

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Soraya Kebbouche

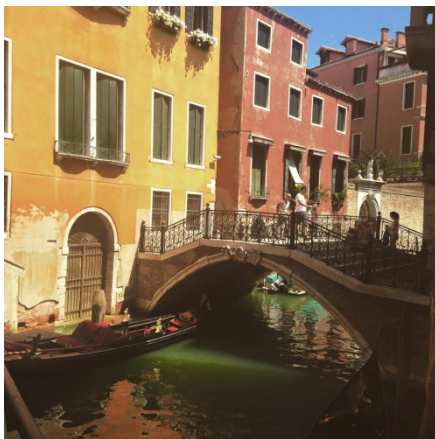
Dates	May – August 2015
Locations	Italy, France, Switzerland, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany and Belgium
Activities	Volunteering and independent travel.



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

When being given the chance to travel anywhere in the world, with no limits as to where you go or how long you go for, one can find oneself in a mental whirlwind of overflowing ideas which cannot be controlled. However, after careful consideration and logical thinking, I formulated a plan that paved out a gap year experience I will never forget.

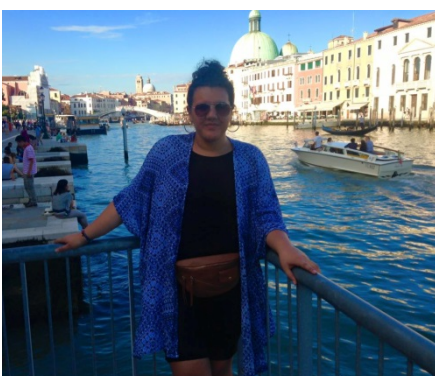
I wanted to escape my daily routines, experience something out of my comfort zone and gain more confidence. I also wanted to gain relevant work experience which would be beneficial once I've graduated. I planned my trip in two phases which was essential in building confidence as it gradually exposed me independent travel.



What did you do on your gap experience?

I first spent 6 weeks in Naples volunteering as an NGO support worker with IVHQ (International volunteer HQ). Here, I worked with 2 separate NGOs. In the mornings, I volunteered with a small NGO named 'El Camper' which focuses on homeless and immigrant communities. Because of its location, Naples is a popular stopover for the migrant/asylum seeker community, predominantly from Northern Africa, parts of Asia and war-torn Syria.

My role with El Camper was to sort out medication, donated clothing and the filing of migrant stories. When a migrant spoke English, I would also help my Italian co-workers with the English and be there for conversation. I loved this because some of their stories were extremely memorable and heart-warming. We would also join the team on the mobile unit, where we would drive around heavily homeless dominated areas of Naples, and aid the vulnerable.



In the afternoons I volunteered with 'CleaNap', an environmental NGO that deals with the conservation and sustainability of the environment as well as the empowerment of the local community. As there is a lack of education on the importance of taking care and conserving the environment, CleaNap does a lot to spread awareness. I took part in beach clean-ups, planting flowers and



cleaning and brightening up piazzas. I also worked in the CleaNap office, writing letters for sponsorships and grants plus other admin.

I then back-packed independently through Europe, which was possibly one of the most challenging tasks I have endured in my life. Being alone, somewhere in Europe sounded daunting to me at first as I didn't know how I was going to get around, find accommodation, feed myself etc. However, it was fantastic. I would wake up really early everyday (a big deal for me as I love my sleep!) have breakfast, explore, speak to locals and literally have an amazing day every day!



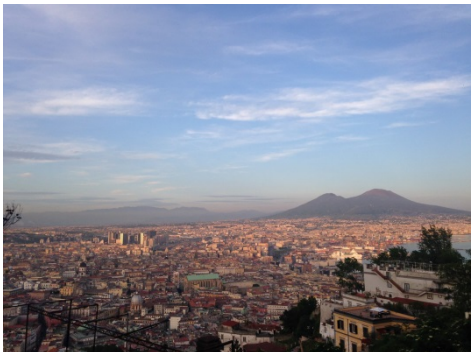
What did you find easy and challenging?

What I found easier than expected was pretty much everything I had worried about before leaving London! To worry is obviously in our nature, but I would advise anyone about to undertake an experience like this just to not worry - even though it is easier said than done!

The one thing that I found quite hard to do was to stick to the budget that I had made prior to leaving. You're obviously not going to stick to your budget 100%; you may want to stay in certain places longer than you budgeted for, you may want to purchase additional things etc, but these things all add up and make it much harder to keep on top of it. However, although this seemed hard at the time, it was a very beneficial experience because it has helped me a lot at university.

What impact has your gap experience had on you?

When evaluating my gap year experience, it actually amazes me how much I have achieved in a small period of time. Prior to setting out, I found it hard to comprehend how you can change as a person; your attitudes, outlook on life etc. But I did. I learned so much!



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

To pick one highlight of my whole experience is so hard because everything I did was memorable and the whole experience was a massive success. However, I would say that my time in Naples was definitely one of the highlights. It was my first time being alone in a foreign country, not speaking the language, living with complete strangers, and it went completely perfectly. I literally fell in love with Naples; the people, the food, the city and just everything about Italy in general. I also loved the NGO programs I worked with. Even though it was a tough timetable, every day brought something new.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

As a result of my commitment to the program, I was asked to possibly return to Naples in the summer to join the International Napoli Network (which works alongside IVHQ) as an NGO Coordinator. This was a great achievement for me and I really hope I can do it.

What do you plan to do next?

I have begun my Geography BSc at the University of Hertfordshire and hope to continue travelling in the future because I have now caught the "travelling bug" and am itching to continue exploring the world. Now that this experience has improved my confidence, and my parents' confidence in me too, I plan to expand my horizons and travel further afield, hopefully reaching Uganda next year to do a 4 week development project with my university.

