

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Abi Ridley

Dates	March 2013 to June 2013
Locations	India
Activities	Community & teaching volunteer and independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I hoped to develop initiative, be more creative and decisive and gain a sense of independence. I also hoped to be able to develop a respect for cultures and communities that I would not otherwise experience.

What did you do on your gap experience?

When I arrived at the apartment in Delhi for my orientation week with IVHQ, I was very confused and tired but little did I know this would be the start of a great adventure in India over the next four months. I had an amazing orientation week in which I was eased into the culture with sightseeing, culture and history lessons, Hindi lessons and spare time to explore. Being so sheltered within the first week was exactly what I needed to ease into the colourful, vibrant and mind blowing shock that is India.

After orientation week, myself and two other girls were moved to the slum of Faridabad on the outskirts of Delhi. Initially this was overwhelming and shocking; however we were comforted by the amazing host Mother that looked after us. She gave us focus and a desire to push ourselves and make change over the next two months.

When we first arrived at 'Tender Heart' an NGO/ School that our host mother had created in the slum our days could consist of teaching or working in the women's empowerment centre. I bonded greatly with one of the other volunteers and we decided that we needed to make change and leave something behind at Tender Heart. From then on, we worked every day in the women's empowerment centre focussing on the project that we have called 'Bhatola People'. Bhatola People acts as middle man between the womens empowerment centre in Faridabad and the Australian and UK market. We helped the women to make products that we could sell at home.

A girl from the community watches over this product making process. 'Bhatola people' now makes skirts and accessories which we sell in the UK and Australia, online as well as in pop up stores. 80% of this profit goes back the Tender Heart project and the local community.



After two months in Faridabad, I moved onto my second project



with IVHQ, in the small town of Bir in the Himalayas. Upon arriving in Bir I was massively shell shocked and missing the focus and friendships I had left behind in Delhi. It was a struggle on the day that I left and cried all the way there; however I had the time of my life in the small Tibetan enclave.

Although IVHQ said I would be doing supported teaching, I was left completely by myself as the head authority in a part time 'school'. My class consisted of 15, 16-18 year old monks whom spoke a little English, Hindi and Tibetan. At first I was hugely shocked by this and felt way in over my head, however I planned my lessons daily and recalled on GCSE knowledge of physics, biology, maths etc. to teach the boys information I felt would be interesting and helpful to them. The language barrier was hard to deal with and made teaching very difficult, it helped me with my Hindi and was one of the greatest challenges in my time abroad which in retrospect I am grateful for.

Following my short and amazing four weeks in Bir, I flew south to Kerala; from there I travelled back up to Delhi via sleeper train and bus and visited - Kerala, Alapay, Ooty, Mysore, Bangalore, Hampi, Goa and Mumbai. I had an amazing time in this final four weeks of travel and did it alongside friends I'd made in my previous months in India and new friends along the way. Travelling without a provider at the end of my trip once I'd gained my confidence was invaluable and again I had the best time of my life, seeing spectacular culture and ways of life.



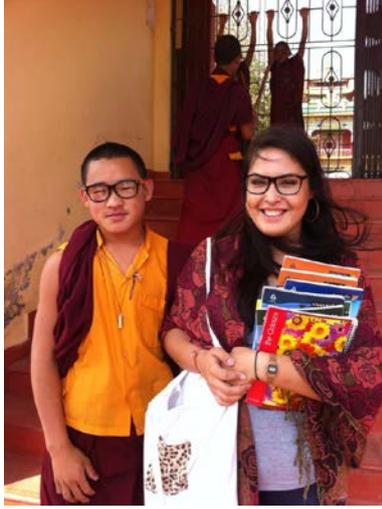
What did you find easy and challenging

The easiest part of my trip was definitely making friends; I think I spent one day alone in total and other than that I had great friends and company wherever I went. More challenging aspects of my trip probably lie in sheer tiredness and exhaustion; India is so hectic and in Delhi we were working all day then taking weekend trips almost every weekend to places that are 10 to 12 hours away overnight on bus. Of course we wanted to travel as much as possible but by Monday morning we were exhausted! I don't regret any of it though.

What impact has your gap experience had?

My gap year has affected everything in my life, as a result of those special four months I am more confident, understanding, aware, motivated and full of desire to travel and excel in everything I do. I can't wait to get back into education and be involved with geography from an academic perspective again. I was constantly referring to my previous knowledge in India and comparing things I had learnt in class to what I was seeing with my own eyes. The only unexpected outcome from my time in India, is truly enjoying it as much as I did. I've made friends for life, best friends that are an absolute highlight of my trip.





How do you think this experience will help you?

As a result of this experience I am focused on working hard so that Bhatola People can flourish and we can help the women of Bhatola village so that they and their children can live happy peaceful lives.

What do you plan to do next?

I am studying geography at university and cannot wait to start. My gap experience has reinforced my passion for the subject, something which I am so lucky to have. I am grateful to be aware that I love the subject I am studying and to be able embody my passion for it every day in constant research, hard work and interest.

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

Don't expect anything or try and know everything then you cannot be disappointed and won't have false expectations of what something will be like. To stay open minded and positive is much more exciting.

Be excited for every day ahead, to make friends for life along the way and to take every opportunity/adventure thrown at you – if that's going to mountain pools at 2am with Tibetan friends then do it, it will be amazing!