

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Robert Murray

Dates	July 2009 to July 2010
Locations	China, Macao, Hong Kong, Australia, Thailand, Laos and Indonesia
Activities	Teaching, travelling, photography, working on a farm



What did you do on your gap experience?

I taught in a school in China for 5 months then travelled in East Asia and Australia doing paid work, volunteering and photography.



What did you find easy and challenging?

I threw myself in the deep end when I first arrived in China. I was one day early to the official arrival date of my teaching program so from day one I knew what it was like to fend for myself and get by – being alone for the first time in my life, made particularly difficult in a foreign country like China.



What impact has your gap experience had?

My confidence has doubled since I went away. There's something about travelling alone that makes you a more confident person. My gap year certainly put me out the academic realm for a bit. I wasn't studying on my gap year, however I taught myself photography to a semi-professional degree. My gap year influenced me to learn a new language, I teach myself Chinese one hour per day. My knowledge of world cultures and people has increased. My gap year certainly influenced me towards more human geographical approaches, and now I would like to specialise in Political/developmental geographies. To put it simply, it was a life changing experience.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

China was my favourite country. Probably because I spent most of my time there and the program I selected (Teach and Travel China) was extremely well executed. I made countless friends and even some likely to be life-long friends.

Scuba diving in Thailand and Indonesia was beautiful. I will never see so much wildlife in such a condensed amount of time. Although it was tough, dirty and pretty poor work, tomato picking in Australia was such a rewarding experience. Bringing my camera and my laptop (to edit the photographs with) was the best decision. I've made some excellent shots to make a portfolio that I will keep for the rest of my life, one which I can look back on and not forget a thing.



How has this experience helped you?

After teaching 20 lessons a week for 4 and a half months I don't think I will have a problem with getting my point across to a group of people again. I spent 2 months in Australia working on farms and during that time managed to save £2000 which was good experience for university budgeting.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I didn't expect to learn Mandarin Chinese to the extent that I have, and to continue wanting to study it during my University years to come. I didn't expect to want to go back to China, even straight after I left the country. I still can't put my finger on what made it so great.

What do you plan to do next?

Complete my degree, and then take another gap year travelling. Currently my intention is to go back to China, however there are many countries I would like to visit.



Is there anything you have done as a result of this experience?

I want to live in Beijing for the summer and do some more teaching work. Without the gap experience, I would not have had the confidence to walk into an alien city and get a job for the summer.

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

How much planning was involved, I found it hard tackling A Levels with whole year of planning – But it's got to be done! Saved more money – I arrived in China, and after the first month or so I was out of the money I had budgeted for China. After that I had to live off my £200 wage as a teacher. I wish I hadn't planned out my gap year quite as much as I did, as I had to leave certain places because my flights had already been pre-booked. That I wasn't going to be coming back for a whole year!

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

1. Put in as much effort as you can to learning a new language.
2. Budget
3. Work in high-income countries, and travel in cheaper countries – You last longer.