

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Conor Campbell

Dates	November 2014 – May 2015
Locations	Thailand, Singapore, Australia and Dubai
Activities	Independent travel and paid work



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

I had wanted to get work experience in the likes of the USGS or in a national park somewhere in the USA. Unfortunately, this just proved impossible: everywhere wanted either people currently studying geology or recent graduates. I therefore decided that instead, I would venture over to the other side of the world to do things I wouldn't have otherwise been able to do if it weren't for the RGS-IBG funding.

My main goal therefore changed from work to life experience. I decided that because I was a fairly shy individual who was mediocre at planning and taking care of myself that it might be a good idea to just throw myself in the deep end and be independent for six months which would mean that I would be a lot more prepared for living alone at university and also for going into a future career and being able to talk in public to groups of people I've never met

What did you do on your gap experience?

I spent six weeks in Thailand travelling independently. I stayed in Chang Mai for two weeks as I loved it there and loved getting to know the staff at the hostel and other locals. I also visited Pai, further north. To get there you have to get on a small minibus and go through the twisted roads in the mountains. There are exactly 762 curves on the mountain road and you can feel every single one of them! For some reason I thought it would be a cool idea to stay in a Circus School... Safe to say that this was an experience I would never get anywhere else, with people learning how to juggle fire and all sorts!

I did some more travelling around Thailand and spent a few days in Singapore before travelling to Brisbane. I then spent sixteen weeks working on a farm in Queensland where I did things I simply would never do again such as: riding a horse in the outback whilst mustering cattle; sitting on a bull's bac; cutting down dozens of trees with a chainsaw and riding a dirt bike in the outback for a bit of fun. The family I lived with were the kindest people I have ever met and I worked longer on the farm than I expected to just because I was enjoying it so much. I therefore ended up giving myself less time to go



sight-seeing but it's definitely not something that I regret as I plan to return to Australia and do more sight-seeing.



Finally, I spent a few days in Dubai which was insane as there is just so much money there! I really enjoy sight-seeing in big cities because I'm interested in the architecture of it all.

What did you find most easy and challenging?

The first couple of days were the worst days of my trip by far. I felt completely alone, I missed my girlfriend and family and I couldn't find any food that I liked. I just kept messaging people at home about being homesick and so many times I contemplated simply going home. I don't think I've been so emotional in my life as I'm a pretty laid back guy but was really out of my comfort zone.

On day four I was sitting on my hostel bed feeling sorry for myself then I just kind of figured I'd go downstairs, buy a beer and see what happens. Five minutes later I got chatting to another traveller then next thing I know there are about 10 of us sitting on the sofas in the middle of the hostel all drinking beers and making plans for later that night. We went to Koh San Road and just had a really good night!



What impact has your gap experience had?

Going away on a gap year has definitely increased my motivation for university. I'm now so excited to move to university and get stuck in to my degree. Working on a farm in completely alien environments with a language barrier between me and colleagues also helped make me less shy and built my communication and teamwork skills. These are essential for a future career in Geology so I can communicate easily with people from different backgrounds in different countries.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I didn't really expect to meet so many amazing and kind people. For instance, a Burmese girl who worked behind the bar 14 hours a day and she was 17. She spoke little English but we got along pretty well and just seemed so happy. It was just amazing to see a girl two years younger than me, working hard every day just to be able to survive and still be so happy. The day before I left she even went out and spent some money on a gift for me. It may have been the smallest gift in the world but it now sits on my desk at home as a constant reminder of my time there and is easily my best souvenir!



During my time on the farm I became familiar with a number of things I never would have learnt such as breeds of cows, the pregnancy and birthing process, how a dairy farm is run, the control of the land to make sure there is enough feed for the cows and everything in-between! The days were long and the job was difficult at times, but it was definitely rewarding and in some ways I still miss it!

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

Some people think I'm a bit mad when I tell them that the best part of my trip was working hard on that farm. I really enjoyed it and it definitely matured me a lot because there were times where the owner was away and I was essentially in charge because I'd been there the longest. If I hadn't gone on this trip I would definitely not feel confident if I was told to lead a team of people from different countries.



What are you planning to do next?

I have already been accepted by the University of Aberdeen to study a 5 year Master's degree in Geology. I plan to hopefully get a First in my degree and find an industry job within Geology. I'm not sure what I'm going to narrow it down to but I guess I have a while to decide!

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

- 1) For me the first days were the hardest because I was too shy. If you find yourself in that situation just go down to the hostel lobby and try and find an opportunity to spark up a conversation. Don't be embarrassed, everyone's in the same boat!
- 2) Take lots of photos but not so many that you're only looking through a camera lens the whole time! I wish I took more photos, but at the same time I didn't because I was more involved rather than constantly looking through a camera.
- 3) Pack light. My main pack when I left was 8KG and my daypack was just under 2KG. I packed too light, not something you often hear! I'd say 12KG is a good amount for your main pack.