anne Frances volunteered with Travellers Worldwide (travellersworldwide.com)*

Tempted to take the leap?

Psychotherapist Hilda Burke suggests three small changes to help make the leap...

1 FIND A BUDDY! Ask the organisers whether you could speak to someone who

has previously done what you're considering. Be curious about their experience.

2 RE-ASSESS THE RISK If you go for it and it really isn't your thing, remind yourself that there is always a way out. Few

things in life are irreversible.

3 IMAGINE HOW YOU MIGHT FEEL LOOKING BACK IN 10 YEARS' TIME From that older, potentially wiser standpoint, what would you advise your younger self to do? **w&h**