

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Shannon Salisbury

Dates	November 2010 and January 2011 to May 2011
Locations	Morocco, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Thailand
Activities	Volunteer in an orphanage and independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I wanted to do a gap experience to learn more about different cultures, try new experiences and meet new people. I was hoping to gain self-confidence and more independence. I also wanted to spend time working or volunteering with children as teaching is a possible career choice for me.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I spent three weeks volunteering in Marrakech, Morocco in November. The projects I took part in were at various orphanages and schools in the city, for children aged 0-14. Along with the other volunteers I travelled to Essaouira for a weekend, and took part in a camel trek into the Sahara desert. I was lucky enough to be in Morocco for the religious holiday of Ede. It was interesting to learn about the Moroccan traditions. I enjoyed my time in Morocco, however I did find working with the children challenging at times due to the language barrier, but it was still very rewarding. Volunteering in a group has improved my ability to work as a part of a team because we had to plan and carry out activities together.



I returned to the UK for a month then in January I travelled to Hong Kong with a friend for a week. As we stayed with my friend's family, I was able to learn a lot about their culture. Chinese New Year was beginning so to celebrate we went along to a traditional large family meal which was a great experience.

We then flew to Sydney, Australia and met two more friends. Our first day was 'Australia Day' which was a great introduction to the country. We then travelled for five weeks up the East Coast to Cairns.



From Australia we went on to New Zealand and did the 'Kiwi Experience' bus for four weeks. We were expecting to start the bus in Christchurch but due to the earthquake a few days before it had to be skipped. Although the news of the earthquake was devastating; it was a good opportunity to experience a disaster case study first hand. For the rest of my time in New Zealand I kept a diary of the news about the earthquake.

We travelled through the South Island first. We took a day trip on a boat through Milford Sound where we saw some incredible waterfalls and rock formations. On the North Island we visited



Rotorua was an interesting place to stay in as it is renowned for its geothermal activity. We visited various geysers and hot mud pools and learnt about how they were formed. New Zealand was one of the most geographically exciting places I have visited, and travelling with the Kiwi Experience bus meant we stopped at a lot of places that we wouldn't have if we were travelling alone. The drivers were very informative. Some of the sights we saw were the 'Pancake Rocks' at Punakaiki, the 'Mirror Lakes' near Milford Sound and the Franz Joseph glacier which was breath-taking. After New Zealand we flew to Fiji and did a week long 'island hopping' trip with the local company 'Awesome Adventures'. We visited two islands – Wailealea and Long Beach. They were the most beautiful places I've ever visited; we got to experience Fijian culture, and took part in traditional dancing and singing. Singapore was our next stop; staying there for just over a week. I then travelled to Kuala Lumpur by myself (as I had accidentally bought a different bus ticket to my friends). However being able to successfully get from Singapore into Malaysia alone gave me more self-confidence. Travelling alone taught me a great deal about making decisions and dealing with the consequences.



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The highlight of my whole gap experience was our trip to the Great Barrier Reef; we scuba-dived and snorkelled for a day, as well as visiting the National Park Green Island. I'm interested in marine life and am going to study a degree in Marine Geography so the diving was an amazing experience; it definitely helped to see and touch the underwater environment rather than just looking at a photograph in a book.



What impact has your gap experience had?

My gap year has confirmed my choice of degree at university; I am looking forward to learning more about the places I have visited. It has also helped me decide that working with children is what I want to pursue as a career, and that teaching geography is an option. After university I plan to take another year out to work and travel abroad.

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

Take more money than you think you need. I found that my budget was quite tight, and that I spent money on activities more often than I expected. I would really recommend keeping a diary. They are brilliant to look through once you are home. Also I found keeping a blog a great way for family and friends at home to keep up with your travels. Take all the opportunities you are given and have the most amazing time.

