

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

Claire Andrews

Dates	September 2009 to May 2010
Locations	Fiji and North America
Activities	Independent travel and volunteering, outdoor pursuits



What did you do on your gap experience?

In Fiji I travelled independently and did water activities such as; diving, snorkelling, hiking and deep sea fishing. In North America I visited LA first and toured the sites with friends I had made in Fiji. I then visited California, Yosemite National Park. I helped at the local visitor centre which gave me an insight into how a National Park in the USA is run. It was also here that I learnt how to snowboard. Next I went to Bay Area, San Francisco to stay with a couple who have contacts in my hometown. I volunteered at the John Muir house in Martinez, giving tours, and giving talks on Scotland. I also visited the local school to give a presentation to the 4th grade about Scotland.



What did you find easy and challenging

I found Christmas alone hard, as the weather was horrible and I missed my family. I also found my door to door sales job incredibly challenging. At times, especially in the beginning it was difficult as many people were rude to you, but after a while doing it I just ignored them and my confidence in myself grew. I found easiest, adapting to the different climates, meeting new people and trying new things.



What did you learn?

The world is a really small place! I met people who knew people I knew from home, which is very odd experience. I was mature enough to cope with all types of situations required without the help of my parents and that I was in fact definitely ready to embrace the next chapter of my life in moving out and going to university.

What skills did you develop?

Communication, social skills and confidence were the main ones as you're constantly meeting and talking to new people.



What impact has your gap experience had?

I can bring examples of my travels into my work at university. Before I was quite reserved and shy, now I feel much more confident talking to new people. I would love to experience even more cultures, so I now have the motivation to work hard and try



to keep on travelling as much as possible. I feel equipped now to go anywhere, and do most things without stressing out about little things, and I'm much more confident in myself when it comes to things such as job interviews. I had to deal with some difficult situations when I was travelling, working in door to door sales was probably one of the most challenging things I did. But I look back on that time positively now because it made me further my communication skills which has helped me at university to make friends, get a job and create a whole new social network.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The people I met made my gap year the special time that it was and they would have to be the highlight because none of my experiences would have been the same without them. I found Yosemite National Park a special place as it was just so stunning.



How do you think this experience will help you?

I think the experience matured me as a person, and furthered my personal skills much more than I was expecting it would. I have gained (a small amount) of worldly knowledge first hand and I have found that this has helped me in my course and university already, I can bring examples of the things I have seen in my travels into my studies, making learning a lot more interesting and fun.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I made a good friend in Yosemite from Argentina, and I now intend to go and visit them. While I'm there I intend to visit other places in South America, I would love to go and see Machu Picchu and I have already started learning Spanish.

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

1. Although planning is obviously very important, I would say don't plan too rigidly as the best experiences I had were not what I had originally planned and many were random decisions which turned out to be amazing.
2. Travelling alone is, in my opinion, the best way to travel as you are forced to speak to people, and therefore meet more people. Also, groups can sometimes be intimidating to other people and may put them off talking to you. If you are alone, it is easier to strike up a conversation and get to know someone. It also means you can be as selfish as you and can move on whenever you want.