

# Learning and Leading Gap Year Scholars

Royal  
Geographical  
Society

with IBG

Advancing geography  
and geographical learning

## ● Georgia Murphy

Dates	October 2013 – May 2014
Locations	Tanzania, India, and Nepal
Activities	Volunteering in a remote village, teaching street children and independent travel

### ***Why did you want to do a gap experience?***

I have always had a passion for human geography and other cultures and wanted to be able to experience these first hand, as well as try and make a genuine difference to people facing problems in developing countries. I also hoped for personal development such as improving my confidence and gaining useful skills like budgeting and getting some real life experience, as well as knowledge for studying at university.

### ***What did you do on your gap experience?***

From October - December 2013 I was working in a very remote rural village in Tanzania called Magukula. I was selected through an organisation called International Citizenship Service (ICS), which is a UK government funded programme that brings together young people to make a difference in some of the poorest countries across the world. Our main focus was working on a Water Aid funded project in which we assisted in the construction of toilet blocks for the local primary school with fully equipped with facilities (such as sinks), using water from the rainwater collection system.

After identifying that knowledge about clean water and hand washing was extremely low, we installed and taught villagers how to make 'tippy tap's' using sticks, an old jerry can and a bit of string, which can then be used as hygienic taps when filled with water. We set up several groups in the village, including a woman's group, youth group, men's group and a water group. We used these groups as a means to spread knowledge, raise awareness, and as a place for them to discuss issues in the community.

I was mostly involved with the women's group, which was one of my favourite experiences of my time there. Furthermore, being camped right on the local primary school playground inevitably lead to the kids becoming a large part of our life and we often taught lessons, joined in with playground games and also set up activities such as sports days.

During the second part of my gap year I travelled around India and Nepal with one of my close friends for 3 ½ months. We spent our first month volunteering in the city of Jaipur, also known as the Pink City, teaching in an NGO run school for street children. This was probably one of the hardest things I have ever done as I was put 'in control' of an entire class and I found the language barrier particularly challenging. However it was an extremely rewarding experience and





one of my proudest achievements is managing to successfully teach two of the children long multiplication (after initially having to re-learn it myself).

From then on we travelled around most of the Northern desert state of Rajasthan visiting the famous forts and sights, visited Mumbai and were shown around the Dharavi slum by a charity organisation run by its young residents. Although there were examples of immense poverty it was also a place of extreme organisation, initiative and had one of the strongest community spirits of anywhere I have been.



We then headed to Goa to relax, swim and overheat before flying to Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. Due to illness we did not manage to do the trek we had planned however we did travel extensively around the Kathmandu valley seeing and visiting places such as Patan and Bhaktapur, which were full of traditional Nepali houses and alleys, it was like taking a step back in time. We also went to Pokhara, a small, tourist-centred town by the lake, where we spent a few days relaxing on the boat and cycling around the local area as well as taking part in a 3 day meditation and yoga course. We also got to experience Nepali New Years Eve, celebrating the start of 2014.



**What did you find easy and challenging?**

I found the actual travelling and organisation aspect relatively easy; however one of the most challenging aspects of my gap year was that a lot of things were different from my original perceptions. For example, I discovered that development isn't always what it seems and that the theory of development is a lot different from the reality.

We faced a lot of difficulties with community integration in our village in Tanzania. This was very hard as it sometimes felt like the community didn't understand why we were there, and what we thought they needed wasn't necessarily what they thought they needed. I also found it quite difficult to see the contrast between the very touristy areas and slums, and I can see how easy it is for people to get trapped in the tourist bubble without realising what else is going on in that country.



**What impact has your gap experience had?**

There are so many different things which I have gained from my travels. One of the most important ones is it has improved my confidence in my own abilities and I have learnt to be completely independent. I also think that I have gained invaluable first-hand knowledge that I will be able to apply to my Geography and International Development degree at Sussex University.



It is very difficult to pick a particular highlight of the whole year but I would say it has to be all the different people I met, including locals and other travellers. However, an unexpected outcome of my gap year was getting quite seriously ill at the end of my trip and having to book an earlier flight home.

As a result of my gap year I want to do a lot more world travel and would like to be able to go back to Nepal and do a 3 week trek. My gap year has also reinforced my interest in international development, and I discovered that I am particularly interested in women and gender issues in the developing world – I would possibly like to work against



the sex slavery trade in India and Nepal in the future. It has also inspired me to try and learn a language as there were various times when I felt embarrassed that I couldn't speak any other languages apart from my own.



***What did you wish you had known?***

I wish I had known that there aren't half as many things to worry about as people make out there are! Advice I would give to anyone thinking of undertaking a gap year would be:

- 1) When it comes to being in a completely new country and culture you sometimes have to let go of what you would usually see as being normal and just embrace it for what it is, otherwise you won't get the full experience and will spend way too much time worrying rather than enjoying it.
- 2) Don't have any plans set in stone as some of the best things will be the ones you didn't plan. If people recommend somewhere, go, even if it messes up your itinerary.
- 3) Don't book return flights in advance as your plans will always change, for example you might want to carry on to somewhere else or may end up having to go back early and it will just end up costing you more money (and hassle) trying to change them. Just make sure you always have enough money in your account to get home when you need to.