

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Courtney Groves

Dates	July 2009- June 2010
Locations	Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand and USA
Activities	Volunteering for NGO's, overland tour of South-East Africa, safaris, conservation work, working in a hostel



What did you do on your gap experience?

I spent 4 weeks in 'Uganda' volunteering for a charity called 'Soft Power Education' teaching children and helping with school building projects. I then flew to Kenya joining an 'overland tour' through Africa for 5 weeks. I then did a tour of Rajasthan, India. I took part in rainforest conservation in Cape Tribulation in North East Australia. I helped run the visitor centre, which helped me gain confidence. Also I helped with forest regeneration, restore the research centre and look after the bats. I then spent 5 weeks touring the East Coast via the train and bus network. Next I went to New Zealand where I travelled around most of the South Island by coach. After being in New Zealand for over 2 months I managed to find a job working as a coffee barista and a waitress. My final destination was North West America where I stayed with a friend in Minneapolis.



What did you find easy and challenging?

I spent a short while in Kenya but I was glad to leave, as it was hard and tiring. New Zealand was easier than some of the other countries: the low cost living, the ease of working in an English speaking country.



What impact has your gap experience had?

I saw my life in a completely different way. I went for a village meal when I was in Uganda, and the locals had very little but were so kind and cooked us a feast. I heard terrible stories from the drought and it made me see my life in a whole new perspective. When I came back I struggled to get motivated and back into education. I found it hard to stay in one place, and the first term of university I lost all motivation to study. But finding friends and finally settling I am now looking forward to the future.

What were the highlights of your gap experience?

I loved India, seeing the Taj Mahal was truly astounding for me.

How has this experience helped you?

My gap experience has helped me focus more on my studies, and there are pros and cons for taking a gap year, but personally it was



the best choice I ever made. Straight away I developed better communication and social skills. I had to talk to people and make conversation and from this my confidence grew and grew.

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

I know now what path I wish to take with my degree. I know I want to travel again, especially back to Africa. From living in Uganda I want to look into development further.



What did you do next?

I went to Aberystwyth University to study geography. I would then like to work abroad.

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

When you start travelling you want to go to certain countries that you haven't intended to and planned to go to. When I was travelling I met other travellers who had said about visiting this country and that place, and because I had already booked my long distance flights I couldn't change them which meant I couldn't see these countries.

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

1. Budget well - I met so many travellers who had to go home early because they had spent it all. You might not necessarily stick to your original budget plan when you leave England, but make sure you're careful when you are away
2. Look up exchange rates - Make sure you look up exchange rates all the time as you're travelling and before you get to your new destination, and research the best way to take out money and convert it.
3. Research to the fullest to make sure you get the most out for your placement and time in that country.