

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Amy Wood

Dates	January – June 2015
Locations	Fiji, Australia, Thailand and China
Activities	Volunteering and independent travel



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

For as long as I can remember, I've always had a yearning for travel and adventure. The idea of taking a gap year before university has always been a serious contemplation of mine but I never thought this dream could become reality until I was introduced to the RGS-IBG.

My main aims were to get hands-on experience of geographical processes; enhance my personal development (including being self-sufficient, learning budgeting skills and improving my self-confidence); understand my direction in life; gain experience; explore different cultures and ways that children learn and challenge myself.



What did you do on your gap experience?

I began my gap year on the 28th of January 2015. It was a real jump in the deep end as through the organisation 'Think Pacific', I did 5 weeks of volunteering on a remote Fijian Island with no electricity and a very different way of life. We built a vital health clinic for the community of Lovu, taught lessons in various subjects, introduced a new structure into the sports lessons at Narocake District School, fitted in with the local community and lived as Fijians for 5 weeks.

I then went to Australia and travelled independently up the East Coast starting in Melbourne and finishing in Brisbane, not forgetting my spontaneous but amazing trip to the island state of Tasmania. I met so many fantastic friends in Australia. This was my first experience of backpacking and by visiting a western place first to 'learn the ropes' I gained the confidence to venture out in the next part of my trip.



For phase 3 of my trip I travelled independently through Thailand. I was lucky enough to take part in activities such as a cooking course, massage course, zip lining through the jungle, caring for elephants in a retirement home, experiencing a full moon party and spending a night in a traditional Thai family home.

My last stop was China. This was definitely the most challenging place to backpack because of the language barrier. However, I was



lucky enough to stay with a Chinese Friend in Beijing and could do so much sight-seeing from that base. In Shanghai, I saw the China of the Future: the Pudong skyline is awe-inspiring and the concrete jungle is broken up by beautiful French architecture on The Bund. I got a real flavour of the superpower China is becoming and am enthralled by it.

What did you find most easy and challenging?

I found it easier to get into the swing of living in hostels than I first anticipated and I also found it easier organising myself than I thought, I managed not to lose anything important or miss any flights, which amazed me! I found backpacking in China more challenging than I thought because of the language barrier in particular, and also adjusting to the strict rules of life in a very conservative rural Fijian village. However, this was not anything I didn't take in my stride.



What impact has your gap experience had?

My gap year has changed the way I think about so many things. It has made me look deeper into why and how people and places impact on each other. Travelling has helped my navigational skills and awareness and I am immensely proud that I managed to travel through 3 countries independently. The experience has helped me grow as a person and also enhanced my geographical understanding and awareness, which will be invaluable in applying to my studies both at university and my career.



My trip has also increased my initiative greatly, as although I have always been very self-motivated and confident, this year gave me an opportunity to push those skills to the limit. I am now so confident in myself and what I can do, how I can manage and hold myself in an array of challenging situations. I feel that travelling broadens the mind – too easily we can be trapped in our western bubble. The skills I have gained and experiences I've had mean I am more comfortable and happy in my own skin than I've ever been, which is so liberating.

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

I can honestly say that the volunteering part of the trip in Fiji was the most incredible experience of my entire life and I will be forever grateful for that opportunity. I learnt so much about what is really important; about myself and others. I was pushed to my limits both physically and emotionally and I feel I am a better person for it. In Fiji, alongside volunteering I was also lucky enough to undertake lots of exciting activities such as snorkelling, spear fishing, making traditional crafts and even a 14,000ft skydive, which was the highlight of my trip.



What are you planning to do next?

I intend to progress onto the University of Leicester to commence my studies in Geography BA and then do a TEFL qualification and year teaching in Asia. I then hope to return to England and pursue a career as a teacher, hopefully to progress into management.



What is your advice for others considering a gap experience?

I would advise future Gap Scholars to not be scared when planning: plan with your dreams and goals in mind and don't shy away. In addition, make Trip Advisor your best friend and ensure you get a good currency card. Also, never underestimate the comfort of an emergency chocolate bar or note from your family back home!