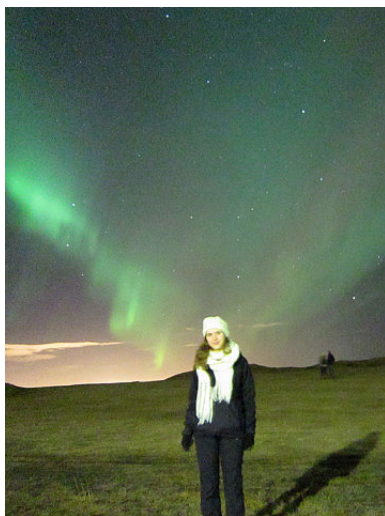


Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Lorna Burnell

Dates	November 2012 and February to June 2013
Locations	Iceland, New Zealand, Australia and Cambodia
Activities	Diving, independent travel and volunteering in a school



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

One of the main reasons I wanted to have a gap experience was to gain independence and confidence before attending university. I also wanted to witness geographical processes and formations to help me understand them better and to finish my PADI Open Water qualification. I wanted to volunteer in a school teaching English which would help me decide whether I wished to pursue a career in teaching.

What did you do on your gap experience?

There were two stages to my gap experience; a two week trip to Iceland and a three and a half month trip to New Zealand, Australia and Cambodia.

In November I travelled independently in Iceland. I witnessed many geographical formations and processes, including waterfalls, geysers, glaciers, volcanoes and the wonderful Aurora Borealis. I also gained a greater understanding of how most of Iceland is powered by geothermal energy and how they harness this power. I extended my diving experience by scuba diving between the North American and Eurasian plates, which was really fascinating and a unique experience.



At the end of February I departed for the second stage of my gap experience to New Zealand. Whilst here I travelled independently and completed my Advanced Open Water PADI scuba diving qualification. I witnessed more geothermal features here, most notably the amazing landscapes around the volcanoes of Mt Tongariro and Mt Ngauruhoe. I also travelled to Franz Josef Glacier, where I gained a greater understanding of glacial landscapes. I partook in many activities including kayaking, scuba diving and hiking.



In April I flew to Australia and stayed with my family in Sydney for a week. I then travelled independently up the east coast to Cairns, where I went scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef. Along the way I carried out further dives, including a night dive and dives on the S.S Yongala wreck. I also visited Fraser Island, the largest sand island in the world.

In May I completed my trip by travelling to Cambodia. I was met at Siem Reap airport by a volunteer from New Hope Cambodia, where I would volunteer for two weeks. Our role was to aid the



teacher in English and Maths lessons, for a range of students from 7 year olds to adults. We helped with pronunciation, marking and correcting students work and leading the lesson. For my final week in Cambodia I travelled to Phnom Penh to witness the killing fields as well as visiting Sihanoukville and Battambang. I stopped in Malaysia for a few days before returning home in June.

What did you find easy and challenging

Some of the things I found easier were communicating with new people and navigating around new places. Whereas I found being by myself at some points more challenging and I did miss home a few times. I also found it quite hard when we visited the very poor area of Mondul 3; where the majority of the students at New Hope Cambodia live, as well as visiting the killing fields and detention centre S-21 in Phnom Penh. Despite knowing to expect it, I found it shocking to see the level of poverty and the horrific brutality that taints Cambodia's past.



What impact has your gap experience had?

I feel that my gap experience helped improve on the knowledge of geographical processes and features I had from my A level studies. I am quite a visual learner and so being able to witness many geographical phenomena for myself really enhanced my understanding. My gap travel experiences have also acted to improve my motivation to succeed in my university studies; which will increase the opportunities for further travel and allow me to pursue a career in teaching or one involving scuba diving. Through travelling independently and meeting many new people I have become more confident and better at speaking to people. I had many opportunities to work on my own initiative whilst travelling, and so through this experience have been able to develop this skill as well as the skills of planning and organising.



I wouldn't have thought that I would have developed the passion I now have for scuba diving and the wish to learn another language. I feel the experience has helped me be more independent and also more ambitious

What do you wish you had known?

Before I had planned my trip I wish I had known how much I would enjoy travelling to Cambodia and learning about different cultures. I would then have planned my trip to have a bit more balance between the more developed and less developed countries I visited. I would also have liked to have stayed for a bit longer at New Hope and been able to become more involved in the charity.



What do you plan to do next?

I am studying at Nottingham University. When I leave university I hope to further my travel experiences and visit South America and



other countries in South East Asia, where I want to teach English; probably through gaining a TEFL course. I also want to participate in ocean conservation volunteering involving scuba diving. As a career I think I either want to pursue teaching or find a job which would involve scuba diving.

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

Stretch yourself and be ambitious. Whilst planning your trip it might be a bit daunting as well exciting. So it could be tempting to be a bit “safe” with some of your travel plans, but you will more than likely find it easier and easier once you start travelling.



Be more flexible. I found that due to booking one way flights I had little flexibility in my travel schedule. Although this was generally fine, it prevented me from being able to stay longer in places that I enjoyed and I definitely think that when I travel again I will book more flexible tickets.

Immerse yourself in the local culture. I found some of the most rewarding and interesting parts of my trip were in Cambodia, when I was talking to local people and volunteering in a school. However I got less satisfaction from my travels in Australia, as I felt more like a tourist than a traveller.