

# WHO'S GOD IN INDIA?

## A FATHER'S GUIDE TO GAP-YEAR SAFETY

Before you know it, A-levels are over and your child is an adult with eyes set firmly on the horizon. A gap year can be a great way to focus wanderlust into something useful, but you need to be aware of the pitfalls and perils, as well as learning to defuse that inner worry bomb

**W**ho's God in India?' you ask your child as they head out the door for their gap year. If they say Brahma or Vishnu, you'd be forgiven for retorting in true Paxman style, 'Oh, c'mon!' Because according to Charlie McGrath, director of Objective Travel Safety, the right answer is Sachin Tendulkar, arguably India's greatest cricketer.

For almost 10 years, McGrath's company has run courses for gap-year students and business travellers heading for potentially dangerous countries. After a long career in the Army as a major, when he managed an intelligence cell in Northern Ireland and was second in command of the 1st Battalion Irish Guards, McGrath is well placed to advise people on how to avoid getting into dangerous situations.

McGrath wasn't joking about Tendulkar. 'Having some knowledge of a country's history, culture and especially sport can make a huge difference,' he says. 'It enables you to build a relationship with local people who can offer advice on safety, for example, if you're chatting to them about your plans for the day.'

His overriding advice for fathers worried about their child's safety is this: 'Entuse them. Encourage them to research the country before they set off. Imagine being in Argentina and never having heard of the Belgrano. You'd look a complete fool.'

Apart from brushing up on cricket – which, McGrath concedes, the Indians are 'potty about' – what other advice does he give to gap-year students?

'There are three main risks: crime, traffic accidents and disease,' he says. 'Mothers can worry too much, but equally fathers overestimate their sons' ability to



### WHERE IN THE WORLD?

Popular destinations for gap years include Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and India. Each has its attractions and – naturally – its drawbacks

**Eastern Europe**  
Plenty of work in orphanages, fewer diseases, but may feel too close to home for some

**Asia**  
Beautiful scenery and beaches, and scope for language teaching, but crime is high in Thailand

**Africa**  
Be aware of malaria regions, but huge scope for voluntary work

**Central America**  
Crime is high, but great scenery and conservation work available

**India**  
Traffic accidents are the biggest danger, but there's a rich culture

read potentially dangerous situations. Men are victims of crime more than young women.'

'It's important to keep a low profile. Theft is rife at airports and stations, so never leave your bags. Consider keeping a dummy wallet to hand over if you're mugged but keep some cash hidden in your clothes or shoes. And never fight with a mugger.' McGrath is still surprised how many gap-year students wear expensive watches, flaunt their smartphones or drape a Nikon around their necks.

Each country has its own risks. In India, it's traffic. More people are killed on India's roads in one day than in a year in the UK. 'Take a taxi from your hotel reception,' advises McGrath. 'And take your own seatbelt – a large belt that will fasten you to the seat on a bus.' Teenagers might be sceptical but McGrath emphasises it saved at least one student's life when their coach teetered over the edge of a ravine.

Basic navigation skills are useful too. 'If you're travelling south in a taxi at midday, where should the sun be?' McGrath says. 'If you don't know or if it's not there, where is your driver taking you? And don't be afraid to tell them to slow down.'

**O**bviously, vaccinations should be up to date and malaria medication taken in high-risk areas. However, it's still possible to be infected and malaria can kill in days. 'Any flu-like symptom should be regarded as malaria and medical help sought,' says McGrath. 'If you come back to the UK two weeks later think you have flu, go straight to A&E'

Another disease, dengue fever, is also spread by mosquitoes. It isn't deadly but it is unpleasant for a few weeks. Good personal hygiene – regular hand washing and using antibacterial gels – is important, and be careful with food. 'Don't assume food cooked in markets is dodgy,' says McGrath. 'It's likely to be healthier and safer than something cooked in a hotel kitchen where you can't see what's going on.'

Given all these worries and potential dangers, would McGrath advise travelling off the beaten track? 'Definitely,' he says. 'Do some research, but generally there's actually less crime. Observe local customs, though: if you're a woman, be aware of appropriate dress and don't travel on roads at night, as most of them are unlit and unsafe.'

We all know how teenagers can dismiss their fathers' advice, but McGrath's enthusiasm for travel is tangible and his company's one-day safety course is fun, educational and far removed from the tones of a nagging parent. And you're never too old to learn talking to McGrath, it turns out that the safest place in an earthquake is, indeed, under the bed. ☹

### COMPANY?

#### DO NOT REMOVE THE STRESS OF PLANNING A GAP YEAR

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**African Conservation Experience**  
Working on game reserves, helping scientists ([africanconservation.co.uk](http://africanconservation.co.uk))

**Project Trust**  
Helping in orphanages and assisting medics in Asia, Africa and South America ([projecttrust.org.uk](http://projecttrust.org.uk))

**Quest Overseas**  
Community and conservation work, including improving water supplies in rural Kenya ([questoverseas.com](http://questoverseas.com))

**Raleigh International**  
Established in 1978 by Colonel John Blashford-Snell and the Prince of Wales as Operation Drake, this was the first youth project to give teenagers the chance to circumnavigate the globe on board a ship ([raleighinternational.org](http://raleighinternational.org))

**The Leap**  
Voted best gap year company by the *Sunday Times*. Specialises in voluntary work and eco-tourism ([theleap.co.uk](http://theleap.co.uk))

