

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Theo Smith

Dates	11 th February – 26 th June 2015
Locations	Singapore, Borneo, Australia and New Zealand
Activities	Volunteering, expedition and independent travel



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

I wanted to come out of my comfort zone and explore new things. I was never comfortable going to places on my own and I thought this would be the perfect chance for me to change that and become more independent and experienced. I had seen all these amazing places in textbooks so I actually wanted to witness them first hand on my own.

One of my other aims was to go out and help people who are less fortunate than I am and to help the environment as best as I could with the volunteer work in Malaysia. I also always wanted to go to Australia and New Zealand to see what was so special about it! One of my dreams was to scuba dive in the Great Barrier Reef which I eventually did. It is these sorts of experiences that I will never forget.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I first spent a couple of days in Singapore adjusting to the time zone before moving on to Borneo where I joined Camps International and took part in four different projects. We first went to an island called Mantanani which initially seemed like paradise! However, there was a lot of poverty there and the living conditions were very basic. Our project work included a beach clean-up, building a reading hut, teaching the children and installing tanks to collect rainwater.

After 2 weeks we moved onto another project in central Borneo where we helped build a school. It was exhausting work but felt very rewarding. We also went to a war memorial where we learnt about the Sandakan death marches in 1945 where out of 6,000 Allied prisoners of war only 6 survived. It was very sobering.

I completed my PADI advanced scuba dive course then did a third project building a new groundwater system for a different village before completing a reforestation project in an area with a history of bushfires. We also climbed Mt Kinabalu.

On 12th April I then flew to Australia and stayed with family members I'd never met before. I got on with them so well and we did loads of





activities together. I did some independent travel around the country then on 5th June flew to New Zealand where I spent my final few weeks visiting an Auntie and seeing the sights. It was amazing!

What did you find easy and challenging?

I felt it was easy to meet new people and to get around: as long as you could read English then you would be fine. Malaysians spoke basic English in the city but not in small villages. The challenges were definitely budgeting as in Malaysia I got a bit carried away with the fact that everything was so cheap so I think that is where I overspent.

What impact has your gap experience had?

I feel this gap experience has given me the tools to prepare for university as I have now actually experienced so many things I had studied such as conservation, reef systems and volcanoes. My social skills have been polished since being away as I now know how to be with all sorts of people. I am now a lot more confident and am great to work with in a team. This experience has helped me gain the confidence to explore new things and talk to different people as well as finding opportunities. It was an absolutely priceless experience.

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

My highlight was the first month in Malaysia as the people I met were amazing and I had some great experiences with them, such as night kayaking on our own in the South China Sea, looking at the stars. The Great Barrier Reef scuba dive was another huge highlight as well as Mt. Kinabalu. Meeting my family for the first time was the most touching as I now have one of them over in the UK staying with me.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I expected to do the Oz Experience but because I got so close to my family, I just decided to extend my stay with them so that was the most unexpected outcome. Also, going to Sydney to stay with a few mates was unexpected but you just take these things as they come.

What do you wish you had known?

If I was to change something then it would have been only to stay one month in Malaysia as I was too long over there, plus it would have saved me a lot more money. I wish also that I could have seen the south island of New Zealand but I will save that for another time.

What do you plan to do next?

I am going to study Geography at Keele University for 3 years and possibly study somewhere else to do a masters and get an internship to work abroad. I have also made brief plans with new friends to travel to all sorts of places so I have started to become a 'traveller'.

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

1. Don't be afraid of anything which is out of your comfort zone as you would only love what you have done once you look back on it.
2. Be smart with your money as the more you have and the more you save, the more you can do with it.
3. Keep networking with people; you never know who you will meet out there and when you might need their help or they yours.

