

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Tom Unsworth

Dates	March 2011 to July 2011
Locations	Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina
Activities	Conservation volunteer and independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I wanted to go on a gap year in order to experience how people live in other parts of the world and the different cultures. I also wanted to see some amazing geographical landforms and features. I wanted to learn a bit of Spanish and also just experience the freedom and independence you get whilst travelling.

What did you do on your gap experience?

On my gap experience I went to South America for 5 months. Initially I took part in a conservation project in the Ecuadorian Amazon near the town of Tena which is run by the Ngo Jatun Sacha. I stayed there for 6 weeks in which I had to do lots of different jobs with the other volunteers. I had such an amazing time it was hard to leave the project. I travelled to Banos for Easter which was really interesting as there were big processions and lots of people walk from the nearby towns to the church and the town becomes full of people of all ages.



I then crossed the border to Peru, where I met my friend from home in the small surfing town called Haunchaco, from here we travelled in land into the Andes and went to Chacapoyas, Cajamarca and to Kuelap, some cloud forest Inca ruins. We then travelled to Huaraz a city that is 3,000m up. There we hiked to Lake Churup which is 4450m and was one of the hardest hikes that I have done but one of the most rewarding as the view over the lake was just breathtaking. After Huaraz we went to Lima where we met up with two more friends from home. We went to Arequipa which is a beautiful city where we spent a few days before trekking the Colca Canyon. I then went to Cusco after this where we did the Salkantay 5 day trek to Machu Picchu. We then went to Puno and into Bolivia crossing Lake Titicaca.



In Bolivia we spent about 5 days in La Paz, then went to the mining town of Potosi where we went on a tour of the mines. I found this quite moving as children were working there. Next we travelled Valparaiso in Chile. It is a sea side town and one of my favourites as it's really arty and colourful.

We then went to Santiago where we spent a few days before going to Cordoba in Argentina then Paraguay. We got a bus back to Argentina and went to The Igazu falls which were like nothing I have ever seen before. We then went to Buenos Aires for a couple



of weeks where I was to finish my trip. In Buenos Aires we just explored the city going to art galleries and museums and enjoyed the food that Argentina has to offer.

What did you find easy and challenging

I found being away from home much easier than I expected and just travelling and meeting people, I did find it hard to communicate with locals especially at first when I had just arrived in South America.

What impact has your gap experience had?

My gap experience has increased my communication skills and has given me a basic grasp of Spanish. It also has allowed me to see some amazing things and also shocking things that has motivated me in different ways and has made me much more considerate of what I have. From my conservation I learnt about the threats on the Amazon and the people who live there.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

So much of it was incredible, but one of them was the Iguazu falls, just the vast size and beauty of it.

What do you plan to do next?

I am now going off to study Environmental Science with study in North America or Australia at the Manchester Metropolitan University. I decided to do this course as I enjoyed being away from home and travelling so much that I wanted to study in abroad for a while as well. My experience has enabled me to be more self-reliant and confident which I think will help me in everyday life.



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

Definitely do it. Have a plan but be flexible and don't intend to stick to it completely. Just be willing to do and try new things.