

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Emma Hulland

Dates	28 th January – 26 th May 2015
Locations	Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong and China
Activities	Volunteering and independent travelling



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

I had never considered a gap year until my geography teacher recommended I apply for this Scholarship as geography was my passion and a gap year would be a great opportunity to build on it. Applying happens to be one of the best decisions I've ever made.

At the induction day I realised just how much of an achievement it was to have got the Scholarship. From then on I started looking into gap year projects and decided I wanted to help others by volunteering overseas. I also wanted to use the experience to help determine what career and which field of geography to enter into.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I spent 5 weeks in Fiji on a volunteering project with Think Pacific teaching children lessons and sports and building a health clinic. I then spent almost 3 months travelling independently through New Zealand and Australia followed by 10 days in Hong Kong and China.



What did you find easy and challenging?

The planning of, worrying about and lead up to my gap year were the hardest parts. I hated saying goodbye, especially to my family. I was more nervous than excited at this point as I'm not too keen on flying and I was about to embark on my longest flight to date.

I found the first few nights in Fiji challenging as I was missing my family plus had a bit of culture shock and jetlag. However, I overcame this quickly and in the end I loved every moment in Fiji. The only other challenging things were how long it took to book everything for Australia and the weight of my bag, which I struggled to carry.



Overall I found the whole experience relatively easy and enjoyable. Travelling around was simple by bus and I always made the most of the activities and opportunities in each place I went to.



What impact has your gap experience had on you?

My geographical skills and knowledge have developed a lot due to my gap year experience. It was so interesting comparing the social, economic and environmental factors of the countries I visited.

My personal confidence has developed a huge amount, I feel so much more able to enquire, communicate and learn. I feel a very much stronger and more able person. Other skills such as teamwork, using my initiative, planning and communicating have improved considerably. This is especially due to the Think Pacific experience.

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The highlight of my gap year experience would definitely be the Think Pacific project. I made so many friends and had my own Fijian family. I enjoyed every activity from Hophop and cava sessions to lessons in school and dancing around a campfire in a thunderstorm. It really made me realise what was important and showed me that you can live happily with a basic lifestyle. I still miss my life there.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

My main unexpected outcome was that I did not plan to go to Australia. I am so glad I did this, although it didn't feel real when I arrived in Brisbane. Another unexpected outcome is that I didn't realise how much I would enjoy travelling: it was completely stress-free. I've still got my travelling blues.

What do you wish you had known?

I wish I'd known that I didn't need to pack as much as I did. My bag was too heavy for me and you can buy everything you need. I realise now that I was naïve about choosing my insurance company. It was expensive and the excess was quite high and unfortunately it didn't quite cover me for the treatment for my infected bites. I also wish that I could have extended my trip; 4 months wasn't long enough.

What do you plan to do next?

My main intention now is to gain a first in my geography degree. This experience has definitely made me realise that in the future I want a career in human geography. I know that my gap experience will look excellent on my CV and will hopefully help me to stand out when I start applying for jobs. I would also like to go back to Fiji and perhaps become a volunteer leader on one of the projects.

What is your advice for others considering a gap experience?

1. Don't pack too much: you simply don't need that many clothes, you can get clothes anywhere.
2. If you do have a medical issue, however small, give yourself time to get seen to and recover, even if you have to miss a bus or ditch your friends. I should have gone to the doctor about my bites weeks before I did, I just thought it would all go away then I woke up one morning and couldn't walk. Thankfully I went just in time; or it could have been very serious. Never take risks with your health.
3. Spend all the money you have and do everything you want to do. My Dad told me before I went that there is no point going travelling and then missing out on activities to save money: those are the things you will always regret not doing. I followed his advice and did everything I wanted and more.