

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Daniel Crewe

Dates	July to August 2012 and January 2013
Locations	Netherlands, Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Bulgaria and Iceland
Activities	Independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

My aims and objectives were to gain a wider understanding of different European cultures, to gain experience in budgeting and decision making, gain independence prior to university, to look at a range of different geographical and social aspects, to develop my written skills and to gain a greater social and political understanding of Europe.

What did you do on your gap experience?

The first part of my gap experience was interrailing with friends through Europe during July and August. We took the ferry to Amsterdam, then travelled by train to Berlin and then to Munich in Germany. For the first few destinations I remember being quite anxious whenever we arrived but this gradually faded. We travelled to the Czech Republic then to Budapest in Hungary. This was the first train journey where I noticed vegetation and the landscape changing, from dark pines into oriental conifers, from forested hills into dusty mountains. We passed through Slovakia and it rained the entire time. Next we headed on to Croatia, on the last train for a while. From Zagreb we took a day trip to the Plitvice Lakes National Park. We continued onto Split by coach. From now on I was travelling on my own, and I took a coach to Dubrovnik. It was the most isolated area I stayed in over my travels and it was a pleasure spending a few days walking around the inlets and coves. From Dubrovnik it was another coach to Mostar, on a tip off from some drama students, and the journey took twice as long as it was meant to due to no less than 5 border checks. From Mostar I took another train to Sarajevo, which was the most picturesque train journey ever, and it culminated in a raging thunderstorm over the cityscape with streaks of purple, horizontal lightning. Sarajevo was so culturally different from anything I had seen before. From Sarajevo I took a train to the capital of Serbia, Belgrade, where I thoroughly enjoyed myself. For the first time in weeks I ate like a king and even visited the zoo. I nearly had a nervous breakdown when departing to Bulgaria after discovering that the train I had intended to catch did not, in fact exist, although I soon found a likely coach and it was only a matter of waiting a few hours before I could be on my way.





After returning to the UK for a few months, in the following January I left for Iceland. On the flight I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the northern lights from above. My time in Iceland was spent exploring Reykjavik, reading, writing, as well as taking guided excursions to see the northern lights, the Gullfoss waterfalls, the valley of Haukudalur, a geothermal greenhouse, and Pingvellir. I also spent a lot of time trying to see what typical Icelandic life is like. I was lucky enough to see Reykjavik under several inches of snow several days into my stay. On my last day I visited the blue lagoon.

What did you find easy and challenging

For me, the most difficult part of it all was sheer loneliness. I love my space more than most, and many of my hobbies are very introverted. In many ways travelling alone should have been perfect for me, but it wasn't. It was very difficult for me once my friends had gone home and I was left alone. It forced me out of my comfort zone though, and I feel far more confident interacting with strangers in unfamiliar environments since returning. It was still difficult at times in Iceland though, and I firmly believe that independent travel is not for everyone, however beneficial it may prove.

Conversely, I found the actual process of travelling quite easy. I took my first solo-flight at the age of 13, and I've been taking trains everywhere for years so it wasn't too unfamiliar.



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

It is difficult to pick one single thing as a highlight of my time away. I saw too much that just amazed me, I saw a horse and cart on Bulgaria's Oxford Street, a man with a falcon on his arm getting off a bus, a medicinal bath being used as a party venue, the Plitvice Lakes, the Northern Lights and more than a couple of waterfalls. I saw lots that I won't forget but probably even more that I won't remember.



What do you plan to do next?

This experience has left me with the better part of a year to read, work, write, and think. I've had a great time and I honestly feel so much better approaching university after having this time off. I feel as though I will do myself more justice in my studies, and I feel more capable. I'm going to be 20 next year and I actually feel like it, whereas I still felt 16 when I left for Amsterdam.

I am studying environmental geography at Queen Mary, University of London. I hope to travel to India afterwards and visit some other places whilst there such as Bhutan and Cambodia.



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

Take more socks than you originally planned. Buy a nice looking journal. Buy a spare battery and external charger for your phone (or don't take one at all). I wouldn't bother with a guidebook, their maps are out of date and they are too big to carry and unnecessary unless you literally plan to do everything there is to do in a country. We have hostelworld.com now, use it.

Don't rely on the internet for train times, get the hostel owners or reception to call ahead for you and find out that way.

Never get a cab straight from the station to the hostel when you arrive in a new place. They will ask you how much you paid for it when you check in at the hostel and physically wince when you tell them.