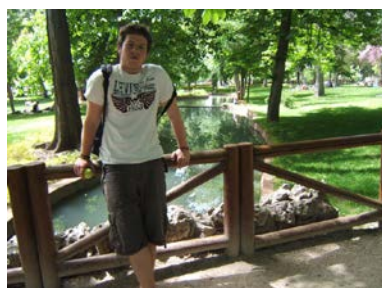


Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Matt Slater

Dates	October 2010 to November 2010, March 2011 to June 2011 & July 2011 to August 2011
Locations	Norway, Spain, Holland, Denmark, Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary
Activities	Independent travel, language assistant and inter-railing



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I didn't fancy the idea of going straight into a further three years of studying. I felt like a year's break would give me an opportunity to learn some new skills that would help me prepare for university. I wanted to be better at managing my time and money, and generally to learn some life skills like cooking and cleaning.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I broke my gap year into three parts because there were a few things I wanted to do.

Part 1 – Norway

I have been fascinated by Norway and its culture for a few years now and saw my gap year as an opportunity to explore the country and experience real life there. I was staying at my friend's houses for the first two weeks in Oslo. For the second two weeks I headed out on my own, staying in hostels and shopping/cooking for myself. I think this was a really important time for me because I had to get over the fact that I was on my own and start embracing it. Initially I didn't enjoy the solitary lifestyle, but then I started meeting people and finding things to do to pass the time. Eventually I felt confident enough to take a spontaneous weekend trip to Sweden which for me was the turning point. I had an excellent time and was filled with confidence for when I headed north into the Arctic Circle. Going to Tromso was probably the highlight of my time in Norway. Even though it was only a couple of days, I managed to see the Aurora Borealis and have a ride on a dog sled, two unforgettable experiences.

Part 2 – Spain

For the second part of my gap year I had organised to go and live with a family in Spain and teach English to the children for three months. This was the longest part of my gap year and the most daunting because although I had been learning Spanish up to A-level, I was worried about understanding things and also it would be the longest I'd been away from home for. It definitely took me a few weeks to settle in to a new way of life, especially with three children to keep entertained and educated, however, by the time I had to leave I felt I had made a really good connection with the



whole family and I was sad to say goodbye. Not only did I develop teaching skills and look after three pretty demanding children, I met other people in a similar situation to me and formed some lasting friendships. I learned so much about Spanish culture and improved my reading, speaking and listening skills no end.

Part 3 – Inter-Rail

I was most looking forward to this part of my gap year because I'd be travelling with my childhood friends. We flew to Amsterdam and from there travelled to Copenhagen and Berlin, before I took the decision to go on my own to Prague, Vienna, Budapest and back to Berlin and Amsterdam. We managed to cram lots of different activities into the three weeks we were away, and made lots of friendships along the way.

What did you find easy and challenging

The most challenging aspect of my gap year was money management. Whereas before the majority of my income had been disposable, this year I had to think about food, accommodation, travel and other essential things that I'd never had to cover the day-to-day cost of before. The easiest thing was meeting new people. When you're travelling you find loads of people that have the same values and ideals as you, even if they're from different backgrounds. It's easy to start conversations by asking where someone is from and where they're going, and the conversation naturally continues from there.

What impact has your gap experience had?

The impact of my gap experience was to make me more independent and prepare me for living away from home for long stretches of time. I feel like I'm more prepared to do things for myself and just get on with day-to-day things that need doing. In managing my money I definitely learned the difference between wants and needs, which will help me budget at university.

What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The highlight for me was the night spent in the Arctic chasing the northern lights. Geographically that is the most exciting thing I've done to date, however I have some really great memories of times spent with the Spanish children, my other language assistant friends, and the friends I made inter-railing.

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

Save as much money as possible, and then over-budget for everything. I didn't account for the unplanned activities, spontaneous trips and additional costs that pop up everywhere. I'd recommend having a boring summer of work in the months



running up to your departure. Everyone else will be going on holidays and to festivals, but you've got a whole year of that sort of thing so try and keep your hand out of your pocket and save. There are always hidden costs and things you don't plan on buying so it's definitely worth adding an extra five or ten pounds onto your daily budget, after all it's better to finish your gap year with money left over than get half-way through and run out.

If possible, plan to be away for a long period of time rather than a few months here and there. I think my gap year would've been more rewarding and easier to manage if I hadn't kept coming back to the UK between each trip. I was home for a month or so between each part of my gap year and struggled to find a job or anything to do in those free days.

Be selfish and do what YOU want. Your gap year is an opportunity to do lots of amazing things that you wouldn't do otherwise. People talk about it being a 'once-in-a-lifetime' thing, and I'd agree with that because you're unlikely to have a year of such freedom again. Make the most of every chance that presents itself and you'll come away with amazing memories and few regrets.