

# Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

## ● Samantha Armstrong

Dates	February to March 2011 and August to September 2011
Locations	Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, USA
Activities	Overland tour of Africa, volunteering & independent travel



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

I did not feel ready to go to university and felt really young and immature. I thought it would be a good idea to take a year off, experience work, as well as travelling for a few months; in both of these things I knew I would meet new people, learn new skills and broaden my experiences and independence, all of which would help prepare me for being totally self-dependent at university! I was tired from being in education for 13 straight years. I really needed time to chill out from learning and to experience new and different things, to learn more about myself. Finally, I had always had the dream to visit both the Amazon rainforest and the African savannah and experience the wildlife and environment there first-hand.

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

I started the first part of my gap year in Kenya where I met with overland tour group 'Absolute Africa' and we travelled through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and finished in South Africa. I travelled to Africa alone but was with the tour group for all of my time in Africa, bar the last two days when I had to travel to Johannesburg for my flight home. 4 Months later I travelled independently to Lima, Peru where I had a few days to settle in and acclimatise before I trekked the Inca trail to Machu Picchu. I met people during my 4 day trek who I continued my travels with in Peru (including exploring some of the amazing Peruvian Amazon) before heading south to Bolivia. I spent a little less than 2 weeks in Bolivia before a massive bus journey to Ecuador via Peru.



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

I found travelling alone a lot easier than I anticipated; I was worried initially that I would have to do long sections in South America alone, but it is so easy to meet people whilst travelling as you all have a common interest in travelling and the majority of people I met were more than happy for me to tag along with them. This made things so much more enjoyable as I did not have to worry about the safety of travelling alone, plus I met so many amazing people I will definitely keep in touch with. More challenging was keeping track of my finances; I didn't want to bring



lots of cash with me when I travelled, but whilst I was travelling, cash points were often few and far between so I had to take out enough money to last me until the next cash point I reached.



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

I gained greater people skills as I was constantly introduced to new people and by the end of my trips, it was second nature to me just to integrate with new people I met along my travels (this helped me immensely with meeting new people at uni!) and also more confidence and independence as I was not only in a different country alone, but I was managing my own money, deciding what I wanted to do and doing little things like washing my own clothes and cooking my own meals. I learnt things from local people in the places I visited that I wouldn't have learnt otherwise, and experiencing cultures, environments and countries for myself really helped develop my geographical knowledge and interests (I already knew I was interested in the management of biodiversity in areas such as the Amazon and Savannah but seeing these areas for myself really confirmed my interest in this area of geography as one I want to pursue).



***How do you think this experience will help you?***

My gap experience has already helped me in being a lot more prepared for university. As a result of my experience, I intend to apply some of my new interests and skills to my degree and hopefully pursue them in the future – I am planning a trip to South America to do conservation work in the Amazon rainforest.

***What do you plan to do next?***

I am studying Geography and International Relations at Sussex University. I am interested in spending a term studying abroad in my second year, possibly in India or Australia.



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

Don't worry about travelling by yourself! It's so easy to meet people while you are travelling so you'll never be alone for long, and if your still not convinced, join an overland tour, sign up to a project or to do some voluntary work and you will meet people that way!

Be organised – have a budget to stick to, have an idea of a route you want to take or things you want to do, along with some important telephone numbers for each area you are visiting. Enjoy every moment – take loads of pictures (and bring a usb stick to back up pictures when you get the chance in case anything happens to your camera), keep a diary or write a blog so you remember all of the amazing memories you are bound to have.