

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Lexi Sears

Dates	August 2014 – August 2015
Locations	Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam
Activities	Volunteering for 11 months, 1 month independent travel



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

When I first became interested in having a gap year at a career's fair in sixth form, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I didn't just want to waste my time working or doing odd bits of travel, I wanted to do something that, although clichéd changed the world.

Before embarking on my travels to Cambodia, my ultimate aim was to make a change, both in others and myself. I wanted to challenge myself to do something that would make me and others proud. I wanted to push myself into a totally unfamiliar situation and learn how to deal with any problems that may arise. I was really keen on working in a social care project, particularly in Cambodia, due to their overpowering dark history and low presence in Asia. I completed an EPQ study on whether the Khmer Rouge was the underlying cause of poverty in Cambodia today, an area which was of huge interest to me. Ultimately, I wanted a first-hand answer to this question and certainly throughout all I saw and heard in Cambodia over 12 months, I received a clearer understanding.



What did you do on your gap experience?

My year was a little different to the ordinary Gap Scholar. I went to Cambodia with Project Trust and spent 11 of my 12 months away volunteering in an orphanage for children who are HIV+. I was paired with another girl, who is now my closest friend, with 30 children and 3 other caregivers. Together, we devised our own timetable of activities around the children's school hours. I taught three daily classes and in between these, one extra lesson per day, one arts and crafts activity, one sports activity and one games session.



So much happened during these 11 months that it is difficult to put into words exactly what we 'did'. We worked from 6am until around 8pm every day and didn't really leave the orphanage, except every other weekend when we went to Phnom Penh for some much-needed relaxation. Many of the children I worked with had mental and psychological issues and so things could be very tough in terms of behaviour. The experience was without a doubt the most challenging



experience of my entire life but also the most rewarding. After 11 months at the orphanage I then spent a month travelling through Thailand and Vietnam.

What did you find easy and challenging?

The most challenging thing for me during my gap year was the feeling of not being good enough. It is extremely disheartening to try your absolute best and be told, or even shown, that it isn't good enough. It is very easy to feel like this when working with children who come from very disadvantaged backgrounds who tend to lash out and say or do things they may not realise will offend. Although I tried to keep it in my head that they have been so hurt in their lives knowing they are ill and having no family, I found it very difficult to not get upset when it came down to a child just a few years younger than me hurling abuse at me and occasionally getting a little violent.



In contrast, the easiest part of my year was falling absolutely in love with all of the children I lived with. I became so emotionally attached to each and every one of them, and them to me because we were in such close proximity for such a long time. They are all completely unique and their individual personalities still managed to shine through despite the fact that there were so many of them!

What impact has your gap experience had?

My year away has definitely made me more confident in myself and in social situations. I was thrown in at the deep end when I was placed in a home where nobody speaks any English and so I had to fully commit myself to learning the language, put myself out there, use my own initiative and be as confident as I could be.



I feel more self-aware now and aware of how so many billions of people can live so differently but still have such a warming sense of community. Cambodian people are so poor but they are the nicest people you will ever meet and will offer all they have to make you feel welcome. It is something that will stay with me forever: no matter how much money you have, you should always look out for other people.

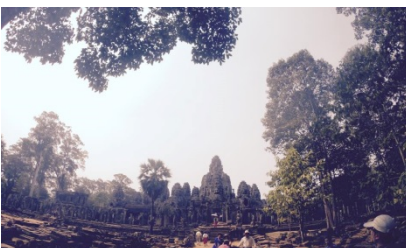
What was the highlight of your gap experience?

Teaching my own classes and seeing the children progress in English was probably the biggest reward, filling me with huge pride every day. I have found that the biggest achievement of all is seeing that you have made someone else feel proud and confident in themselves.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I loved seeing 'Geography in real life' and applying all I have previously learned and read about, into a real life situation. The different cultures of countries are fascinating and to experience this traditional Buddhist and Khmer culture was a privilege. After visiting Vietnam and Thailand, you realize how far behind Cambodia is, in terms of development. The evidence is physical; basic infrastructure, primarily primary and secondary industry and you only have to look at the people to know they just can't afford the same clothes, food or other necessities that other south east Asian countries can. Even in terms of food: Cambodian food is basically whatever is cheapest and available, with little thought or tradition put into it, yet Thai food is an international cuisine.





What do you wish you had known?

Realistically, you can't prepare for what I have experienced but you can only try. I would have liked to have talked to someone who did the same thing previously, as an honest evaluation of the project and what to expect would have been helpful.

What do you plan to do next?

In the future, after studying Geography at Durham University, I would love to work in Asia or do work involving aid, education or healthcare. Cambodia is a country with so much potential but with little international aid that would give it the push it needs to develop as rapidly as countries like Thailand.

After seeing so many successful businesses, it would be my dream to run an NGO for orphaned adolescents or those from difficult backgrounds in Cambodia. It is an incredible thing to devote your life to helping other people and ultimately, that is my aim for the future.

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

1. I would say that you need to completely push yourself and be self-confident in everything. You will be so much more respected if, even if you don't really feel it, you appear confident. You will get so much more out of the experience if you put yourself out into the situation and deal with the consequences. I definitely learned the most from doing things I wasn't exactly comfortable with at first.
2. It is especially important to try and learn the local language! It is respectful to the people of the country you are staying in and they also really appreciate it and will be so happy even to hear you say thank you!
3. Lastly, do not regret anything! Do every single thing you can and don't stop yourself doing something because you're scared or because it is too expensive. Experiences on a gap year are ones you will never get again and so you need to take every single one and not regret anything – it gets you nowhere!

