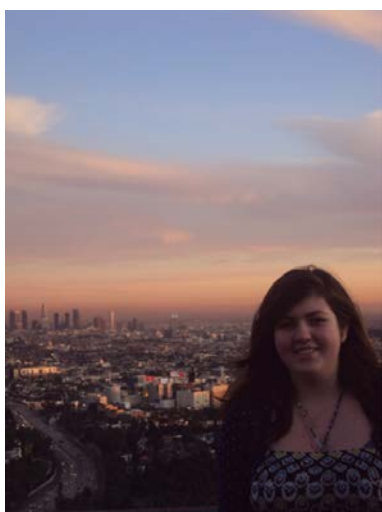


Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Victoria Benjafield

Dates	January to August 2010
Locations	LA, Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia
Activities	Volunteer community project, paid work and independent travel



What did you do on your gap experience?

I worked for the first 4 months in the UK then spent three months in a rural village in the outer islands of Fiji on a volunteer community project with Think Pacific. I was part of a group of 18 volunteers from the UK. We all lived with families from the village. The main focus of the project was to build a community centre with men from the village. We also taught in the Island's main primary school. After Fiji, I travelled in New Zealand for three weeks then went to Australia for just over 3 months on the working holiday scheme. I got a job in the outback of Western Australia working in a country pub before returning back to Melbourne to work for the next 2 months and made some amazing friends for life. I then flew to the Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to experience something totally different.



What did you find easy and challenging?

I found the planned project part of my gap year the easiest, purely because at the start of my gap year, it was nice to have it all planned, instead of being thrown in at the deep end with independent travel; I think that by beginning with a project I was eased into the idea of independent travel and so found it easier. The most challenging thing about carrying out my gap year was the planning and narrowing down of what I could and couldn't do, as well as sticking to that plan once travelling because, as I found out, plans rarely stay the same.



What impact has your gap experience had?

The biggest impact this experience had on me was becoming more independent and confident, which will help me with university and later life. My knowledge and understanding of geography has greatly improved as I am able to relate things in my studies to things I have seen whilst travelling. My presentation skills have greatly improved which has been great for my course at university.

What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The Fiji project as I experienced a culture so different to anything I have previously experienced.



How has this experience helped you?

I developed a lot as a person. One of the things I was most worried about was meeting new people and travelling alone, however, as soon as you start travelling, you realise that you become used to meeting people; this helped me a lot with starting university as I was not as worried about socialising. I learnt the importance of teamwork especially with the building work, without working as a team then it wouldn't have been half as good and the friendships made wouldn't be as strong. I think that because I had a break from my studies I was more motivated to get back into them and have really enjoyed university so far.



What are you intending to do as result of this gap experience?

I am a lot keener on travelling than I was before, if it's possible! It has really opened my eyes to the experiences out there in the world, as well as the fact that I can go out by myself and survive. It has also encouraged me to look into and take more opportunities. I have applied to study abroad for my second year as part of my course in Norway. If I had not received the gap year scholarship then I would be hesitant to apply to study abroad due to the language barrier and different environment, however, from traveling abroad, I know that I will be able to fit into a new environment and I will benefit greatly from studying abroad.



What do you wish had known before your gap experience?

I wish I had known how easy it would be to meet people when travelling alone. I wish that I had budgeted for an alternative itinerary, which I had to put into place because of protests in Thailand meant I couldn't travel there. I wish I had known how expensive Australia was going to be.

What did you do next?

I plan on finishing my course at university and then I want to travel and gain work experience in a geographical field.

What is your advice for anyone thinking of taking a gap experience?

1. Fully plan as much as possible your trip and the different activities that you are interested in doing.
2. Gain advice from as many people and places as possible both before travelling and during, from people who have been to the places you wish to go to.
3. It is a good idea to not book any activities such as day tours before you get to the country because plans often change.