

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Mark Kittle

Dates	April 2009
Locations	Svalbard, Arctic
Activities	Glacial geomorphology research expedition



What did you do on your gap experience?

I went to Svalbard in the Arctic circle on an expedition with BSES. Over two months I took part in a variety of glaciological, biological and adventure activities. The glaciology projects included the mapping of two glaciers and measuring snow depths across the ice to find the equilibrium line altitude, mapping of the snout of a calving glacier to see if it has advanced or retreated, measuring an unmapped ice cave under a glacier in order to make a 3D computer model and monitoring a river during the melts to study the phenomenon of slush surges. Some of the adventurous activities were ice climbing, mountaineering, ski-mountaineering, snow holing, building igloos, sleeping on the top of a mountain in bivi bags and many others.



What did you find easy and challenging?

Returning to normal life at the end was the most difficult bit. I got so used to the same 23 people and having nobody around that at first even the small town of Longyearbyen felt crowded and disorientating. This only got worse on returning to England. The first proper night for 2 months also accompanied by the warmest temperatures since the summer before made the first night at home very strange. I found adjusting to the environment surprisingly easy, as I had done a lot of camping before, the skills were easily transferred to arctic camping.



What impact has your gap experience had?

I discovered I really enjoy leading groups and teaching people and therefore really want to get into mountain leading in future and hopefully someday lead an expedition. It has also strengthened my love of geography and my certainty that I have made the right decision about my university course.

What were the highlights of your gap experience?

Experiencing the breath-taking beauty of a place where so few people will get the chance to visit, such climbing an unnamed peak at the top of the Foxbreen (a glacier we mapped using an RTK GPS system) and the ice cave we mapped near Kapp Belvedere. Also, growing as a team to forge lasting friendships and learning to ice



climb and all the other mountaineering techniques we practiced.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

A lot of great friendships. Ten weeks together forms some pretty close bonds. We've already met up and the plan is to keep meeting up in the coming years.

How do you think this experience will help you?

Hopefully the practical field experience will help me during my time at university as well as confirming my desire to be a glaciologist in future.



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

I would like to go again in the future but this time as a leader. At university I intend to do mountaineering qualifications such as the summer mountain leader and single pitch award schemes.

What do you plan to do next?

Hopefully the practical field experience will help me during my time at university as well as confirming my desire to be a glaciologist in future.

What do you wish you had known before your gap experience?

That in the end I would catch the expedition bug as it was just too good not to do something like it again.



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

1. Just do it. Don't worry about money or any of that. It's so worth it even if you end up in debt to do it.
2. Go for something unusual. Not just the standard trip to Australia or New Zealand. The further off the beaten track you go, the bigger and more exciting your adventures will be.
3. Try and test your gear as well as possible before going. Nothing worse than getting to the arctic and finding your big "warm" gloves leak and aren't warm enough