

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Amy Donaldson

Dates	August 2011 to September 2011
Locations	Sicily and St Vincent
Activities	Independent travel and guided tours of volcanoes



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

Growing up with Montserratian heritage, I visited that country very often but hadn't experienced anywhere else. I really wanted to explore a bit more and expand my knowledge on volcanoes.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I was away for a total of 5 weeks; I spent 2 weeks in St Vincent and 3 weeks in Sicily travelling independently. In St Vincent I stayed on the north of the island and took part in different activities. During my time at Sicily I stayed in Catania on the west of the island and home to Mount Etna. During my time in Catania I mainly focused on learning about the volcano, and immersing myself in the culture.



What did you find easy and more challenging?

I found it easy to stay in my hotel room and not do anything, and I found it a lot harder to go out and explore; especially when I was alone, I found this extremely difficult. I found this very difficult when I was in Catania, especially due to the language barrier.

What impact has your gap experience had?

I think my gap experience helped improve my geographical skills in a sense that I gained a deeper knowledge on geology. I think I learnt a lot about motivation during my time in Sicily as a rarely left the hotel room, usually due to fear and shyness. However in St Vincent I think I gained a vast amount of life skills. I do feel that throughout my whole experience I did gain a lot of confidence which I even use today in my everyday life, even the simplest thing of being able to make conversation with a complete stranger I was not able to do before this experience. I used team work skills often in Catania due to group activities such as hiking.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The highlight of my experience would have been the first time I left my hotel in Catania, where I hiked up one side of Mount Etna, the journey was to actually get to the top. However when I did it was the most amazing thing I've ever felt in my life. I felt so liberated and empowered. Even along the journey up the mountain I learnt so much about the different types of rocks, the cloud patterns



around the volcano, history of the city and many other amazing facts. Another highlight of my journey was when I hiked up the black waterfalls in St Vincent, there was a vast amount of walking done on that day, however when we reached our final destination, it was absolutely breath taking.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

During the time I was in Scilly, there had been a large amount of fraudulent traveller's cheques being passed around Europe so my traveller's cheques were refused from every bank I went to. The money which I had on my card was limited, so I had to phone my family to ask them to top it up for me. It limited me heavily to the amount of things I could do in Catania.

What are you intending to do as result of this gap experience?

I think this experience has helped me gain great life skills and has really opened my eyes to the amount of world that is out there waiting for me to explore. I met some lovely people and feel a lot more confident and I think am more of an independent person also. I would say I do feel more inclined to travel to more adventurous places without being fearful.



I am still motivated in achieving my dream of working in a volcanic observatory in the Caribbean, however I have also gained interest in geographical photos, and I feel this interest had been because of my travelling.

What do you plan to do next?

I am currently studying BSC Geography at the University of Greenwich. I still have dreams of working with volcanos however I am also very interested in geographic photography.

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

I wish I had known people who had visited the countries I had visited, who could have given me advice on travelling alone. I regret letting my family have a large input on where I went. If I had had a longer time to plan my experience I think it would been a more successful experience and felt less rushed.

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

Don't be scared/don't let others influence. Plan and prepare. Research the country you're going to beforehand.