

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

Torquil Hall

Dates	May to August 2013
Locations	Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France
Activities	Independent cycling



What did you do on your gap experience?

On the 22nd of May I set off from my front door on a 4250km (2640 miles) cycle around the coast of the North Sea. I wouldn't be home for 88 days.

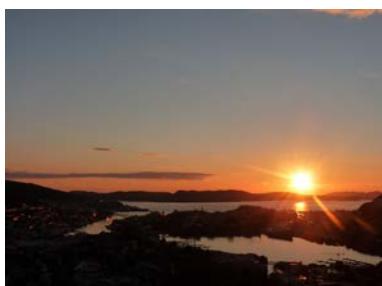
I knew that this was going to be a test both physically and mentally and so the first objective I had in my mind was to finish it. My second objective was to take in and experience as much about the environments and cultures I would cycle through as possible.

After leaving my home in Leeds I began cycling north, towards Newcastle, Edinburgh and onto Montrose. I then flew from Edinburgh across to Bergen in Norway. From Bergen I headed south along the coast through the Fjords, Stavanger, Haugesund and Kristiansand, where the coast veers round to the north-east and I could follow it until I reached Oslo. After only a brief stop I got back on the road and pedalled through Gothenburg in Sweden, Copenhagen in Denmark and Hamburg in Germany. I crossed the border into The Netherlands and enjoyed the easy terrain as I followed the Dutch coast all the way to Den Hague. I spent a few weeks visiting friends before continuing my journey from Brugge in Belgium. All that was left to do was cross the English Channel and pedal north through Cambridge and Lincoln, Across Yorkshire and to my finish point at Bolton Abbey in the Yorkshire Dales.



What did you find easy and challenging

I often found certain parts of the trip to be easier or harder than I expected. For example relying on a tent as my main source of shelter for the entire trip was much more enjoyable than I thought it would be. In fact, after spending a few nights in a hostel to get clean and enjoy a soft bed I would always be relieved to leave and look forward to my own space and the peace and quiet of a secluded camping spot. Navigation was also less of a problem than anticipated. Even if I did get lost I found people to be far nicer than others would have you believe. However, I have to admit that cycling into constant, heavy rain is not something I grew accustomed to. I only experienced two periods of extended foul weather whilst I was cycling but both were truly miserable periods of the trip.

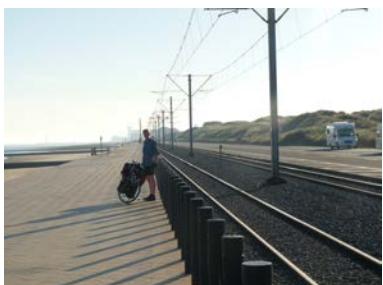


What impact has your gap experience had?



Personally I feel a much more motivated and confident person and as soon as I was home I had an itch to do things, get on with life and enjoy it as much as I possibly could. I have been able to improve my geographical skills after experiencing how the physical and human sides of the subject interact as I rode through the mountains and wilderness of Norway to the open expanses and urban developments of The Netherlands. This trip has increased my desire to go to university and start my degree so I can understand the amazing geological processes I have experienced.

The effects and experiences of this whole process will be with me for the rest of my life. I now know I can stay safe, cook my own food, meet my own deadlines and generally keep myself alive after having to do this every day of my trip. This is good to know as I head off to university. My outlook on what I will do after university has also changed. I thought this trip would satisfy my need for an adventure but now that I am home I feel as though it has increased it, I hope this is just the first of many adventures for me.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The main unexpected outcome of this trip was the sheer number and variety of people I met along the way. Other travellers from anywhere in the world, local residents happy to show me a short cut or asking about my trip, a Norwegian musician come to warn me about the gig that was going to go on all night just across the field from where I had chosen to camp that would keep me up all night, the list could go on. Coming out of a sheltered and realising that there is so much to the world is another positive impact that could be added to the list above.

What lessons did you learn?

I learnt a lot of lessons on my trip, most of them the hard way. When faced with a problem I have found it is much better to put faith in my own ingenuity. I had to solve many problems during the trip so, when I think about it, I'm quite good at solving problems and there isn't really much point in worrying. My least favourite moment was just after I left Gothenburg. I was already in a bad mood after saying goodbye to the friends I had made in the city but then, 80km south of Gothenburg the strain caused by cycling thousands of kilometres finally caught up with me. I was so tired that I crumbled and hoped on a train to Copenhagen. I felt like I had failed at the time but I knew I was tired and needed some rest, the only way to do so and be able to make it to The Netherlands on time was to do what I did. Next time I plan an adventure I will know to plan for rests.



What is your advice for anyone thinking of taking a gap



experience?

Before you do something whilst travelling, stop to think, weigh up the risks, make plans for what you are going to do and, if it's still too dangerous try and find an alternative. Don't be too hasty to shy away from things that scare you. And by scary I mean talking to people, trying new things and putting up with a challenge. Also, definitely keep a blog and journal and make some effort with them so that you'll be able to keep great memories and allow people to get an idea of what you have done.