



ARE YOU A FLASH PACKER?

For some affluent thirtysomethings, every weekend is an excuse to jet away. Hazel Davis finds out what 'flashpacking' is all about

You throw a few things in a bag, ring your boss and tell her you're not coming in for a while, jump on a plane and return several weeks later with a super tan and a string of anecdotes. Does this sound familiar? If so, you could be one of a new generation of flashpackers, thirty- and fortysomethings with bank balances equipped for wanderlust.

Often dubbed 'business-class backpackers', flashpackers are typically people who travelled as teenagers or students and for whom the adventure hasn't stopped. They're often successful professionals who can take extended leave from their jobs. While backpackers are prepared to take their chances on the open road and go where the adventures are, flashpackers demand something different from the travel experience and like to have the creature comforts and photos to prove it. Crucially, flashpackers want more than the average package deal and are prepared to pay as much as it takes.

Liz Pollard from the West Yorkshire town of Liversedge is a 31-year-old advertising manager for a publishing company. She and her partner Howard, 40, a senior brand planner, both have good jobs and own their own home. Most of their disposable income



goes on funding short trips abroad. "In the past 12 months we've gone to Sienna, Florence, Pisa, New York, South Africa and Riga," says Pollard. In 2006 the pair went to Venice, Rome, Prague, Budapest, Barcelona, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam and Cologne, and they hope to spend Christmas in Amsterdam. Despite their busy jobs and family commitments, the couple spend much of their time eagerly planning their next adventure. ►

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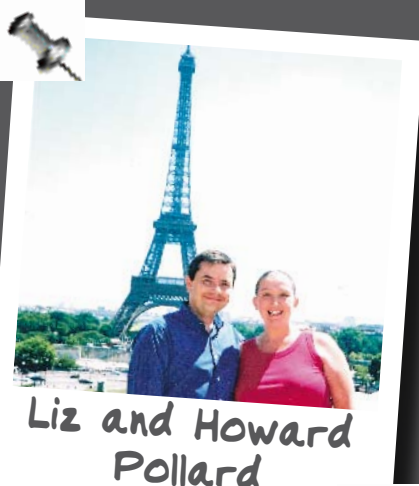
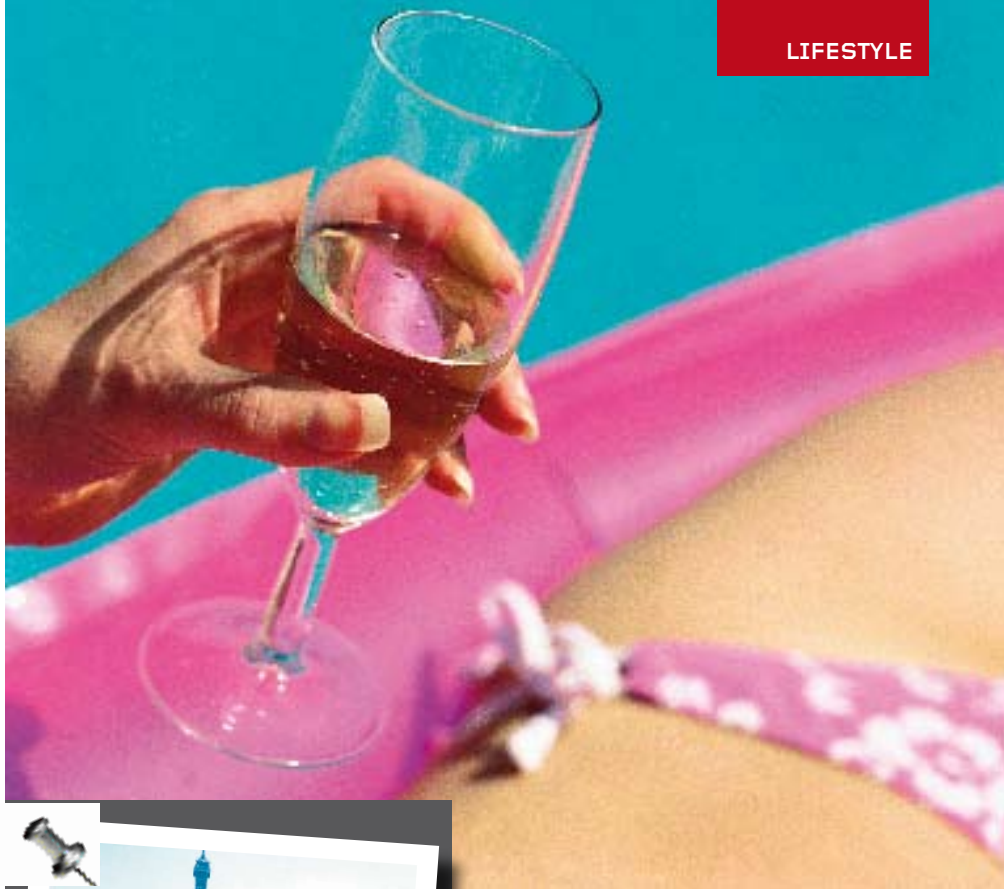
Liz Pollard has always had itchy feet. She thinks this stems from never having had foreign holidays as a child. When she was 25 she took a year out and travelled around Australia. "As soon as I was old enough and had the money to indulge my wanderlust myself I did it," she says.

These days Pollard's travelling experiences are a far cry from her Australian jaunt. "We used to go down to the local supermarkets and stock up on loaves of bread and tins of beans," she says. "Instead of flying we'd get a bus." Now Liz and Howard eat at nice restaurants and stay in nice hotels. "The increase in budget airlines means we can go to more places and stay there in style. Budget airlines are the best thing that ever happened to us!" she laughs. The pair usually hire a car, which allows them to see sights inaccessible by public transport and venture a bit further off the beaten track. "But the main difference is that it's a lot more relaxing and a lot cleaner," says Pollard.

The pressures of working long hours and achieving financial success at a younger age mean that people need to take time out, she believes: "The majority of people we meet on our travels are couples around our age. I think they're seeking something else from life." People having children later, or not at all, also adds to this freedom. The flexibility of the job market and the tendency of people to switch careers later in life means that just upping and leaving isn't as terrifying as it might have been previously.

Jim Clay, 36, from Leeds, agrees. He and his wife Nikki gave up their jobs six years ago to go to the Alps for six months. "I was a project manager at the time and I was able to persuade my boss that it was good for my development. Nikki was a physiotherapist and resigned from her job knowing she would have a good chance of reapplying when she returned." The pair rented out their house to a friend and off they went.

"We went from earning £25,000 to £30,000 each a year to earning £50 a week as ski-resort workers," says Clay. The pair worked in Meribel before travelling round Italy for four weeks. But the trip round Italy was different to the usual Inter Railing experience. Clay managed to keep his company car and they drove around the Italian Riviera, stopping at pleasant B&Bs on the way and dining at



Liz and Howard Pollard spend most of their income on short trips while John Emmerson left a job in marketing to see Europe in style

fancy restaurants. Says Clay: "We were lucky enough to be able to charge our credit cards to the tune of £3,000 before we left, which meant that we didn't need to scrimp and save and we could literally just rock up for the night somewhere and stay there in style." The couple had both been travelling round Europe before but, like many of their peers, the urge to travel never left them, despite the fact that they had responsible jobs.

Young, affluent professionals now make up much of the travel market. Indeed, the trend is so prevalent there are websites devoted to it. At www.flashpackerdiaries.com, like-minded travellers can read the experiences of an enterprising couple who decided to publish details of their travels on-line after a three-and-a-half-month world trip. On the site you can find hints and tips on how to make the most of your travels and also discover whether the 'flashpacker' term applies to you by answering questions such as:

The bus doesn't turn up and you're trapped in an unfamiliar town. Do you...

- Check your *Lonely Planet* guidebook to see if any local hostels will accept friendship bracelets as payment?
- Rant at your travel operator, then draw up a list of people to sue?
- Walk your *MasterCard* straight to the front desk of the nearest *Hilton*?

No prizes for guessing which answer qualifies you a flashpacker...▶

Suzanne Holiday, account manager at Saltmarsh Partnership, one of the UK's leading travel and tourism PR agencies, explains: "The travel industry is quickly recognising the importance of the growing flashpacker market as a high-spend audience. Not only do these travellers tend to stay longer in destinations, but they are also a more lucrative consumer than the traditional backpacker. We are seeing infrastructure relevant to the flashpacker market opening up in the destinations we represent. For example, trendy upmarket hostels are being introduced with private rooms and women-only floors. This market is also spending on value additions such as day tours and once-in-a-lifetime experiences." Flashpackers want more than just a tan from their holidays – they want to have been where no one else has gone before and to have a story to tell when they get back.

Leeds advertising executive John Emmerson is currently preparing a year-long travel break and he's no stranger to flashpacking. Two years ago the 31-year-old quit his job in marketing to travel around Europe for three months. He went to Turkey via Holland, Spain and France, staying in hotels and visiting friends. "The fact is, there's a good chance I am going to be working for another 40 years and so anything I do in my thirties isn't going to make that large a dent," he says. Emmerson thinks there are lots of people who would like to do what he does but worry about the consequences. "Things have changed and taking a year or six months out really doesn't make that much difference," he reasons.

Emmerson says that his time in Europe was a far cry from his teenage travels, which were spent staying on floors and cadging beds from strangers. "I stayed in some nice hotels and used my contacts to find decent places to eat and drink," he says. "Moreover, I had some money behind me and a high chance of getting a job when I returned, which made the whole thing less stressful. I was learning essential life and work skills and that can only be a good thing."

Liz Pollard adds: "We are constantly being told that quality of life is more important than status or wealth, and I think the flashpacker generation is going all out to find it, albeit with a nice glass of burgundy in hand."

www.flashpackerdiaries.com

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BACKPACKERS

Internet Café

Sweaty hostels
Grey undies
Blisters
Lonely Planet guides
Internet cafés
Holiday romances
Communal showers
Pub culture
Full English breakfast
Fish 'n' chips

FLASHPACKERS

Hot hotels
Agent Provocateur frillies
Bunions (à la Mrs Beckham)
Mr & Mrs Smith
PDAs
Romantic breaks
Private Jacuzzi
High culture
Champagne brunch
Fish 'n' chablis

Photo: Getty