

A life-changing holiday

Why settle for another relaxing vacation when you can take a trip that could change your life?



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GRADUATION vacations, gap-year getaways, semester breaks. We've all been there — students celebrating the end of campus life, taking advantage of an extended break from the books, or just chilling before it starts all over again.

But for some travellers, school is never out. In fact, while others travel the world to lounge on pristine beaches or discover the best bargains, these people set out in search of a lesson — be it a sport, skill, real-life business school or something as intangible as the independence one seeks.

Hear from three way-farers who tell us in their own words about the journeys they've been on and the lessons they've learnt along the way. You might just be inspired to tweak the itinerary for your next vacation.

He's kicking butt in Thailand

Alain Moggi, 31, personal trainer: As you're reading this, I'm on my fourth Muay Thai training trip in Thailand where I'll also be working on my Brazilian jiu-jitsu and mixed martial arts.

This passion for combining training and holidaying started four years ago when I got bored of my usual routine at my gym. My childhood heroes were Bruce



Alain Moggi (left) is addicted to Muay Thai training. Photo: Danny Bowes

Lee and — as cheesy as it sounds since I'm Belgian — Jean Claude Van Damme.

The thing with most martial arts is you have to dedicate a fair bit of time to achieve an acceptable level or even become good at it so when I lost my job in 2008, it made sense to extend my backpacking trip to Thailand and join a Muay Thai camp in Phuket.

The second trip in 2009 made me realise I wanted to stay for a longer period to have a proper experience. Last year, I stayed in Chiangmai and Phuket for four months. It was great to have such an in-depth and intensive experience.

I took part in my first fight last year at Patong Boxing Stadium. I was pretty nervous a week before the fight but I felt fine on the night of the match — I was more concerned about not screwing up

the wai kruu (traditional dance Muay Thai fighters do before any fight). The experience of fighting in front of a huge crowd isn't something you forget. I won with a second round technical knockout and got 4,000 baht (\$\$166.72) for it.

I love travelling to Thailand for training. It's addictive. I love the food, too, although I should go easy on the chilli as I had interrupted my trainings for toilet runs before.

I met the most awesome girl with the same passion on my last trip. While meeting your soulmate is no guarantee, one thing is for sure is you will meet a lot of like-minded, cool people from all ages, backgrounds, nationalities, religions and so on, who are always willing to share their knowledge and skills, or just people to hang out with.

She's headed to the United States — to bag groceries

Adeline Yeo, 22, student: I'm just like any typical final-year student in university — thinking about my future prospects, what sort of career I should pursue, the kind of salary I'll be drawing, whether I should further my studies.

I was struck by how mundane those thoughts were, especially when I hear from friends who've entered the workforce. They complain about work stress and lament that they didn't take time to enjoy the freedom after graduation. I went into panic mode — I didn't want to end up like them!

Together with three girl friends, I joined the Work America Programme and signed up with Dorgan Connect, a local company that organises such trips. I paid about \$2,000 for registration, job placement and insurance, but that sum excluded flights and accommodation.

It's a work and travel programme so I'm essentially working in Roche Bros supermarket in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Okay, I know it's not the most glamorous job but we chose the posting as it pays better — US\$10 (\$\$12.60) an hour, which is more than what you'll make working in a theme park.

What's more important to me as a business student is that I'd be allocated to different sections in the supermarket to get a taste of the operations and management of a big firm like Roche Bros, which could prove to be useful experience if I were to join an MNC.

This time away from home would also do me a world of good. I'm the youngest in the family, my siblings are 10 and 11 years older than me. I never had to worry about anything. My laundry is taken care of and meals "appear" in front of me at home. Like many, I take things for granted as we live in a sheltered and safe society.

I'm leaving for Massachusetts at the end of May, and I'm really looking forward to learning to be independent. Fending for myself in a foreign land and earning my own salary will be immensely satisfying although my parents have urged me to come home any time I feel unsafe or homesick.



It's gonna be a 'party in the USA' for these girl friends.

I'll be staying on for two more months after my three-month work stint to do a road trip through several states in the US, and I'll be recording the entire adventure on my blog (www.awesome4US.wordpress.com). Who knows how this trip will turn out? But at least I know I'll be learning something new and experiencing something different every day.

She gave up advertising to make jewellery in Italy

Carolyn Kan, founder and designer of Carrie K: When I interviewed for a position in an advertising firm over 10 years ago, I was asked what I would be if I weren't in advertising. I said I would love to be a silversmith and jewellery designer. I got the job in advertising and I didn't give my dream a second thought after that.

In 2008, after five years as the managing director of an international advertising agency, I decided to take a year off the corporate race to go on a sabbatical where I would do all the things I had promised myself I would do one day.

I went to Florence because it was

renowned for being the home of the best artisans, in particular silversmiths. That was how I became an understudy, learning to silversmith from Elizabetta Tognetti for two weeks.

I fell in love with her workshop the moment I walked in. The space was cluttered with well-worn jeweller workbenches and old tools that looked like they had been passed down through generations of loving, calloused hands.

At the end of the first week, as I was putting the final touches to my first piece of jewellery, I had an epiphany in a sun-lit room that oozed character. Yes, I know it sounds cliched, but I decided there and then I was going to be Carrie K, the jewellery designer. I quit my job and became a full-fledged jewellery maker at the end of August 2008.

A paper merchant, Stefano Viliani, in Florence helped me design my namecard, and receiving them marked the first day of my new life living a "one day" dream of being a silversmith and jewellery designer. Whenever I look at the card, it reminds me of the decision that changed my life.



Carolyn Kan living her dream as a jewellery designer.



All-weather cover-it

HERE'S one more piece of garment that could better help you battle the elements when you travel. Made of 100 per cent polyester fibre yarn, the North Face Dipsea Cover-it (\$\$36) can be worn over the head to absorb perspiration either while trekking in the Galapagos Islands or taking a camel ride across the Sahara. If you're headed for colder climates, the versatile accessory can be used as a neckband to offer an additional layer of warmth and protection from harsh winds, and you can even pull it up when snow starts getting onto your face. **SERENE LIM**

The North Face Dipsea Cover-it is available in three different prints and retails at all The North Face boutiques.



Jetsetting with Eli Kirshtein

ONE of American chef Eli Kirshtein's favourite dishes is octopus — sous-vide at 77°C for five hours and served with watermelon, lemon vinegar and nasturtiums. Sounds pretty and delicious. And here's the best part: Save for a kalamansi dressing that has replaced the lemon vinegar, the dish — minus the flowers — is available at Krish (Tel: 6779 4644) until April 14.

For those unfamiliar with the 26-year-old chef's recent rise to the ranks of America's most promising chefs, it all began with strong performances on the Emmy winning series *Top Chef: Las Vegas*. Kirshtein, however, received his formal training at the renowned Culinary Institute Of America in New York, which included stints at top restaurants Le Bernardin, Restaurant Daniel and Jean Georges, as well as Alain Ducasse.

His Singapore debut also marks the chef's first cooking stint outside the US, having been kept busy with work on opening a restaurant in his home city of Atlanta, Georgia, and appearing in demos and workshops across the US.

DON MENDOZA

What's the worst thing you've eaten on the plane?

I have been fortunate because I haven't had too many bad meals on flights, but



Kirshtein looks forward to having chicken rice and chilli crab in Singapore.



the thing that stands out the most to me was a cold potato salad. It had the texture of cold French fries that were mealy, and starchy. Not good at all!

The top three Singapore restaurants on your must-visit list!

This is a really hard choice because there are so many fantastic world-class restaurants in the city but the three I would say that rank very high for me are Iggy's, Restaurant Andre, and of course Krish.

Have you had problems travelling with the tools of your profession?

I have rarely had issues traveling with my tools other than my own paranoia. I did find that I wasn't allowed to bring knives through customs in Singapore, which is a first. It is usually airport security where it can get difficult. It's hard to explain why you are checking a bag full of knives, an immersion circulator, and bags of nondescript white powders (the latter two are used in some modern cooking techniques).

What food have you been missing the most while travelling?

The foods I miss the most (have more to do with) cooking at home.

First place you head to eat when you touch down in a new city!

I have created a game for myself that I consider a "culinary punch-list". I always try to find a food that is a trademark of a city, like a cheese steak in Philadelphia, or fish and chips in London. I always want to say I have experienced the most authentic iteration of all of these things. In

Singapore, I am really looking forward to chicken rice and chilli crab.

Eli Kirshtein's three-course and five-course set menus — priced at \$85++ and \$135++, respectively — are available at Krish (9 Rochester Park; Tel: 6779 4644) until April 14.

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