

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Rebekah Akingbala

Dates	August 2011 to September 2011
Locations	Canada, USA
Activities	Language course and independent travel



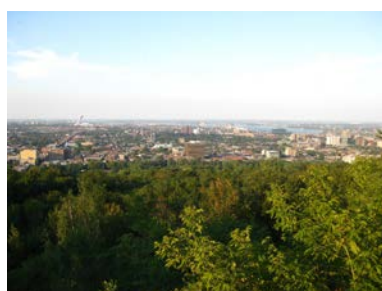
Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I have always enjoyed the idea of travel; the opportunity to discover new places and experience different cultures. At the beginning of my first year of A-level study I was becoming mentally tired as I had been in compulsory education for 13 years, coupled with the pressure of being one of the youngest students in my year. Therefore, when the opportunity to apply for a gap experience scholarship, it seemed like the perfect chance to take a break from my studies while doing something I enjoyed that was worthwhile in terms of my future goals. I decided to learn a foreign language on my gap year. Language study seemed like the perfect way to use this experience to become a traveller as opposed to a tourist, learn a new skill and really become involved in the life of whichever destination I chose to travel to. Some of the university courses that I had been researching prior to my application had stated that they offered study abroad opportunities, some of which were located in France and French-speaking Canada which also influenced my choice of experience.



What did you do on your gap experience?

I spent 4 weeks on an intensive French course in Montreal, Canada. I thought that this would be the perfect place to learn French as I would get out of Europe, visit a new country and be able to fall back on English if things got difficult. The location also meant that I was able to travel to the USA fairly cheaply in my spare time.



What did you find easy and challenging?

Initially, I found it difficult to adapt to the school as it was a full immersion course. However, as I became more accustomed to the way the school was run and made some friends, by the second week I was able to hold conversations in French with my friends, host family and teachers.

What impact has your gap experience had?

The gap experience has made me want to continue with language study and further travel. It has also motivated me to stick with the application process for a year of international study at university, no matter how demanding it may get.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The highlight of the trip was the time we as a school got to spend exploring Montreal. Although we got to visit cities in the Quebec and Ontario provinces, and took an excursion to New York City, I found myself really beginning to feel at home in Montreal, and as a result, the city is high on my list of possible places to spend my year studying abroad as it also has two great universities.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

One of the unexpected outcomes of this trip was that I kept in contact with so many people that I met on the course. I had expected to keep in touch with maybe one or two people from the course, but I stayed in touch with about 15 people, and made many more friends while in Montreal. Another unexpected outcome of my experience is that I would now also like to learn German. The majority of students at the school were from Germany and I found myself picking up parts of the conversations some of the students were having with each other.

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

First, I would say that it is important to know exactly what you want to get out of the experience so you can finalise your plans relatively early in the year. Second, I would suggest staying with a host family while you are abroad to get the most out of the experience as you have no other choice but to get to know local people and immerse yourself in their customs. Finally, I would say try something that you've never done before or don't think you can do, as you may surprise yourself and end up enjoying or even excelling in whichever new activity you choose to do as part of your gap experience.

What do you plan to do next?

My future plans are to continue with my French studies, earn a place on the study abroad programme at university and get a 2:1 in my first year. After university, I will either undertake further study or travel.

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

Before my gap experience, I wish I had known how much time went into planning an extended trip so I could have managed my time better and been more organised prior to departure.