

How VSO can help you make the most of your gap year

VSO is offering young volunteers the chance to do some lasting good during their gap year. Nick Jackson reports

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¹ A gap year can sometimes be just that: a gap. For some it's a welcome relief from goals and objectives, but others want to build something more than a photo album and a fine stock of dinner party anecdotes. For them there is VSO.

² Voluntary Service Overseas, known as VSO, can seem something of a rather worthy two fingered salute to gap year companies. While some companies charge thousands of pounds to let untrained teenagers loose on schoolchildren for six months and then leave the community with nothing, VSO asks for realistic fundraising and prides itself on its sustainability.

³ Started as a youth organisation in 1958, VSO moved away from year-long sojourns by young Brits to focus on serious sustainable voluntary development work, recruiting highly skilled professionals for two or three years at a time. Since the millennium, VSO has moved back to its roots, offering a new gap programme for the 21st century, Global

Xchange, and boosting its Youth for Development scheme.

⁴ 'If you're after an experience, that's great,' says Leona Daly, spokesperson for VSO. 'There's nothing wrong with having fun. But if you want to do some good with your energy then you need to think a little more about what you're going to do.'

⁵ At £600 sponsorship for Global Xchange and £900 for Youth for Development VSO's programmes are also a steal. That sponsorship covers training, visas, travel, medical checks, injections, accommodation, food and an allowance.

⁶ VSO runs programmes for hardened world savers and for the rest of us who mean well but have not yet delivered on our ideals. Youth for Development is a 12-month overseas programme for young volunteers interested in working with VSO's partners and programmes. To qualify you need to have a year's experience of voluntary work in your community in the UK. Applications are closed for this year,

but if you are going into your final year at school, applications are due in October through January.

'an opportunity to make a real difference'

⁷ For the rest of us there is Global Xchange, organised with the British Council and Community Service Volunteers. 'The focus is about getting an insight into development and the diversity in their own countries,' says Daly. Volunteers spend three months in the UK and three months abroad. Locations vary but recent programmes have been in Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, India and South Africa. Each country is paired with a British city and the volunteers, British and foreign, work together in teams. 'We want to engage with the volunteers of tomorrow,' says Daly.

⁸ For **Helen Parker**, 18, VSO was an opportunity to make a real difference. Growing up in ➡

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➡ Hong Kong, Parker had already experienced the exoticism that many suburban British teenagers spend their year chasing. 'I've seen lots of different countries,' says Parker. 'I wanted the experience of living in the community and no longer being an outsider, being accepted and being able to share some of my skills.'

⁹ Parker joined up with the Youth for Development programme this year. She did her training last month and, all going well, will soon be off to China to work with HIV charity CHAIN as a peer educator on HIV awareness. She already has some experience to rely on: for the last year she has been an HIV peer educator at her school, taking lessons in personal, social and health education and assemblies.

¹⁰ She admits that Youth for Development has a tough recruitment process. As well as the year's voluntary experience, potential recruits have to take an assessment day in London, where your character, commitment and team skills are examined. It can all sound rather like a job interview, and it is certainly tougher than getting on to other gap year programmes but Parker believes it's worth it. 'I looked at a variety of programmes and some seemed tokenistic,' Parker says. 'A lot seemed to be just three weeks' teaching and a month surfing. VSO is different.'

¹¹ 'I wanted to get out of the education system and learn

something from the real world,' says **Farhaan Mumtaz**, 19, who took part in a VSO Global Exchange project this year.

¹² Mumtaz's six months focused on ethno-religious conflict and cooperation in Birmingham and Makassar, Indonesia.

¹³ Mumtaz worked with an Indonesian Christian counterpart in the UK. He spent most of his time at an Islamic college, helping out and organising interfaith discussions. Although a Muslim, the college was a long way from Mumtaz's liberal comfort zone. 'It gave me a chance to meet people I wouldn't come across in daily life, people I'd be intimidated by, but we became real friends,' he says. 'It was interesting how they dealt with the current situation, when Islam isn't the most fashionable thing.'

'the opportunity to change your perspective, not just the scenery'

¹⁴ In Indonesia, Mumtaz lived and worked in Makassar, soon after the city had suffered race riots against the Chinese minority. He wrote articles on the conflict, which gave him a chance to meet local religious and community leaders: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim. 'We got to speak to some amazing people,' he says. 'If you are travelling

you don't get that chance to have time with experts in the field.'

¹⁵ It was not all high-brow stuff. One of the high points of Indonesia for Mumtaz was teaching English to and playing football with kids living on a landfill site outside town. 'It was wicked,' he says. 'I'd look forward to it so much. The biggest impact was showing that someone outside of their city, even their landfill, cared.'

¹⁶ **Sophie Lewis** did a Global Xchange this year between Selby, Yorkshire, and South Africa. She saw how necessary the fundamental principle of cultural exchange was when she spent three months with the programme in Selby, where she taught global awareness at a school. 'These kids had never seen a black person in the flesh before,' says Lewis, 19, who worked at the school with a young Zulu. 'And it had a pretty significant effect on the staff.'

¹⁷ In South Africa she worked with Treatment Action Campaign, a local NGO, to break the taboo surrounding taking an HIV test by publicly going for testing, and helped advise pregnant women on how to avoid passing HIV to their baby. VSO gave Lewis structure and the insight to deliver on her ideals. 'It's about learning,' she says. 'Global Xchange gave me such a wealth of skills and knowledge. I've become more and more radically hippy, I suppose.'

¹⁸ Her enthusiasm for the organisation grew. 'I'm quite ➡

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➡ sappy about VSO,' she adds, although she admits that the endless acronyms did sometimes make her feel like she was in a cult. 'It gives you the opportunity to find out what your potential is with other human beings and back up your ideals with actions.'

¹⁹ As with other Global Xchangers, Lewis found that the biggest culture shock was in the UK. Many gappers take the long haul looking for a culture shock, a challenge to the lives and values they have lived up to as children,

only to spend their time with other privileged youngsters at parties or on the beach. VSO gives you the opportunity to change your perspective, not just the scenery. ■