

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Rowan Blackmore

Dates	March 2012 to July 2012
Locations	New Zealand, Chile, Peru and USA
Activities	Independent travel, conservation volunteer, overland tour



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I wanted to build my confidence. I felt I had no real experience of the world. I had only been on an airplane twice and was terrified of airports. I was so scared about my trip that I almost didn't want to go but I knew it would help my confidence and that I needed it. If I could travel alone, I could do anything. I knew it was my chance to see the places I'd learnt about for myself. I also wanted my experience to give me inspiration for the future. I knew I was going to study Geography at university, but I wanted to get ideas for what to do after that, and to discover if there was something I had a real interest in and loved doing.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I left the U.K in March and was away for four months in total. My first destination was Auckland, New Zealand. I explored the Hauraki Gulf islands, and did some conservation work on Motutapu Island with the Motutapu Restoration Trust. I then used the 'Stray Bus' to travel around both islands. On the North Island I went to a Maori cultural centre, went sailing on Lake Taupo, saw the geothermal activity at Rotorua, went caving in Waitomo, hiked the Tongariro Crossing, and visited Wellington. I then went to experience the untouched beauty of the South Island, visiting Abel Tasman National Park, Franz Josef Glacier, horse-riding in Glenorchy, climbing Queenstown Hill, saw Milford Sound, hiked in Mount Cook National Park, and went whale and dolphin watching. I fell in love with New Zealand. Although travelling alone, I spent most of my time with people I'd met on the bus and in hostels, but occasionally went off by myself.



2 months later I left New Zealand for South America. I landed in Santiago, Chile and took a week-long trip around the Lake District with 'Pachamama Bus'. We visited lots of different towns and lakes, and I got a feel for the Chilean culture. I then flew to Cuzco, Peru where I arranged a 3 day jungle trip to Machu Picchu. I then went to Puno and saw Lake Titicaca. Next I travelled to Arequipa to see the Colca Valley with condors, Inca tombs and volcanoes. I travelled to Lima and flew out of South America to the USA.



I went to stay with my relatives in San Francisco, before getting on the 'Green Tortoise' Bus for 9 days to go to some of the western national parks. My last destination was New York.



What did you find easy and challenging

The things I found easy were making friends, meeting people, having fun, learning new things and encouraging myself to have new experiences. What I found more challenging was relying solely on my own judgement. Getting around was sometimes difficult, as some public transport can be really complicated!

What impact has your gap experience had?

In regards to my geographical knowledge, I finally saw examples of the things I had spent my school life learning about. I was incredibly motivated by my experience and it has made me really excited to go to university, and given me hundreds of ideas about what to do for the future. My confidence is so much better, and I think I have gained a lot of people skills. My organisational and planning skills have improved. I also find it easier to manage my finances, which will be a big help at university.

How do you think this experience will help you?

My new found skills will be invaluable to me at university and in the future. I feel like I've learnt some life lessons whilst being away, and have matured a lot. As a result of this gap experience I am going to work on Zapata Ranch in Colorado next summer, and learn about their conservation work.



What do you plan to do next?

I am studying Geography at the University of Leeds and possibly studying abroad at some point. During my holidays I want to do conservation work and travel. Once I finish university I want to get a job in a geographical field, hopefully within conservation.



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

I wish I had known not to worry so much before I left! When I was planning to go, I was so terrified that I made myself feel terrible, even though deep down I knew it would be fine. I just wish I hadn't stressed myself out so much.

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

My advice would be to firstly pack lightly. There's nothing worse than dragging a backpack around that weighs more than you do. Secondly, don't be afraid to talk to people! Most people are really friendly and love chatting to you about your travels. It's the fastest way to make friends, by just being bold and striking up conversation. And lastly, go it alone! The experience of going by yourself is so much more beneficial than going with friends from home. You put yourself out more, challenge yourself, and make so many more friends, as you're more approachable if you're alone.