

MONTENEGRO



Kate Pasola



"The three Balkan dares that rescued my self-esteem"

Dare number two. Let me put it like this: I've never unbuttoned my shorts in such a high-stakes situation before.

My fingertips are rendered useless by nerves, a lifetime of less terrifying unbuttonings springing to mind. For example, a secret, satisfied unbuttoning in the garden, charcoal in my nostrils, The Kooks in my ears, a second veggie burger in my belly. Or in my mum's bathroom, hot shower steam flattening against tiles. Or an unbuttoning that coincides with a kiss, unfurling into an almost-homely bed, smelling almost-familiar detergent. All far preferable unbuttonings, in my view, to this.

"Just look for the horizon, your body will do the rest!" I hear Sophie, my sister, shout. I stare out at Montenegro's opiate mountainscape. It's gorgeous, yes, but it's also a reminder of how high up I am.

And then Sophie grins, freckles forming on her nose by the minute. "The longer you leave it, the harder it gets." And then she is a hurricane of limbs and sun-bleached hair. And then she is the cackle and splash of saltwater below.

My knees lock. *Wimp.* I shake my head, gesturing to stop the camera that was ready to capture my bravery. *So much for using this holiday to change your life, Kate.*

Dare number one was a private dare, to myself. You'll laugh when I tell you. Simply put, it was to find my way from Edinburgh to London, then board a plane to Montenegro and visit the travel hostel my sister, her partner, Tom, and a handful of other intrepids had created out of a disused olive-oil factory. The Grove. In case you don't know (I didn't at first), Montenegro is a Balkan country, nestled in the elbow of the Adriatic Sea. Nervous travellers like to think of it as neighbouring Croatia and Italy. The plucky will remind you it's also next to Serbia, Albania and Bosnia. I fell into the former camp. Don't judge me.

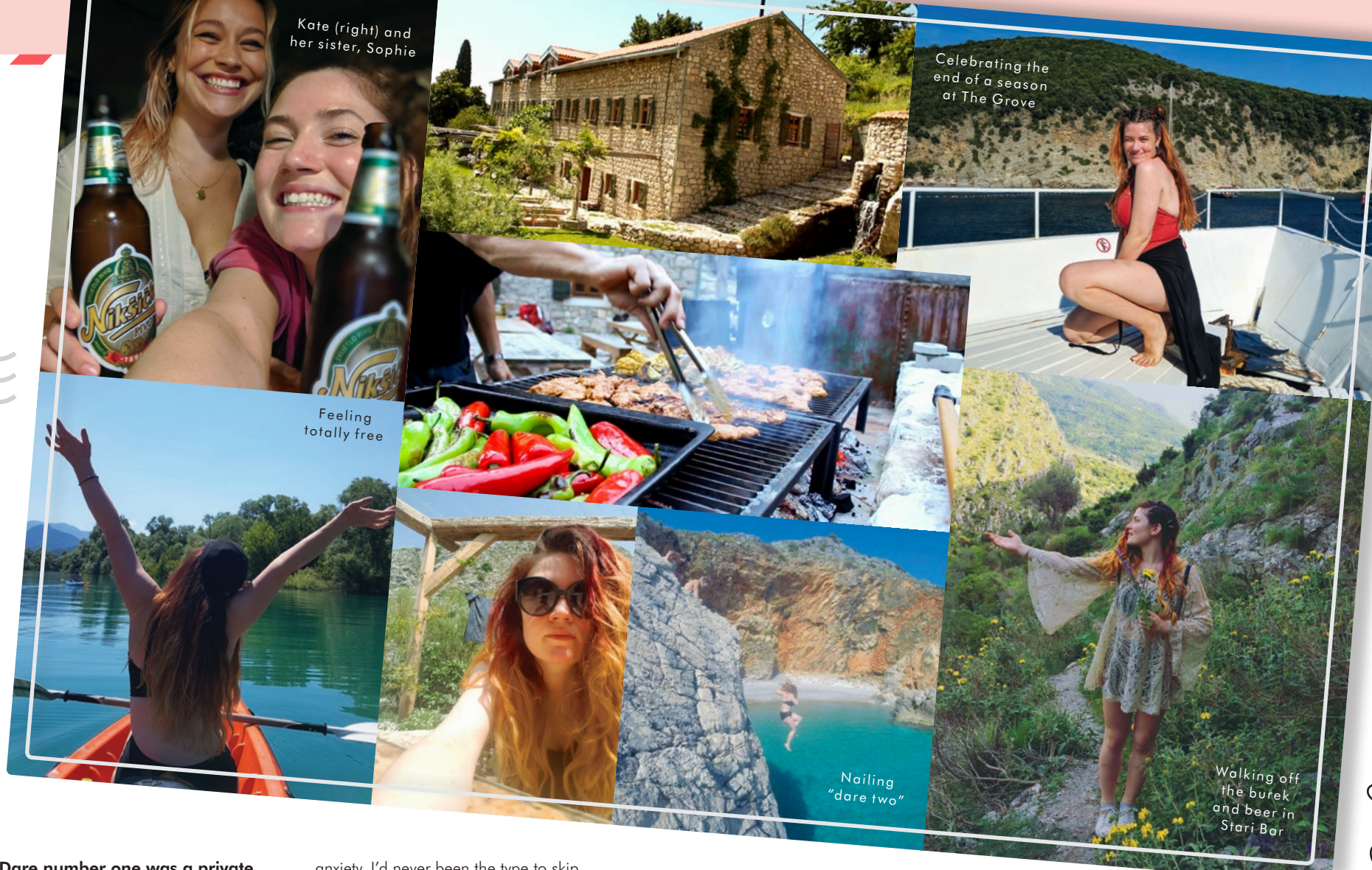
Since the age of 17 I'd been single-mindedly chasing ways of making my parents proud; a place at Edinburgh University, a shiny degree, a good-enough job as a journalist. I'd never really travelled alone, apart from an exchange year in Barcelona, and, a victim of my academic

anxiety, I'd never been the type to skip classes for long weekends in Copenhagen.

But that dream graduate job at the music magazine in Edinburgh? After a year, it wasn't a challenge, and I curled into plodding, working life like it was a comfortable armchair. It didn't seem to matter that my friends had all moved out of Edinburgh for pastures cooler, and that walking the streets felt like swimming through heart-ripping nostalgia. As a team (most of them five or more years older than me), we'd get drunk together weekly and head to the same karaoke bar, spill the same margaritas down our fronts, and scream the same old songs, eyeballs shining too brightly in the disco lights.

Then I'd walk home alone, a gap in my heart, shoving my fist into a bag of pretzels. Sunday would be an anxious, dehydrated day of laundry. Monday, work.

"So come help at The Grove," Sophie had said, as I cried into the phone. "Do



Feeling totally free

Nailing "dare two"

Walking off the burek and beer in Stari Bar

Celebrating the end of a season at The Grove

Kate (right) and her sister, Sophie

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"I'd never unbuttoned my shorts in such a high-stakes situation"

it. Pack your denim shorts, some tops you don't mind getting paint on. And stay for the opening party." So I did.

The sun was proud in the sky when, on that perfect day in April, I extended a Birkenstock out of the people-carrier and caught my first glimpse of The Grove. A terracotta roof; tortoises hiding under pomegranate trees. Nonchalant mountain peaks. A hammock and a campfire. A donkey clicking heels on a greystone bridge; the frothy giggle of a clean river.

At the time there were concrete mixers and spilled paint on the patio, too. With only a week until the place opened, there were plenty of jobs to be done. Looking back, there were far more dares than I realised at the time. Tiny, inconsequential things, but dares all the same. Get over your fear of messing up the paintwork and grab a roller. Get an axe and chop firewood with Chris. Brave the social anxiety of cooking for a crowd and fill a stove pot with beans and sweet potato. Make friends with Jaki, the cool girl in the hammock, and Jaxon, the electrician who likes to juggle. Join in with Zoe's improvised song at the campfire. Make a playlist for the opening party and ignore the dread of an empty dancefloor.

"Are you going to make a chandelier today?" Tom asked me one morning, glimmer in his eye, tin cup of coffee in his hand. He nodded past my denim shorts, drying on the washing line, towards a pile of cast-iron hoops. "Use those. Parts left behind from the olive press. There's tools and fastenings. Ben will help you." In reality, I helped Ben. Later that day, as the room clapped in glee at our installation, suspended 20-feet high, a dare accepted in cast iron, my heartburn disappeared.

Back to the cliff-edge and what felt, at the time, like dare two. I took off my shorts. My knees unlocked. A week at The Grove behind me, I threw myself into the empty space above the sea, body undulating, breathing postponed, a never-ending fall that finally finished in an echoing splash and bubbles surrounding me. The salt water pushed me towards the sunlight breaking, and Sophie's delighted laugh bounced around the bay.

Later, at the customs queue in Heathrow under white lights, I'd open my passport to the picture page and feel a clench in my belly. And then, a week later on a warm day in Edinburgh, I'd rifle in my drawers for my denim shorts. I'd remember them forgotten, drying on the washing line, sea salt crystallising, dare two complete.

The next day would be dare three. I'd open a Word document and type my resignation letter. I'd book a solo adventure around Europe, and then I'd move to London, to work at *Cosmopolitan*.

The Grove is different now. It's still euphoric, pastoral, hilarious and tranquil, but it's also slick. The renovation diet of beers, bread and burek (a local pastry) have long been replaced with patchwork feats of stonebaked pizzas, flatbreads, chilli-non-carnes and barbecues. There are chickens that roam and lay fresh eggs, pet cats, and there's a bright-blue plunge pool for respite from the sun.

There are kayaking trips, hikes, yoga retreats and gin-drenched parties. Amazed travellers arrive every day, gratefully kicking off sandals and borrowing guitars. But what has stayed the same is that every week there's a new group of people, each with their own locked knees. A new pile of shorts on the floor, a new set of toes gripping a cliff-edge, and a new firework display of bodies leaping into the unknown. >



sharing my space with someone else, getting married or committing to seeing the same person day in and day out. But as the week went on I became more and more sure that not only did I enjoy living with this person, but I could see myself sharing greasy takeaways, IKEA arguments and morning breath with him for quite some time.

One day, we sat outside the Pantheon drinking beers (we're still Brits abroad after all) and people-watching in contented silence, breaking only to smile at each other as a bird stole chips from the table next to us. There are very few people I can sit in silence with, and there are very few times in my life when I have felt truly relaxed.

Until that holiday I hadn't considered our future. I had been happy to simply enjoy where we were and, given that I hadn't expected to find myself thinking like this, it had never occurred to me to put the walls up. But all of a sudden I realised he'd bedded in, like an emotional tick. I was

"I'd embarked on a one-night stand that had got out of hand"

done for. It was perhaps something I had known all along, but there is something so reliably frantic about Rome that it forces your brain to relax into the white noise around you, and all my thoughts were let loose to wreak havoc on my rigidity.

When we returned home, I worried that panic might set in. But the next morning, as I watched him cooking breakfast in his grubby kitchen, I realised I felt the same as I did that day outside the Pantheon. That the reason for the calm I'd felt wasn't because of the holiday, it was pottering about the kitchen wearing odd socks and scrambling eggs.

seen us on the street I'd have laughed and given us six months. Tops. We had met on a night out 18 months previously. Our "friendship" was only intended to last those few hours, but on that first day in Rome, I realised I'd made a grave mistake. After arriving at the Airbnb we got cleaned up and headed out for lunch. There was a moment when we were sitting opposite each other at this little Italian restaurant, on a cobbled street dripping with jade-green vines, when I looked at him and realised that was it. I sighed. But it wasn't one of relief, it was a bizarre mix of happiness congealed with terror. I had unwittingly embarked on a one-night stand that had got out of hand, and had become something else that didn't seem likely to end any time soon. And in that moment I realised I wasn't mad about that.

As someone who has generally pined for a life of solitude (I've considered running off to live in a commune more than once, but they're not exactly great environments for personal space...), this realisation came as quite a surprise. I was so taken aback I was only able to manage the one plate of gnocchi. I'd always dreamt of living on my own, had never seen myself

ROME, ITALY



Daniella Scott

"The week I realised I was in it for the long haul"

The journey from the airport to the Airbnb was messy – physically and conversationally. It was 30°C and the air was sticky; we had flown from Manchester so were layered up, and as we lugged our suitcases through the city – two sweaty cheapskates unwilling to pay for a cab – we bickered ferociously. If I'd

CHANIA, CRETE



Emily Gulla

"The holiday where my friendships fell apart"

Tiny Greek islands were dotted between the waves like lost fragments. As I sat back in my budget-airline plane seat, a sense of calm washed over me as I realised I'd finally made it. Three years of university had come to an end. Exams: done. Dissertation: submitted. Chapter: closed. I thought I'd made my friends for life, and the six of us were ready to celebrate our freedom together – complete with the odd bikini beach selfie.

We were a tight-knit group, all with different personalities and from different backgrounds, but we fitted together perfectly, our group chat always the first port of call whenever anyone was in crisis.

Our friendship ran smoothly against the background of our busy lives in London, but crammed into a small villa, cracks began to show. Renting an Airbnb metres from the golden beaches of Chania, Crete's second largest city, I wanted nothing more than to spend a week rolling out of

bed straight onto the sand. But others had huffed at the choice of Chania's sleepy old town over Malia's wild nightlife. The tensions didn't stop there. They ran into everything: who was sleeping where, which restaurant we'd eat at for dinner, who was leaving who out of a group photo.

Quickly, the differences in our personalities became too loud to ignore. Three of us wanted to go with the flow, sunbathing by day and browsing Chania's Venetian harbour by night, while the others wanted to go gallivanting on day trips to the other side of the island. When we said we didn't mind what we did, we'd get shouted at for not making a decision. Out on a boat trip, when we dithered about diving into the water, they felt like we weren't joining in. When I asked simple questions about how much money we needed, I'd be met by responses calling me "dumb". Of course there was fault on both sides – I definitely didn't behave like my best self either. It all started to feel like a school trip that had gone wrong. In that moment, I realised this had happened in London, too. Being away from our real lives forced me to

acknowledge something that should have been blatantly obvious: I didn't like being put down, or the side these friendships had brought out in me.

Eventually, a would-be sophisticated dinner eating souvlaki by the Venetian harbour, waves crashing against the port, ended in two girls storming away

"Being away from our real lives forced me to acknowledge things"

from the table. I knew that things would never be the same after that.

Back home, after graduation, the two halves of our group were officially severed. That trip had marked the end of one chapter, but I'd expected to bring all my friends into the next one. Now I've accepted that some friends are for a season or a reason. They don't need to be for life, and that's OK. No one is to blame. I'm now closer than ever to the girls I did stay friends with, and look forward to many more girls' holidays in our future. >





L-R: Amy's sister, mum and Amy



One of the many lakes Amy swam in



The view from the house



UMBRIA, ITALY



Amy Grier



"The last holiday I remember taking as 'a family'"

The thing I remember most is the sunflowers. They were my signal, the sign that after a long, hot, claustrophobic drive through France and into Italy – a drive where my sister and I squabbled over everything from whose music got to play on the tape deck to whether air conditioning was more effective than having the window open – we had arrived. For the first nine years of my life, and for many, many years after, those sunflowers became my happy place. When I had bad dreams, when I had to count down from 20 before going under general anaesthetic, when heartbreak or anxiety kept me up late into the night, I would breathe deeply and think of the fields of endless yellow heads stretching as far as the eye could see.

They belonged to the house that we rented, every other year, in Umbria, northern Italy. We started going in 1992 when I was just seven years old, taking over an old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere with my parent's best friends, their two daughters and their grandmother. Both families – me, my mum, dad and sister; them and their party of five – would load up the cars with food, games, toys and towels (to stop the leather seats of my dad's car from sticking to the backs of our legs in the heat), drive to the ferry in Dover and then head down through France and Switzerland to Italy. The journey took days, but it would have been too expensive for us all to fly. That was when there was still four of us to think about, instead of just two.

As soon as I felt the crunch of gravel and earth underneath us, I knew we were close. As my dad swung our family saloon over the potholes, I'd press my nose against the hot glass and count the sunflower heads at my eye level. Eventually, a cream-and-brown stone house came into focus, half-covered in creeping green vines and purple bougainvillea. We had arrived. **Casa Quercia was our home for the next two weeks. It had no pool, no TV, no air-conditioning.** But it was a palace to me. It had been converted into two self-contained apartments stacked on top of each other, connected by a terracotta-stone outdoor staircase that opened out into the second-floor loggia – a covered terrace where we ate every single meal. My family and

I took the ground floor, and the Slopers, our family friends, slept above. I was the youngest of the bunch. My sister, Ruth, was 10 years my senior, and the other two girls, Jenny and Alison, were three and five years older than me respectively. It often meant I was the butt of the pranks, and that I didn't always understand a lot of the chat – particularly when it was about boys. I didn't care. I would do anything to feel like one of the "big girls". Once, when we went to a local village fair, I asked my mum why Ruth and the others kept talking about all the "monkey men" around. She laughed and stroked my hair behind my ears. "They're talking about the *hunky men*, Ames. They think the local boys are hunky."

I don't want to make it sound like a scene out of *The Waltons*, but our days at Casa Quercia were idyllic. Graham, the dad of the other family, was the most exceptional home cook (as were his wife and mother). We'd feast on fresh blackberries and white peaches with local yoghurt and fresh bread most mornings. Then we'd pack up both cars and drive to one of the many natural lakes that mark this part of Italy. There we'd swim, read our books, have lilo races, play bat and ball and build up to the all-important part of the afternoon when we were allowed that most hallowed of early-'90s holiday treats – a choc ice.

Back home later on, we'd play badminton, or my dad and Graham would battle it out over the Scrabble board while we played rummy and "shit head" (insistently renamed "poo head" for my benefit by the grown-ups). The sound of someone shouting "SEVEN LETTER WORD" or "Z IN GOOD POSITION" is the only thing that could be heard against the crickets and the zoom of motorbikes in the distance. The thing that lingers to this day, though, is not the memory of the pasta we ate or the tomatoes the size of my head in the supermarket. It's not the slices of garlicky focaccia we'd wrap in greaseproof paper at the local baker's and then eat for our lunch on the steps of whatever church or town square our parents had dragged us

to that day. It was that those holidays were the last time I felt like I came from a "normal" family. One with a mum, a dad, and an older sister. Six months after we'd returned from our second time at Casa Quercia, my parents sat me down in our living room and told me they were getting a divorce. I was nine years old, and my sister had left to travel the world on her gap year. Our semi-detached house in north London went from the hustle and bustle of four people to the near silence of two.

My mum and I still went to Italy the following summer. We flew this time, and she hired a car at Florence airport and did the three-hour drive herself for the first time with her 10-year-old daughter "navigating" in the front seat. Only now, as an adult myself, do I understand how terrifying that must have been for her – she wasn't the most confident driver. But she did it to give us both a sense of normality. The ground had shifted under our feet.

"The ground had shifted, but we still had Casa Quercia"

But we still had Casa Quercia. We still had the sunflowers. Life was never the same after that last time. Mum got diagnosed with breast cancer and our world tilted further on its axis. But throughout everything that came after – the chemo, the foul-smelling dressings and silk turbans resting on her dressing table where Lancôme perfume used to be – those holidays became my escape route. A hatch I could slide down into a happier time. Now I see that those holidays created a blueprint for my perfect summer. In every trip I take, I bring a part of Casa Quercia with me. In every card game, alfresco meal, every trip to a foreign supermarket, every map spread wide on a scorching-hot dashboard – I am recreating the holiday I never really wanted to end. Everything that came after was hard. But I'll always be so grateful for those weeks we spent under the Umbrian sun. >

ATACAMA DESERT, CHILE



Fiona Hayward



"I finally learned how to switch off from life back home"

The hire-company walls were vibrantly decorated with collages of bohemian wanderers, casually hanging out of their huge four-wheel drives. Despite being insecure 21-year-olds, we desperately tried to project the aura of confident and free-spirited travellers, the type the owner usually encountered. In reality, the road trip we'd impulsively booked, as part of our six months away, started to feel like a really stupid idea. We were handed an "emergency" brick phone, as there'd be no Wi-Fi or signal in the Atacama Desert, Chile... a small detail of this seven-day excursion we'd naively not considered.

Suddenly, being disconnected from 3G and life as I knew it felt daunting; there'd be no Google Maps if we lost our way, or YouTube tutorials on how to change a tyre. While we weren't inexperienced travellers, we'd never been far from a Wi-Fi hotspot. Our phones had been an extra arm, helping us research and navigate our every move, and our social feeds were filled with idyllic snaps of places we'd visited. Even at night we'd find ourselves scrolling through content and catching up with any news or gossip from back home. We were thousands of miles away in South America, but we'd never truly shut off.

"No Instagram Story could capture what we were looking at"

Despite reservations, we exchanged cash for our new home... a brashly decorated NYC-sheriff truck. Setting off from the little oasis town of San Pedro, leaving the dusty streets behind, our inhibitions were soon forgotten. The hours spent driving flew by like minutes as we were greeted with curious rock formations, salt flats and hot springs; the relentless orange contrasting against the piercing blue sky. With no other vehicles or sign of life for miles, the vast lunar landscape felt as though we were driving on Mars. One night we parked up by Salar de Atacama, the largest salt flat in Chile. We cooked pasta and spent the evening talking, regularly stopping to breathe in our beautiful surroundings. Camping together on the rooftop tent, we all awoke around 4am and climbed down

the ladder for a communal wee. Landing on the salt-encrusted earth, we were rendered speechless; the stars were like nothing we'd ever seen. The night sky of the Atacama is considered among the clearest in the world, free of almost all ambient night-time light. As we squatted, we gazed up, mouths agape. We were tiny insignificant humans in an entire galaxy. No photo would ever do this justice, no Instagram Story could capture what we were looking at. For the first time in a long time, we weren't watching through our phones — as cheesy as it sounds, we were really living in the moment and the rest of the excursion continued in this same conscious vein.

It's so rare these days to even go to a social occasion without someone being distracted by an alert on their phone, or a need to share content online. While we had a camera to take pictures, the whole experience of being cut off from the internet was a liberating and refreshing reminder of what's truly important.



Golden-hour guru, Laguna Miscanti

At Salar de Atacama

Valle de la Luna AKA guilt-free rocky road

PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES, LEWIS PASOLA. *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

AUSTRALIA



Steph Jackson



"The trip that broke my heart – and mended it again"

It was 2013 and I just remember feeling overwhelmed. Like I needed to break free from everything in my life – the unfulfilling PA job I'd fallen into (despite wanting to work in journalism), the never-ending social commitments (and consequential lack of money) and the manic merry-go-round of London. There was one thing I didn't want to break free from, though: my boyfriend-of-almost-four-years, Sam.* He was a talented photographer stuck in a sales job, and equally fed up of the capital. So on April Fool's Day (I know), we booked open-return tickets to Sydney, Australia. There, we decided – with the help of the sun and the unknown – we would start again.

We arrived that September and travelled around Australia's East Coast for three months, exploring the Blue Mountains, swimming in the Coral Reef and driving to the Round-The-Twist lighthouse in Melbourne (essential). When we got fed up of surviving on 40-cent supermarket pizza-bread – and living in cockroach-covered hostels

– we got jobs (office work, for quick cash), a flat in Pyrmont, Sydney, and spent the weekends with friends in Coogee.

By early 2014, though, we'd started arguing (we'd even spent New Year's Eve apart – I can't remember what we'd fallen out about, I just remember calling my mum, crying, and feeling totally alone). The lifestyle and better pay in Sydney were great distractions, but we were desperate to carve out our dream careers, and taking our frustration out on each other. Weekend mornings rolled into late evenings as we sat in coffee shops teaching ourselves how to use InDesign and Photoshop, bickering about what drink to buy each time our free Wi-Fi ran out.

Despite both needing a break from "us", we were still best mates. So life continued. We holidayed on the white-sand beaches of Whitsunday Islands and spent three months exploring South-East Asia on a shoestring budget – we kayaked in Ha Long Bay, biked around Langkawi and danced on Koh Phangan till we (well, I) passed out. Moments of total freedom were spliced with fraught conversations and days apart – for every time we couldn't bear to

be around each other there was another when we laughed till our cheeks hurt.

I'll never forget the day we spent on the beach in Cambodia working out for good how we'd afford to study and intern once

"Total freedom was spliced with fraught conversations"

we were back in the UK, scribbling down calculations on a bit of paper. We ran into the sea to celebrate. I'd never felt happier.

We flew home in July 2014 and eventually split up for good. It'd been the most exhilarating, painful, fulfilling and heartbreaking year of my life. What may have looked like a generic "gap yah" was actually a very deliberate attempt to navigate a huge crossroads for us both. The trip gave us perspective. It gave us time to refocus. It helped us to see that the relationship we'd been in since we were 22 was no longer working, and neither of us would be where we are now without it. So thank you, Sydney. We owe you. ♦



Langkawi, Malaysia

Thailand's Full Moon Party

Sydney, Australia

In Vietnam, with lots of (emotional) baggage