

Once upon a time, overseas travel was something you did every couple of years, finances, job and family commitments permitting. Now a growing number of women are rethinking their travel plans and embracing the idea of a 'gap year'.

Once the domain of high-school graduates, we're turning that dream into a reality sooner and for longer. A shift in the gap year demographics reveals that women 40+, many of whom are finding themselves with more time to do the things they've longed dreamed of, are setting off across the world on unforgettable, life-changing adventures.

It's something Janine Hall, founder of Escape Haven wellness retreat in Byron Bay, sees on a regular basis. "Many of the women who stay with us are over 40 and going through a 'half-life reckoning'—whether they've experienced divorce or are finding their 'nests' suddenly empty—and are seeking new meanings in their lives. Taking time out to reassess on holiday, often meeting like-minded women along the way, can be a heartwarming realisation they're not alone. It's a spiritual awakening for many." Case in point? Meet three women who went on vastly different golden gap years which have seen them return happier, stronger and more fulfilled than ever.

DEB HUNT, 55, made the move to Australia after a devastating relationship break-up. Then a trip out to Broken Hill altered the course of her future forever

Picture this: I'm 49 years old, living in England (where I'm from), working a desk job in event management (which I hate), and then the man I stayed in England for announces he's getting married—to someone else. That was the point at which I hit rock bottom and which set me on an adventure that completely changed my life.

In truth, I wasn't sure how I could change things. I was in my 40s and I thought, "That's it, this is my life. I have a well-paid job and a mortgage; I have no choice but to keep doing this." The good news is, there is always a choice, so when I saw a job advertised with the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Sydney, I decided to take drastic action. I poured everything into the application... and was offered the job, as a communications coordinator! Amazing, considering they were after a junior, not a 49-year-old.

When I arrived in Australia, after renting my house and packing my bags all in the space of three weeks, I still felt quite sad.



But the great thing was that my new job was absolutely full-on, so there was no time to feel sorry for myself. Within the first two months I got sent to Broken Hill to do a photo shoot for the annual report. That meant going out on a clinic flight and interviewing the staff. I was blown away by their commitment and the dedication to what they do, not to mention the extraordinary world they inhabit in a very remote area. Fairly soon after that, I met Clyde. He worked for the Royal Flying Doctors, and before long we started seeing each other. But because he lived in Broken Hill, I had to move there if there was any chance of our relationship working.

In many ways, that was the biggest journey. I'd known what to expect in Sydney, but moving 1200km away where the nearest town is a three-hour drive was a huge culture shock. The first time I visited Broken Hill for work, it was hot and dusty, I didn't know anybody and I kept thinking, "Wow! How can anybody ever live here?" But it turned out to be the most welcoming community—I didn't have to pretend to be smart or funny or sexy or any of the things I'd always been trying so hard to be—I was just accepted and welcomed.

Since taking that trip my life has been transformed. I started working only one day a week, which gave me the chance to focus on writing a book—something I'd always dreamed of doing. My first novel, which I self-published, was the story of a woman who at 64 took herself off to France where she meets the love of her life. As a result of that book, I found an agent who got me a contract with Pan Macmillan to write my second novel, *Love In The Outback*.

Clyde and I have been together for six years now, and we even have a dingo. We saw an ad from a man going into a retirement home who



WHEN I LEFT THE UK I NEVER DREAMT THAT I'D END UP IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIRECTOR OF THE ROYAL FLYING DOCTORS—OR OWNING A DINGO!

couldn't take his dog with him so we adopted it. I took her in for a check-up soon after and the vet recognised her. "Hello Maggie!" he said. "You know her?" I asked. "Yes," he replied, "She's the nicest dingo I've ever met."

Clyde, Maggie and I moved back to Sydney at the end of last year, and being back in the city has taken some getting used to, especially for Clyde, who's lived in Broken Hill for 40 years. I can't imagine we'll stay in Sydney for too long. The experience of living in the outback was so transformative—I'd love to find that sense of community again.

In my 20s and 30s I was shy, nervous and reluctant to talk to people. Now, I'll talk to

anybody. That's the wonderful thing about travelling. You meet people who perhaps aren't in your usual circle. Take Barry, my neighbour in Broken Hill: he's a big bloke, has lots of tattoos, rides a Harley-Davidson; he's the sort of person I'd normally cross the street to avoid, but he's actually the kindest man you could ever hope to meet.

My travels have taught me that you never know what's ahead of you, and that embracing adventure keeps you young. The older you get, the younger your outlook can become if you embrace life, and whatever it may present you with along the way. ►