

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Jake Shah

Dates	March to April 2012, May 2012, August 2012
Locations	Austria, Turkey, Cuba
Activities	Independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

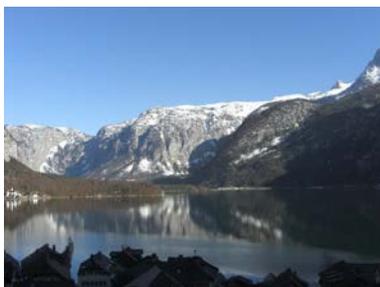
I had always wanted to be able to go on a gap year. I wanted to put the places we were learning about in the classroom into context. I wanted to delve deeper into human and physical geography and discover for myself how people live their day-to-day lives in contrasting cultures to ours.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I felt that 3 trips of around a month long would increase the amount of time I had to reflect on my experiences. The three trips were stepping-stones, with the first being the least challenging and the last being the most. I travelled to Austria, Turkey and Cuba. I started in Austria in March and travelled almost the entire country taking in all but three of Austria's 9 Bundeslander (Provinces) This allowed me to see a wide variety of different cultural. Highlights for me were, Rossfeld where I saw a functioning alpine climate and Vienna and Munich where I was able to see the contrast between urban life in Austria/Germany and the hugely contrasting outlook of the rural communities of Steiermark.



I then moved on to Turkey, where I spent just over two weeks travelling down from Istanbul, using various modes of transport and ending in Bodrum, on the Southern part of Turkey's west coast. I was interested in exploring the vast and beautiful natural scenery as well as its culture. Spending time in Istanbul was an eye opening way to see two cultures side by side. I was overawed by the magnificence of the several World Heritage sites that I saw, including Ephesus and the Hieropolis at Pamukkale. It was a truly wonderful experience.



Finally, the pinnacle of my trip led me to a place that since starting to learn Spanish at secondary school, had me fascinated for as long as I can remember. I was determined to try and see for myself, with my own eyes, what really keeps Cuba going. I was in Havana for a total of 8 days and travelled to Varadero, Cienfuegos, Trinidad, Santa Clara and Camaguey. In Havana, I was in a casa particular in Centro Habana, the most densely populated district in Cuba. This 2 mile sq. area home to over 150,000 people gave me a chance to see the lives of Cuban people first hand. It was eye opening and at times difficult, to see how hard they needed to



fight to stay alive and carve out the most meagre of existences. At times it struck me quite hard, as I'm less than used to seeing this sort of relative poverty. However, despite this it remained a wonderful experience and has changed my perception on many aspects of life. It was a very positive and overall, enriching experience.

What impact has your gap experience had?

Personally, it has helped me develop greatly, and I feel has given me confidence to go on and succeed in a university environment. My passion for travel has increased. I became more motivated as the challenge of the trips increased and culminated in almost 3 weeks in Cuba. This drove me on and it became a challenge that I relished, where I previously may not have. I believe also, that due to the nature of me travelling alone, that I have become far more self-sufficient and competent in making important decisions, managing my time and above all staying safe.



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The whole trip was a highlight from start to finish. The variety of people I met on my travels were all wonderful and helped me in making my trip more enriching and valuable. I feel that often it's the people that you meet that can shape your trip and have a profound effect on you.



What do you plan to do next?

The immediate future is very exciting for me. I am delighted to be studying Geography and Politics at Keele University. I would very much like to pursue a career in journalism, specifically in the fields of travel or motoring as these are where my main passions and interests lie.

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

Go out there and be yourself. You will enjoy it much more, be able to laugh and meet wonderful people. Always think before you do something that you wouldn't do back home. Use your head and ask yourself whether it's worth the risk. I'm not saying that you shouldn't have fun, only that you should minimise the danger you put yourself in where you have control over it. Finally, be proactive. Seek out new paths and don't be afraid to go off the often well beaten tourist trails to interact with local people. A little bit of the local language can go a long way. It makes them feel more comfortable with you and will open up many things to you that wouldn't be available to the average package holiday tourist. And obviously, enjoy yourself. Have fun and stay safe!