

# The radical SABBATICAL

What do you do when you don't know what you *want* to do? Emma Rosen road-tested 25 jobs in a year. Here's what she learned

Photographs

SARAH BROWN

**T**hat feeling. A year ago it was as much a part of my Sunday routine as roasts and a Netflix binge. I'd lie awake counting down the hours until I'd have to go to work in the morning. Knots of stress would tighten in my chest and I'd just lie there, thinking about how long my to-do list was – and how I didn't want to do anything on it. I'd been desperate to leave my job in the Civil Service for months, but I felt trapped. The problem was I had no idea what I would do instead.

Mine is a generation bombarded with messages that we should 'follow our dreams' and that if we work hard enough at something, we can get there. I knew I was a hard worker... but that was about it. I had lots of vague ideas of things I'd like to do, but no idea if they would be a better fit.

I set myself a challenge to do something about it. I was about to turn 24 and had some savings. I would try 25 careers before I turned 25, through a series of ever-more-varied work-experience placements. So for one whole year, I did everything from archaeology to becoming ➤



Earn



EMMA WEARS: (WITH TABLET) TOP, WAREHOUSE; TROUSERS, & OTHER STORIES; HEADPHONES, £219.99, BEATS BY DRE AT ARGOS, EARRINGS, LAURENCE COSTE; BANGLE, SASKIA DIEZ; RINGS, ESVAI. (WITH TROWEL) JUNIC, SAMSOE & SAMSOE; EARRINGS, LONDON ROAD JEWELLERY; NECKLACE, WEEKDAY. ARROW RING, SONAL BHASKARAN. THIN RING, ANNIE HAAK. (CONTINUES OVERLEAF)

a newsroom journalist. I've since been a film extra, a tour guide, even worked with police dogs. Here's what I learned along the way...

### ARCHAEOLOGY

I flew to Cluj-Napoca in Romania (nope, didn't know how to say that either) with a group of students. We'd get up at 7.30am every day and, depending on the weather, get covered in a fine coat of dust, or caked in mud. I was given a spade and just told to dig. You have to shovel through all these layers (at least a week's work) before you get deep enough to find anything.

I wasn't prepared for the hard, physical labour required. I was there in August and it was baking hot. Back home I can get through the toughest boot-camp class, but this tested me mentally and physically – especially as you're digging and digging with nothing to show for it. But then, one day, I found a bone hairpin and a coin. The coin had oxidised and turned green, but you could still see the text and the outline of an emperor's face. When I showed it to one of the organisers, he nearly cried. And I could see why – our connection with ancient history is so often obscured by museum glass; nothing beats the thrill of actually touching something that hasn't been seen – let alone touched – for hundreds of years.

### ALPACA FARMING

On my first morning at an alpaca farm in Cornwall, a ewe gave birth right in front of me. As I got a little closer, my boss told me I had to inject it with antibiotics. "What do you mean, I have to?" I yelped. "Here's the syringe, off you go," she replied.

I had certain assumptions about what working on a farm would be like. I did expect the outdoor stuff (though I was preparing myself more

Sadly Emma's showstopper had a soggy bottom



for chickens and cows, not the curious-looking beasts I spent the week with). But it was the entrepreneurial side of things that surprised me. Farmers have to think differently about their produce now – and be really proactive. Emma, who owned the farm, would shear her alpacas and send the fleece off to be spun into yarn to make high-end children's clothes. I loved the mix of both worlds – being outside all day but also having an intellectually challenging side hustle. I left thinking, 'This is it, I'm going to be a farmer.'

## FILM EXTRA

How do you pretend you're having a conversation with someone you've only just met? Take a leaf out of a film extra's book by saying "strawberries and watermelon" over and over again. This film-biz trick-of-the-trade may sound bizarre, but it definitely worked for me after the 20th take.

I had no idea what to expect, as it was my first time anywhere near a film set. Rule number one? Be prepared for an early wake-up call, followed by a few hours in the hair and make-up department – especially if you're gracing the background of a period drama. It was fascinating seeing how much goes into each scene – there was one guy whose job it was to light all the cigarettes in the room and make sure everyone was smoking at all times. He definitely looked like he was the most stressed person on the set. I did *not* envy him.

## INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

The office was based in a beautiful barn in the middle of some woods in Sussex. The company won't allow me to identify it (it's *that* secretive), but it specialises in crisis simulation, and its clients include people within the government who are likely to be sent abroad at very short notice. They're prepared for situations from plane crashes to natural disasters or terror attacks.

It employs 50-odd actors and I was part of a 'Russian plane crash' simulation. The 'Russian military' had big fake guns and it was my job to try and calm them down. Everyone else's acting was so good it really tested my sense of reality.

What became clear is how differently everyone reacts in the same situation (a good lesson for anyone who works in an office, too). Some were incredibly calm, while others went into panic mode. Acting things out in a realistic environment helps prepare people more, and it gave me such respect for those who are deployed in war zones every single day.

## POLICE DOG UNIT

I'm not going to lie – I was terrified of this at first. Part of my role was to help train the dogs to assist in crime-scene investigations. I had to hide in a school building and wait for the dogs to sniff me out, following the human scent. I crouched down in a cubbyhole, with only a small squeaky toy to protect me, convinced I would be attacked. I was assured that the dogs wouldn't bite but when it's a 50kg German shepherd, it's pretty nerve-wracking. Luckily they were well-trained giants. I also went in a police car, with the sirens flashing. It felt like we were going to crash every time.

I learned not to make assumptions about job types – I thought the dog-handlers would be big, burly men with lad banter, but I couldn't have been more wrong. The first officer I spent time with was a woman who was the same height as me (5ft 2in) – and she was totally in command.

## WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY

Although we didn't witness any 'bridezilla' moments, the same couldn't be said for the best man

who, it turns out, had neglected to practise his speech. I was supposed to be taking photos, but it was such an awkward moment, because *nobody* was laughing. He ended up throwing his cue cards on the floor. I don't know why, but I ended up photographing them instead. I don't think that made the wedding album.

I thought this job would be glamorous. In fact, it was one of the most stressful I took on, because it's so important to catch those special moments. If you don't get a good shot of the first kiss, that's it – you

can't rewind and try again. And you can't just nip off to the loo, or let your mind wander for a second. I was also starving, as we didn't eat – but had to watch everyone else chow down. Definitely harder than it looks.

"I made a list of all the things that lit me up"

## ONE YEAR ON...

It's really easy to coast along without truly thinking about what tasks make us happy. At the beginning of my challenge, I was searching for the perfect job – one that would erase that Sunday feeling for good. So I made a list of all the things that lit me up, and I added to it as I went along – I found that I was increasingly enjoying careers that were creative and open to innovation, such as travel writing, news reporting and working for a tech start-up. But guess what? None of the jobs ticked every box.

Which is why I think my generation are leaning so much towards portfolio careers – it's said that by the end of the decade, 79% of us will have skill sets in multiple careers.\* I now know it might not be possible to get everything I need from one job for life. So I'm going to work part-time writing a book, while setting up my own business encouraging others to take up work experience. I do still miss those alpacas, though... ♦

(WITH CAMERA) TOP REISS, SKIRT, RM WILLIAMS, NECKLACE, LAURENCE COSTE, BANGLE, SASKIA DIEZ, THICK RING, ESHVIL (WITH MICROPHONE) JACKET, REISS, SHIRT, LDY JASPER CONRAN AT DEBENHA-MS, SKIRT, UK BENNETT, EARRINGS, LONDON ROAD JEWELLERY, NECKLACE, SASKIA DIEZ, WATCH, LARSSON & JENNINGS, RING, ELIZABETH AND JAMES, YELLOW NOTEBOOK, £45; RED DIARY, £55; BOTH SMYTHSON, PEN, £23.95 FOR SIX, LIBERTY LONDON. THIS PAGE: DUNGAREES, ROKIT, TOP, MAISON DE NIMES, NECKLACE; EARRINGS, ALL LONDON ROAD JEWELLERY, GLOVES, £20, ORLA KIELY, HAIR &