

the E P L (eat) (pray) (love) effect.

Is a sabbatical, à la Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love*, really all it's cracked up to be? By Tania Gomez

It's the book that launched countless sabbaticals. *Eat Pray Love* (Allen & Unwin, \$24.95) sold over seven million copies worldwide. It was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over 200 weeks – that's almost four years, people! Oscar-winning actress Julia Roberts agreed to star in the film adaptation. Clearly something about writer Elizabeth Gilbert's year-long, soul-searching escape to Italy, India and Indonesia resonated with a lot of people. But why did packing it all up to go travelling seem so attractive?

Discounting the obvious fact that eating pizza in Rome isn't exactly a tough gig, it seems Gilbert's trip to find herself appealed to many of us simply because it said it's okay to feel lost and go in search of what you want. According to psychologist Gemma Cribb from Equilibrium Psychology, a lot of women are brought up with a life script imposed on them from family and broader society: go to school, travel, get a job, find a guy, marry, have babies ... To see someone deviate from it all was refreshing.

"Women's traditional gender roles are often more about caring for others, like family and children," she explains. "So the

notion of ditching these responsibilities to focus on oneself resonates with many women who may not have prioritised themselves in a long time."

As successful as it is, one of the main criticisms of Gilbert's book is that it all seemed to be a gigantic exercise in self-indulgence. It appeared more like a year-long holiday funded by her publisher than "one woman's search for everything", as the book's cover would suggest. But exotic travel destinations aside, you can't deny that Gilbert was just looking for what most people want – contentment. And while it's not always necessary to jump on a plane to find it, a dramatic life change can often give the kind of perspective that can be difficult to attain in familiar surroundings.

Cribb says, "Changes of scenery often serve to open you up to a world that's bigger than your small existence and remind you of other possibilities." It's one of the main reasons Alysha, 23, left her job as a travel agent to go on a year-long sabbatical travelling through the US and Europe. "I wanted to do this for me ... to find myself, gain confidence, experience new things, meet new people and appreciate what I have at home already, particularly my family."



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Regardless of what you think of Gilbert's journey, ultimately the quality of a sabbatical depends on the individual. It helps to set out with an idea of what you want to achieve during your time away. Fiona, 29, quit a job in online publishing to travel through South America and the US and agrees the experience is what you make of it.

"I suppose there's always been a romantic notion tied to the sabbatical – in the sense you'll come out the other side having 'discovered' yourself and bagging Javier Bardem," she smiles. "In the end, though, I think your trip will depend a lot on what your expectation is – I wanted to experience new places and feel inspired and take some risks. I believe my time away allowed me to do all three."

There's no doubt a life escape can be a fulfilling experience, but what about the "return to reality" part?

Ease the homecoming comedown by reflecting on your experiences and how far you've come. Cribb suggests taking stock of what you learned and what you really enjoyed about your time away, then devising ways to incorporate those new qualities into your normal life.

And what about the no-job issue? Professor Barbara Pocock from the Centre for Work + Life at the University of SA thinks we often exaggerate what a break will do to our career and are overly concerned about our disappearance from the workplace. "Over a 40-year working life, it's just one year amongst many, and doing things you like will often mean you make better decisions about where you want to be." Considering that a recent report found that a quarter of full-time working women are dissatisfied with their career/life balance, a sabbatical may be a way to hit refresh on your career and gain a new sense of perspective.

Yes, *Eat Pray Love* painted a rosy picture of sabbaticals, but whether you meditate in India or stay in your own backyard, finding yourself ultimately comes down to you. And it doesn't take a bestseller to tell you that. □

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