

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

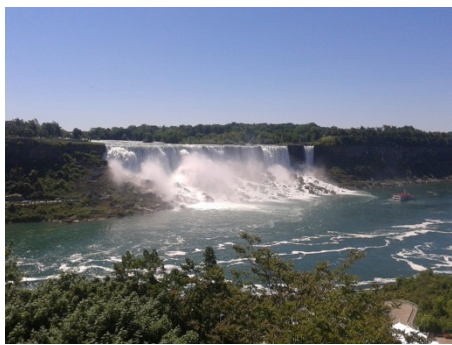
● George Smith

Date	14 th May to the 16 th June 2014
Locations	USA and Canada
Activities	Trekking and independent travel



Why did you want to have a gap experience?

I wanted to undertake my chosen gap experience as at the time I wanted to get away from things. I decided to do something that involved independent travel rather than being organised by a travel company. It was also something that would allow me to experience new places and cultures while still feeling safe and in an environment where if it did all go wrong, I would feel comfortable. It gave me an opportunity to not only be in the big city areas, but also the absolute wilderness and meant I didn't have to blow a lot of money on a lot of travelling. I love waterways and river systems, and so this environment interested me and allowed me to see if I wanted to go down a water management career route.



What were your specific aims and objectives?

My aims for my gap experience were: to experience true wilderness, explore a potential career route, become more independent, experience a different culture, get away from everything, and work towards my Scouts explorer belt.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I went to the state of New York and travelled around New York City before heading north to the Adirondack National Park. I left on the 14th May and returned on the 26th June.



For the first two weeks of travel I went with a friend. Together we travelled around the city and the Lake George area, then he left for New Jersey and I stayed in the National Park. This is where I spent the majority of my time, exploring the area, doing some of the peaks there and trekking around areas such as Lake George, Ticonderoga and Schroon Lake. I then travelled to Niagara Falls and Canada.



I also explored the winter Olympic facilities of Lake Placid. There I also met up with a Boy Scout troop and was invited out for a few evenings, as well as to their annual awards ceremony. I saw a lot of wilderness areas that I assumed to be protected but that were bordered by big industry.

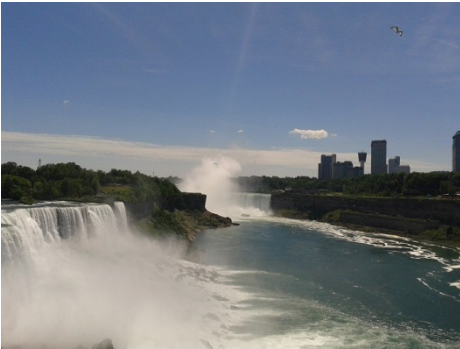
What did you find easiest/most challenging?

I found getting around to be one of the more challenging things as public transport was all but non-existent and even if there was some it was normally once a day or less so walking was my main way of transport. I therefore frequently ended up losing 2-3 hours walking somewhere. The amount of weight I had to carry wasn't a problem initially but soon took its toll and became a challenge. In about the third week my knees started to give in but after I got used to the weight again I found I could quite easily carry more by redistributing my kit about me.



What surprised you on your gap experience?

One of the most surprising things about my trip was the social inequalities I observed between the commercialised, well built-up, wealthy Canadian side of Niagara Falls and the seemingly far less-affluent American side. It really hit me as you don't expect an area like that to be so humble, in terms of the developments, compared to just across the gorge. I also found that after I was on my own for a while it got to the point where I hadn't seen/spoken to another person for a few days so I soon learned to overcome my shyness and reluctance to speak to people. I got a huge boost of confidence from realising this.



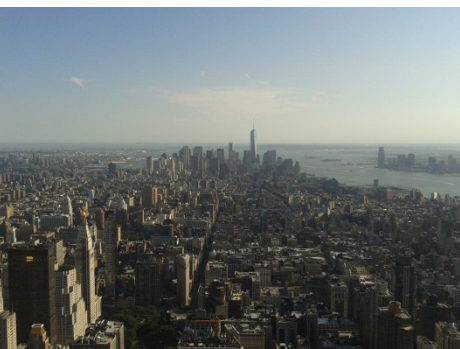
What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The biggest highlights were when I was at the top of the mountains and of the Empire State Building and could look down at everything and see it all in perspective. From that height, everything I could see seemed to be dwarfed by where I was and it made me realise that everything that seems important is actually small and insignificant when you're up there.



What were the unexpected outcomes of your trip?

The most unexpected outcome was having to cut short my trip as I couldn't find anywhere to stay for the 4th July period and was out of an area where I could camp. There were also a few reports of tornadoes in the area I was in. The result of these reports – and the swarms of black flies - meant that I ended up having to use a hostel as a base as I was being eaten alive and had been literally washed out of my tent by heavy rain!



I found my confidence on this trip. I am more willing to do things that I wouldn't have done before and I have the confidence to speak up. It has also really helped with my urge to go and explore, and with less worry than before. I used to panic a lot when trying to find somewhere to stay so I would go with an easy option but now I'm willing to be more adventurous in my decisions.