

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Nia Rees

Dates	April to June 2013
Locations	Peru
Activities	Volunteer in a school and travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

My passion for human geography influenced my aims and objectives in preparation of my gap year experience. My aims were to embrace another culture, to work in a community on a development project, to bring geography to life by witnessing the world's issues such as rurality, inequality in women, disability, poverty and playing a part in a key project overcoming these issues in the community.

My objectives were to stay in a community with a local family, select a well-established volunteer programme that benefits the local community in their development and to travel around the country using local providers that focus on sustainable tourism.



What did you do on your gap experience?

Following extensive research I decided to base my experience in Peru, and in particular, the city of Cusco. Peru is a diverse country that would provide an opportunity to enhance my geographical understanding providing practical case studies and further develop my Spanish language skills. I chose to use the gap year provider 'Real Gap'. Following research I chose to attend a 'Gap Safety' course so that I was fully prepared for the forthcoming challenges. In April I embarked on my three month trip to Cusco, Peru. Peru is South America's third largest country, covering 1,285,215 km², with a population of approximately 30 million. It is divided into three geographical regions- the Andes, lowlands of the Atacama Desert, the dense forest of the Amazon, beneath the slopes of the Andes. Cusco, situated South East of Peru, was my base for the majority of my trip. It is a large city located in the midst of the Andean Mountains at an altitude of approximately 11,200 feet. The population is approximately 358,935, but it is increasing. During the three month period I stayed with a host family, situated close to the Spanish School. This allowed me to embrace the local language and culture.



For the initial 2 weeks of my trip I took part in intense Spanish classes that were held at 'Academia Latinoamericana' Spanish School. This helped improve my linguistic skills, and allow me to make the most my experiences and be better equipped at the volunteer project. Attendance at the school also provided me with a social network of fellow 'gap year' travellers.



On my third week I started at 'Jardin Alto Los Incas' pre-school, situated on the outskirts of Cusco in one of the most deprived areas. I travelled via public transport to the school with locals and their livestock! The school was housed in one of three outbuildings (with a family in other buildings), made out of tin and bricks, with very basic teaching facilities and inadequate sanitation. During my time at the school I created strong bonds with the 18 'niños' very well. I taught the group for 7 weeks, on subjects ranging from shapes, colours, numbers, hygiene, healthy eating and cultural events. We became a unit while I was volunteering there, the teacher, children and their families– working together to make the best out of the hard situation they are in.

Towards the end of my time in Peru my sister joined me and we travelled to some of the most breath-taking locations in the world. I planned this trip using a company that invested back into the local community. Our first was to Machu Picchu, a large Inca Ruin site at approximately 11,000 feet. We arrived to watch the sun rise over this lost city, one of the eighth wonders of the world. It was situated in the Sacred Valley, through which flows the Urubamba River flows.



At the beginning of June we caught a flight to Arequipa, South Peru, an important commercial centre of the country. This was the starting point of our 5 day trip travelling through the Colca Canyon (deeper than the Grand Canyon, USA). We then travelled to Puno, a city located on the shore of Lake Titicaca, near the border with Bolivia. We stayed here for one night, before travelling to the Uros Floating Reed Islands on Lake Titicaca. Here we met a local family and spent two days with them. We learnt about their culture from net fishing to weaving blankets with the women.



We flew back via Cusco to Puerto Maldonado, the gateway city to the Amazonian Jungle. We then took a 25 minute boat trip down the Madre de Dios, a tributary to the Amazon River, where we stayed for 4 days in the heart of the jungle in a wooden lodge. Our guide was very enthusiastic and we learnt much about the ecology and tribal traditions. The 4 days included a canoe trip to Lake Sandoval, canopy walk, early morning trip to watch the macaws and parrots, medicinal plant walk and piranha fishing trip.

In mid-June we returned to Cusco. It was an opportunity to meet for the last time with 'new' friends, last minute market trips, and for me a final, very sad 'goodbye' to the 'Alto Los Incas' pre-school.

What did you find easy and challenging



Despite thorough planning there were still challenges I needed to overcome. However I felt I was more equipped to dealing with these because of the preparation I had done. These included difficulty initially in communicating with the children as they spoke partly in a different dialect – Quechua, difference in diet which included a lot of meat, rice and potatoes, adjusting to the



inequality of men and women, particularly in the home of the host family. Aspects of the gap experience that were easier to overcome were developing strong bonds and relationships with the Spanish School, using my Latin American Spanish correctly and adapting its use and organising my classes for the pre-school.

What impact has your gap experience had?

My geographical skills and knowledge from research, cultural differences and mapping have improved greatly. My motivation to broaden this has increased and given me an incentive to travel more in the future particularly to LED Countries. Many of my personal skills have improved, for example organisational, teamwork and working of my own initiative. Travelling on my own forced me to become independent and self-reliant.



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The highlight to my gap experience was having the opportunity to work with the children of 'Alto Los Incas'. My time working there, taking classes and being a support to the families provided me with a great sense of joy and satisfaction to be a part of this worthwhile project.

How do you think this experience will help you now?

The knowledge and skills I have gained from my time in Peru have been very beneficial in enhancing my development as a Geographer. I have shared my experience of the voluntary project through talks to local community groups and articles in a local community news magazine. I intend to continue to communicate with 'Jardin Alto Los Incas'.



What do you plan to do next?

I will be starting my human geography degree at Cardiff University. I am keen to continue to develop my Spanish language skills and explore opportunities for further volunteering.

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

Stay with a host family, learn the country's language (if relevant) and participate in voluntary work.