

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Jemimah Larbi

Dates	February to September 2013
Locations	China, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Philippines
Activities	Teaching English and independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I felt that I was lacking a lot with my confidence, interpersonal skills and public speaking so I really wanted to particularly focus on these areas. I also wanted to improve my geographical skills. I wanted to visit places I had previously read and studied about and experience these places for myself. In addition I wanted to take a break from my academic studies to reflect on my future prospects. And most importantly I really wanted travel, broaden my horizons and explore the world whilst meeting new friends from different geographical locations.

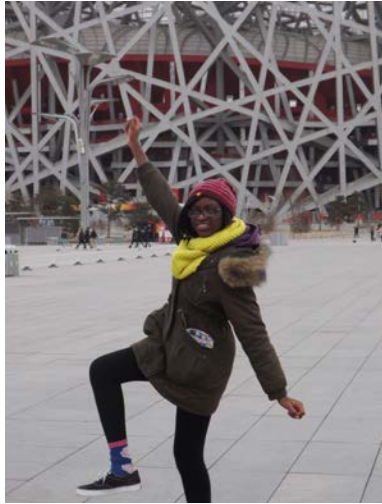
What did you do on your gap experience?

I started my gap experience in China, and was there from the beginning of February to the end of July. I spent a lot of time exploring in Beijing for 3 weeks then went to Huhhot in Inner Mongolia where I took part in a Teach and Travel Internship and spent five and a half months teaching English in an English training school called 'Little London English School'. I did this with my twin sister.

For the first three weeks of August we then travelled to Thailand. I visited places such as Bangkok, Chang Mai and Ko Samui. We visited many areas of historical and cultural interests such as The Reclining Buddha and floating markets. We also went on a safari and beach hopped. We then travelled by coach to Malaysia and stayed there until the first week of September. We visited areas such as Penang, Langkawi and Kuala Lumpur. We visited iconic sites such as the Penang Hill, Geoforests and the Petronas Towers.

My twin sister and I really wanted to experience a quick city break so we visited Singapore for a few days. We visited places of interest such as Raffles and really explored Britain's colonial past in South East Asia which aided my knowledge of colonialism. We also visited the Botanical Gardens and experienced the subway, Singaporean style. We then visited the Philippines for a few days which was unplanned as I really wanted to use this opportunity to take a rest, prepare for university and reflect upon my gap year experience. I went to the district of Intramuros which was the Spanish stronghold of the city In Manila and I visited the ancient ruins there I also had the opportunity to reflect on WW2 in Asia. In mid-September I returned to Beijing to fly back to the UK.





What impact has your gap experience had?

This gap year experience has made more motivated and strong-willed person. I was also able to develop myself as an individual for example I gained ability to look after myself way from home as a responsible young adult. I now consider myself as a self-directed and independent person now as a result of my gap experience. I was able to demonstrate to myself that I am a reliable and mature person and also that I can enthuse and improve the lives of others. I gained the ability to juggle work commitments and maintain a good social life which I think is very important as a student. I now have the confidence to plan for things and save money. I also learnt that travel doesn't only involve the destination but that the people you meet can contribute to your overall experience. I was able to mix with locals and immerse myself in a new culture and learn new things about not only the historical, cultural and social aspects but also about myself as an individual as well.

As a geographer I think it's important to be able to link geographical concepts with ones experiences and I learnt that the spatial notion of home isn't fixed and can change to different geographical locations.



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

I taught students from age 4 to 15 and I thoroughly enjoyed this experience. I loved it when they would all shout my name and run up to me and hug me. I got the 'Teacher of the Week award' and gained respect from peers and Chinese teachers, I even got job offer to stay on with a pay increase and many other job offers to become a personal tutor.



Meeting new people especially my new Chinese friends was great; they really helped me throughout my journey and helped me to see that friendships can go beyond language, cultural and racial barriers.

What did you find easy and challenging?

Surprisingly I found settling in and making friends quite easy as I was interacting with people including the locals and other Chinese teachers. I found eating the food easy and did not get sick at all. However I found planning an itinerary and planning on where to go and visit was challenging. Fitting everything into a day and trying not to burn myself out was difficult so finding the right balance of sight-seeing, travelling and relaxing was something that took me a long time to get the grasp. At times I did find it quite lonely. In addition I also found some of the local people's reception towards me quite difficult to understand as they rarely see black people, sometimes people would call out things at me like 'Bob Marley' and 'look at that black girl...she's soo dark' sometimes it hurt my feelings, this happened throughout travelling in Asia but I tried not to let that affect my experience.





What do you plan to do next?

I would like to complete my geography degree and incorporate many things such as volunteering and travelling in order to deepen my knowledge and develop more skills. I now have the confidence to travel and I would like to do so in order to broaden my experiences of international travel whilst utilising my geographical and language skills. I now have a personal goal and that is to visit 30 countries before I turn 30. I think that travelling will always be a part of my life and I really want to utilise my skills to do this whilst I am young and don't really have many commitments.



I would like to take the HSK (Mandarin proficiency test for non-native speakers) level 3 exam in Mandarin to gain a qualification in the language, the exam incorporates speaking, listening and writing competencies at an 'intermediate level'.

I would also like to study abroad for a semester or even a year at a partner university in either Canada, North America or Australia and this is something that I am currently discussing with my university. Additionally I would like to take a travel blog course to improve my blogging skills and would like to blog my experiences of travelling. Most importantly I want to share my expertise with others to inspire them to travel.



What do you wish you had known?

I wish I had known how to pack light before my gap experience. I also wish I understood the fact that I can't see everything. I wish I had bought a camera that uses electricity to charge.

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

Don't let anyone get in the way of you and your travelling- just go for it! Try not to have any preconceptions on countries you are visiting as it may dampen your experiences. Be confident and willing to take risks. Research properly so you know roughly what to do in certain places. Let your gap year 'mould' you and use it as a learning experience. Some people's reaction to you might be different or even negative but never let this ruin your experience.