

Thinking of a Green Gap Year?

Ed Beale offers advice and describes his experience



Potala Tree

Maybe you or someone you know is planning to take a Gap Year and go travelling? Before you race down to STA Travel to buy a round-the-world plane ticket, consider this – those plane trips will pump out at least 5 tonnes of CO₂ per person and you will use many times your fair and sustainable ecological footprint (try the quiz at <http://www.ecofoot.org/> to find out what your ecological footprint is).

So do you have to stay home? Well, you could do, or you could travel overland. You can get to some very exciting places without leaving the ground (or the sea), and the travel itself will be an amazing experience too. You will meet lots of local people along the way and see the ever-changing landscape, rather than doing most of the journey above the clouds at 30,000 feet.

For Christians, it is very important that we don't cut ourselves off from other people when we are abroad – segregated transport and exclusive resorts isolate and insulate us from the realities of life for the majority of people. Travelling overland on ordinary buses and trains inevitably brings us into contact with people, and ordinary ways of life. Travelling by train through Russia or China, or by bus through Nepal will be time-consuming, and often uncomfortable, but it's real life for billions of people, all of whom our God loves just as much as he loves us.

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For environmentalists, travelling overland connects us to the reality of the range of environmental problems that people around the world are suffering: piles of rubbish building up next to their houses; pollution and degraded land which can't grow food any more. It also shows us very different lifestyles to our own. How do people live without running water supplies? How do people stay clean without ever being able to have a shower? All these things help us understand why our ecological footprint is so many times higher than people in other countries, and gives us some idea of the changes that we need

to make in our lifestyles to avoid some kind of ecological collapse.

To really learn these things it is important to step off the beaten tourist trail on your Gap Year, to get away from

the comfort zone of staying in youth hostels and tourist guesthouses surrounded by other Europeans, Americans, Australians and New Zealanders. One way of doing this is to join a short-term mission or other project, to do something to help out the local people. You will meet local people much more easily and learn from them first-hand.

Overland travel takes a bit of planning, but there are some great websites which can help. "The Man in Seat 61" (<http://www.seat61.com/>) will tell you how to get to over 60 different countries by train, bus and ferry, mostly in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. For the Americas there are no cross-ocean ferries any more, but you could look at travelling on a freighter ship.

You will need to check that your chosen route is safe to travel, and whether you need a visa for any of the countries. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website is the best place to look, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/> - click on 'Travel Advice', 'Travel Advice by Country' on the left-hand bar. Also check a travellers' bulletin board like Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree, <http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com/> where almost any question you might have will probably already have been answered by another overland traveller! Do an Internet search to find English language churches to visit en route as well. A lot of big cities around the world have an "International Church".

Try to learn a little bit of the language of the countries you will be passing through, even if it is just the basics. Think about taking a water bottle which can take boiled water. It will save loads of plastic waste compared to drinking bottled water. On trains, and in hotels, you can often get boiled water, which is safe to drink.

Lastly, keep a diary of your trip. You will have so many new experiences and you will see so many things it will be hard to take it all in and harder still to remember it, so write things down as you go along.



Piles of litter in Xinglongzhen, north China

God will want to teach you things through what you see and experience, both while you are on the trip and as you recall it and think about it later.

Overland to India



The cross-border train between Nepal and India

I took a Gap Year not at the usual times, after A-Levels or after my first degree, but I found a third opportunity after I had been back to University to do an MSc. I wanted to go to India, but back in 2000 when I had become aware of the seriousness of climate change I had committed not to fly any more, so I planned to go there overland. As well as causing less environmental damage than air travel (3 to 6 times less for the same distance), it is also interesting to see the gradual (and sometimes not-so-gradual!) changes of scenery, culture and people along the way when travelling overland.

I originally planned to travel through Europe to Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and into India. But researching into this I discovered that getting a visa for independent travel in Iran is quite difficult, and that the Foreign Office strongly advises against travel to the border areas of Iran and Pakistan. The next easiest route was the much longer way round via Russia, through Siberia into China, then down through Tibet and Nepal into India, so that is what I did.

I started out by train from London with the short hop on the Eurostar to Brussels, then the train journeys got longer with an overnight train to Berlin, a 25 hour journey to Kiev in Ukraine, then a journey of 4 days and 4 nights to get to Krasnoyarsk in Siberia, and another train

journey of 3 days to get to Harbin in north-eastern China! It was March so the scenery was pretty snowy and icy but inside the train it was always hot.

In Russia I passed through several huge industrial cities, but the majority of the time the train rolled through forests and fields, past villages of wooden houses, across frozen rivers and through ranges of wooded hills.

In China I started to see some environmental problems resulting from the rush to embrace Western consumer culture. There is no rubbish collection in the northern Chinese towns and villages I went to – people just dump all their household waste on a big pile a few metres outside their front door. So there are piles of decaying rubbish all over the place, which now includes loads of plastic which will take years to degrade. Even at that cold time of year it seemed very unhygienic and smelled quite bad, and in summer it would be worse.

In one village very much in the middle of nowhere I stayed in a Chinese guesthouse with no running water, which gave me a chance to see how people cope with that situation. The Chinese there keep themselves immaculately clean with no access to a shower. Each morning they heat a kettle of hot water and each person has a shallow bowl of hot water and some soap to wash with. The guesthouse had two rooms, one for men and one for women, with a large raised platform for sleeping on, heated from underneath.

I moved on to Beijing, a vast city of tall buildings and multi-lane roads. There were some interesting tourist sights to see, but unfortunately the city was usually shrouded in thick smog. Sometimes even the buildings on the far side of the wide streets were hazy. This is due in the main to huge and growing numbers of motor vehicles, most of which use low-grade petrol, and the many industries in the city, and there are still many houses using coal for fuel, too.

After Beijing I visited a couple more big cities, both suffering from smog, then I caught the train to the end of the line at Germo, and changed to a "sleeper bus" to get to Lhasa in Tibet. The "sleeper bus" sounded good but if I had known the reality I would definitely have chosen a normal bus with seats as the bunks were tiny and there were 15 more people on the bus than there were bunks!

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Heavy traffic and smog in central Beijing

Arriving in Lhasa, I walked to a guesthouse in the Tibetan part of the city, past the amazing Potala palace, on a hill in the centre of Lhasa. In the background were mountains, grey and brown lower down and snow-capped at the top, and an incredibly blue sky! I stayed right in the centre of the old (Tibetan) part of town, where people still wear traditional dress and walk clockwise round the temples turning prayer wheels.

Beyond Lhasa was the only section of my route with no public transport, to get down into Kathmandu. I found a group of travellers who were all going the same way, and we hired two jeeps with drivers to take us along the 1000 km of rough dirt roads down to the Nepali border. Along the way we passed through many little villages of flat-roofed houses, with colourful curtains on the outside of the windows and prayer flags rising from the corners. Outside each village there were a few small fields, often being ploughed by a pair of yaks, their horns decorated with red tassels! As the jeep drove upwards towards the passes the villages dropped away and instead we passed the occasional black nomads' tent, and the incredibly tough people and yaks who live up at this

travelling overland connects us to the reality of the range of environmental problems that people around the world are suffering



A child washing pots at a village water pump in Nepal altitude.

After a few interesting days in Kathmandu, it was an uncomfortable 12 hour bus journey down to the Terai, the lowland part of Nepal which joins onto India. I was shocked by the poverty in the Terai, and the apparent lack of basic hygiene. At the edge of the town "tanks" (artificial lakes used for bathing and washing clothes, pots and pans), there would be people squatting with their trousers down going to the toilet. They go to the toilet here so that they can use the water from the tank to wash their bottoms afterwards, but the disease that must spread because of this practice appalled me. I was seeing the country at its worst, in the hot and dry season, with the water supplies almost dried up, the rivers just tiny streams in the middle of

kilometre-wide dusty river beds. Drinking and cooking water comes from local hand pumps, or from pipes which have a very slow but continuous flow. At all times of day and night I passed big crowds of people queuing up at the pipes, slowly filling their water containers and then carrying them home on their heads.

From Nepal, I crossed over into India, the main destination of my trip, where I spent 6 weeks travelling around the country, mostly by train with a few bus journeys. I visited most of the main cities as well as lots of smaller interesting places. In the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu I visited the international community of Auroville, where they are doing research and practical projects in environmentally-friendly and locally-applicable building methods, and in renewable electricity generation.

In Indian cities I saw great disparities of wealth, with smart modern buildings, but also vast slums of mud or board huts with corrugated iron or thatched roofs, with no piped water and no sewers, often surrounded by a sea of litter. I also saw huge numbers of people just living on the street, or on railway platforms, all of them thin and many of them obviously malnourished. But there is theoretically enough food to feed everyone in India. And driving past these people in expensive cars are the rich people of the same cities who are just as well off as anyone in the West. Some of them live in the "gated communities" which I saw advertised in India. They have cars, mobile

phones and all the other trappings of wealth, and many choose not to see their neighbours on the street who are in need. The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us that

these people are our neighbours, and we should help them in their need by working for fairness in the systems which oppress them, whether social, economic or environmental.

Indians have strong extended families who support each other, and very close groups of friends who share everything. I also found an amazing spirit of non-violence and a genuine friendliness towards me, a stranger. I was really encouraged. I believe and I hope that they will be able to find a better way forward not only for themselves but for the rest of the world too. It has to involve much more equality and that almost inevitably means sacrifice for the "rich", though we will probably become richer in relationships and happier in the process!

To complete my trip I came home overland too, through Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China and Russia again, by a different route. I learnt a huge amount on my travels, not just about the world, its people and the problems that they face, but also about myself. I am more determined than ever to keep following the path that Jesus lays before me, the road towards the social and environmental justice that is God's Kingdom.



People and yaks at Mount Everest, Tibet