

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Daniel Evans

Dates	August 2012 to January 2013
Locations	USA and Canada
Activities	Independent travel and research



What did you do on your gap experience?

PHASE 1: Flight to the Freezer: Alaska

Alaska encompasses a pristine wilderness and supports a bounty of flora and fauna. If anywhere in the world had to showcase just how diverse the planet can be, it's Alaska, in every possible way. Despite its fortunate scarcity of civilisation, the selection of quaint settlements I visited including Girdwood, Seward and Anchorage. Despite the austere climate, the weather is invigorating and I explored on bike along the Tony Knowles Trail, hiked the Chugach Mountains and took a boat tour to Exit Glacier where I caught sight of a Bald Eagle. Alaska is saturated in culture and native tradition, ranging from amazing art and craft to grand music and awe inspiring literature. I have travelled to the Arctic Circle, dipped into the Chena Hot Springs and walked with Reindeer.

PHASE 2: Studying Permafrost at the University of Alaska Fairbanks

A large duration of my stay in Alaska I devoted to my own personal study of permafrost. My prior knowledge was enriched by meeting some of the world's leading researchers and partaking in cutting edge laboratory work. One of the unexpected outcomes to stem from this and indeed a highlight came when I was invited to assist on an investigation into some new features known as Frozen Debris Lobes and a well-documented explorative survey of methane in frozen lakes, pioneered by Katey Walter Anthony.



PHASE 3: Southbound through the U.S.A

In November, I moved on to explore the west coast of the U.S.A. I entered Seattle one rainy November evening. It is blessed with a rather chic sandy coastline, and Eugene has a sinuous river flowing through its alternative 'hippy-orientated' culture. To the west of Portland is an extinct volcanic cinder cone; to the east the Hoyt Arboretum offers a maze of vegetated diversity.

The southbound voyage by Greyhound coach takes one through a variety of geographical landscapes; from the Oregonian flat agricultural monocultures to a more exciting Californian topography. I explored a lot of California on my trip, firstly visiting Sacramento. It's a delightful city, keen to uphold aesthetics, untarnished in beauty and serves as a thriving hub for entrepreneurial activity. Not far from Sacramento is one of the



greatest places I visited on this trip and quite possibly the highlight of this gap experience: San Francisco. The very land the city accommodates is physically inspiring; an undulating terrain supporting the world's steepest road. San Francisco maybe the city 'by the bay' but no vista is as majestic as the one that comes from the hill-sides that reside behind the Golden Gate Bridge. I made a couple of short excursions to cities such as Monterey, a fishing community and Santa Barbara which upholds some of the finest architecture I've had the pleasure of espying.

PHASE 4: Canada

In January I headed to Canada for the last phase of the trip and finally view the Niagara Falls. I remember standing there, gazing at the power of the crashing water and found it such a stimulating sight.

What impact has your gap experience had on you?



Meeting one of my aims, solitary travel has taught me the fundamental skills of self-sufficiency from cooking to keeping safe and vigilant in the face of the unknown. My earlier fears of negotiating foreign transport and airport procedures turned out to be some of the more easy elements on the experience. What was perhaps more challenging was maintaining a sustainable budget. Lengthy journeying has lifted my confidence just as sharing a roof with a mix of international culture has heightened my teamwork skills. I have returned feeling more courageous than ever before, more determined to fulfil my dreams and more inspired to travel greater distances. My geographical skills have never been stronger, from basic map reading to sophisticated data analysis, successfully meeting another one of my aims. I feel my knowledge of the Cryosphere has been particularly embellished and completing a lengthy overseas journey has also augmented my knowledge of society and culture.

What do you plan to do next?



Since I returned I have begun sharing my experiences with Rotary Clubs and W.I's around the country, and have presented to schools and colleges to inspire young people to make their dreams a reality. I am also penning a book about my travels. I would cherish the opportunity to become a Geographical Ambassador for the Society.

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

What do I wish I had known before I set off? In all honesty, nothing. The learning is in the travelling; exploration in the outdoors is the best classroom; mistakes and experience are the best teachers and spontaneity revitalises the mind. If I knew what



to expect before I set off, would there be much value in going? So my first piece of advice would be: Keep an open mind. Accept that there are a whole variety of cultures out there, and that sometimes society's values might differ from your own. Soak up the culture and talk with as many people as possible. Realise 'Expense' and 'Experience' are two different things. Sometimes the most mind-enlightening experiences are free. Take the rough with the smooth, and accept there will be both good days and bad days. You can't expect it all to go swimmingly; some of the more aggravating of my experiences I now laugh about.