

# Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

## ● Sean Cox

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| Dates      | April 2011 to August 2011                                 |
| Locations  | Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Chile                            |
| Activities | Independent travel and volunteering on community project. |



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

I wanted to experience new cultures and to work on my life skills e.g. confidence, independence, and money management. Living in a big city such as London all of my life I wanted to get out there and experience something different.

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

I spent my time travelling through Brazil and Bolivia, on my own for the first 2 weeks. I enjoyed walking through the towns and cities trying new foods, visiting local markets, beaches, mountain biking and trekking. I met up with John, another gap scholar, in Peru and we began our 2 weeks of volunteering. This involved living with a local family which was great for my Spanish. We built water tanks in a small desert community that benefitted over 100 families. The work was hard but rewarding as I knew it was helping the people I was interacting with on a daily basis. Also included in the project was 10 hours of Spanish lessons which was useful. One of the most amazing parts of my trip was when I did a 4 day hike through the jungle towards Machu Picchu. I grew to love trekking which I did on many occasions. This took me over rocks, waterfalls, across cliff faces, through sand dunes and shrubbery with breathtaking views. I also worked in a bar for a short period; I really enjoyed this as I really became integrated into the community. I knew many local people and became accustomed to the local way of life. It was also good for my Spanish as I used it almost every night when talking to those I was serving. In total I travelled for 4 and a half months and loved every minute of it.



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

The thing I found easiest was being independent and travelling about the towns and cities. I also found getting to know locals easy as they were very welcoming and accommodating. One of the harder things was trying to understand the Portuguese language when I travelled in Brazil.



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

I better understand physical processes and landforms as well as the importance of biodiversity/ conservation and the work of NGOs. It made me more motivated to achieve my goals as it



confirmed my love of all things to do with physical geography, asserted my desire to get into a career focused on physical geography. This trip aided my teamwork through the volunteering and bar work that I did. It gave me more confidence and a desire to travel the world without worrying about doing it alone. It made me think on my feet and assess situations.

***What were the highlights of your gap experience?***

There were so many highlights: Looking down onto Machu Picchu from the top of Huayna Picchu after climbing to the peak. The community spirit amongst friends and colleagues on both jobs. Making such good friendships over such a short space of time. The bar work was unplanned but turned out to be a great way of getting to practice Spanish and become more of a part of the community.



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

This trip has reaffirmed my future plans and increased my desire to travel and get a future job abroad. It made me more assertive and confident to strive towards my goals. I have gained great personal skills such as teamwork, money management, organisation and independence. As a result of this gap year I intend to travel more and get a career in natural hazard prevention abroad.

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

I am Studying BSc geography at King's College London, focusing on physical geography.

***What do you wish you had known before your gap experience?***

I wish I had known more Spanish and more history of the places I had visited; however it was nice learning whilst surrounded by it.



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

Be prepared to adjust your itinerary if things go wrong. Use lonely planet but take what it says with a pinch of salt, it's better to explore the city finding alternative local restaurants than just going to the food places suggested. Take as much money as you can back up - South America was much more expensive than I planned.