

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Sophie Garrett

Dates	September 2011 to November 2011
Locations	Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina
Activities	Overland tour



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

The first of my aims was to gain independence and with this some life skills. I knew that the experience of travelling across the world without anybody I knew to rely on would improve my strength as a person and hopefully prepare me for the future when I have to move out and cope day to day by myself. I also wanted to gain a look at the world and particularly Machu Picchu. I wanted to improve my knowledge and also see first-hand some of things that I had only read about in textbooks. Human geography is my main area of interest so I wanted to visit places that would show me some variation; this is why I wanted to complete an overland trip as it gave me a chance to visit lots of places in a short space of time.



What did you do on your gap experience?

I chose to go on a 6 week overland tour of the South American countries Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina with the company 'Dragoman'. I chose this as it included a trip to Machu Picchu and it allowed me to see a variety of different countries. By going with an organised tour, I did not have to worry about border crossings and travel as it was all already arranged.



I departed for Lima, Peru in September. The first day was spent in the Paracas National Park where we took a guided boat trip to the Ballestas Islands. Here we learnt about the vast range of bird and mammal species along this coastline and saw the Humboldt penguins. That evening we travelled to Huacachina and took part in dune bugging and sand boarding! One of the best nights of the whole six weeks, was an estado cooked by the locals and sleeping under the stars in the middles of the dunes to their music. The next day we visited the Nazcar lines. On one night we had to cook for a group of 20 and meet specific dietary requirements. I learnt more about budgeting as we had to buy the food for this meal. We then visited Arequipa then moved onto Chivay and the Colca Canyon which is where we first saw evidence of the terraced farming used in lots of South America. We had an early start so that we could watch the condors fly past on the thermals at dawn. After that we went to Raqchi to stay with the local families. Our next stop was Cusco, and the part of the trip I was most anticipating, the community trek and visit to Machu Picchu. I



regret not doing more physical exercise in preparation for the trip, as I have never been as physically pushed as during the hiking, especially when I was suffering from altitude sickness. Machu Picchu was truly one of those places where you could just stand and appreciate the wonder of it.

With a visit to the Uros Islands on Lake Titicaca came the end of our time in Peru. The next day we crossed the border into Bolivia and took another boat trip on to Lake Titicaca to visit the Isla Del Sol. The next stop on our trip was the mines of Potosi which was my most memorable experience we visited. After this we went to Uyuni to visit the salt flats which are an amazing geographical phenomenon.

We then had to cross into Chile and onto Argentina. We drove to Salta which was the most western city I had seen so far. It was then that we entered the wine region of Argentina, Cafayate. We then had a three day stop at an Estancia before moving on to Mendoza where I had the chance to go white water rafting. Finally we crossed back into Chile to Santiago, which had a very bohemian vibe to it and probably my favourite capital of the trip.

What impact has your gap experience had?

As a first experience of foreign travel I loved every second of it, but if I try and take a more objective view there are some things I wish I'd done differently. I think that I did gain independence and life skills with this trip but I could have gained more by completing some independent travel at the end of my trip. I also would have liked to complete some more directly geographically related work.

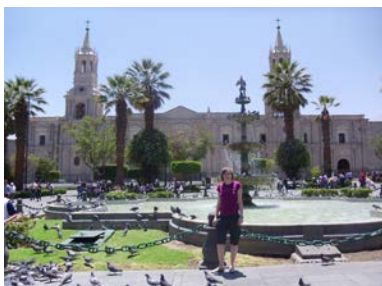


What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The highlights of the trip for me were Machu Picchu due to its awe inspiring atmosphere, and Potosi for the chance to witness real life hardship being dealt with and overcome.

What will you do now?

I am studying Geography at the University of Nottingham. I then hope to complete a further PGCE course with the aim of being a secondary school teacher. By studying at Nottingham I have the chance to study my second year abroad at a partner university. I have definitely got the bug for travelling and so as a life goal hope to visit every continent with Africa being my next priority.



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

Trust in your own ability more and have confidence in yourself. Challenging yourself will lead to you getting the most out of your experience.