

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Alan Nicholls

Dates	March to June 2010
Locations	Thailand and Cambodia
Activities	Conservation project and independent travel



What did you do on your gap experience?

I went to the depths of Northern Thailand to live with the Akha tribe where I could experience a different culture and even participate in rituals. I travelled into the city of Chiang Mai for the Songkran water festival. I set about learning Thai Massage at the old medicine hospital. I then embarked on a 3 days bike ride up on the mountains in the Doi Sutep National Park. I visited lychee farms, Hmong hill tribes and coffee plantations then onto Cambodia, just outside Siem Reap to see spectacular temples.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

Gaining a privileged insight into the Akha tribe, learning how to dive and seeing underneath the waves, and the sheer splendour of the underwater world and taking time out from the rest of the world in the silent Buddhist meditation retreat. They all gave me new challenges to face, new skills to gain and they will never be forgotten.



What has been the impact of your experience?

It has given me the motivation to grab every opportunity that I am given, and give 100%. The experience made me focus on what I want to do with my future, so I am pursuing that dream. I certainly have maintained a healthier lifestyle too.

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

With my new found skills I want to be able to inspire younger students into pursuing geography as a career as it is such a diverse and interesting topic to follow.



What do you plan to do next?

As a result of my gap year I have gained a bigger insight into where I want life to take me. The new skills I have gained will give me a competitive edge in the workplace. I came to realise that the job I have in later life has to have a higher objective than just being a job. I want to have a job that sees my hard work benefitting the less fortunate and works towards a more just world.



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

1. Plan and research well. There is so much the world has got to offer and to find that one thing that will change your life is well worth searching for.
2. Voluntary work is a great way to get underneath the skin of the country and really learn about the people. It somewhat separates you from a tourist and the locals give you more respect. The work you achieve also feels greatly satisfying, like you're making a real difference to the local people.
3. Talk to the locals and other travellers as much as you can, it might unearth a few secret gems of the country and transform your trip into something unforgettable. Some of my fondest memories were the unplanned ones.