

Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

● Arif Hussain

Dates	Aug – Sep 2014 and July – August 2015
Locations	Tanzania and China
Activities	Volunteering, organised tours, hiking, language course.



Why did you want to undertake a gap experience?

I had a variety of aims and objectives for my time in Tanzania and China. I had the desire to experience a different culture and live like a local. I wanted to learn Mandarin and learn more about China's and Tanzania's development. By volunteering with locals my aim was to gain primary research which I would be able to use as case studies for university, as well as develop my travel writing skills. It was important that I did this as I wanted to use my experiences to gain more experience for a career in journalism.

During my experience I also wanted to gain confidence both generally and travel confidence through traveling on my own and meeting new people from around the world. My final aim was to develop skills in areas such as planning and organising as I knew that these are fundamental skills needed for first-time travellers.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I first went to Tanzania for just over a month with a tour provider. I spent 2 weeks in Moshi volunteering on a conservation project where I was mainly planting trees. During this time I was also able to get more of an insight into the Tanzanian culture, for instance by staying in a Masai village where I found out that a chief can marry 10 wives, depending on how many cows he has!

I was then lucky enough to be to summit Africa's highest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro, which, at 5,895m was an impressive achievement! I also had the opportunity to undertake some more touristy activities, such as going on a safari to the Ngorongoro crater, for instance.

I then spent about a week in Zanzibar, which included 5 days of volunteering in a turtle reserve. This, as well as the volunteering in Moshi, gave me a fascinating insight into the environmental problems the locals face as deforestation has been increasing in Tanzania, especially in Zanzibar where the mangroves are being cut down to make way for luxury hotels.





For the second part of my gap experience I spent 5 weeks in Beijing completing a Mandarin language course. I stayed in a student flat and used my free time to see the sights such as the Summer Palace and other popular sights.

What did you find easy and challenging?

I find that traveling alone, you do have to be a lot more focused: for example, I had to make sure my timings were well thought out so I didn't miss buses and ferries etc. Budgeting was a significant challenge, especially trying to use the different currencies, for instance the Tanzania Shillings, as I had to carry a large amount of notes which amounted to 200,000 Shillings!

Compared to my previous experience in South America it was significantly easier to communicate with locals in Tanzania as English was widely spoken as Tanzania was a former British colony! The biggest challenge in China was communicating with local people: it is next to impossible to speak to someone in English unless you are in a place that caters for tourists. This was very challenging; however, as I was learning Mandarin I was able to know some words in Chinese.

What impact has your gap experience had on you?

My trip has been very useful for my geographical skills and knowledge and I think has given me an added advantage at university. Living and working with locals has allowed me to see how Tanzania is developing; For example the rural Masai villages have started to accept modern technology for lighting such as solar panels and the use of smartphones is widespread around Tanzania.

I believe that motivation and personal skills have increased during my time away. My confidence has certainly increased which was helped by being part of a large group in Tanzania, then moving on to travelling independently. Teamwork is also a skill I was able to develop during my time in Tanzania as my time volunteering was largely group work which involved skills such as communication to ensure that the planting of trees went efficiently.

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The highlight of my experience in Tanzania will always be climbing to Africa's highest point, Mt Kilimanjaro! Also, meeting so many people from around the world was a great experience and it is really nice to still keep in contact with them. The island of Zanzibar will also always one of the best highlights particularly Chumbe Island near to it.

The highlight of my time in China was developing my Mandarin. While in my five weeks of study I have not become fluent as this is not possible, I have been able to become knowledgeable in the phonetics and many tones. Similarly, I am able to say a few words and sentences in Mandarin. As I plan to take some lessons at my University I believe my trip has given me an advantage.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The only unexpected outcome was that I was given independent classes in China which should have cost more than group classes, for free! I think the reason was because I came at a time when there were no other beginners to join me. This was a very positive outcome



as I was able to learn very quickly as the focus was on me.

What do you wish you had known?

I think my trip went very well in China with very few problems. However, I wish I'd known about the parade and the rehearsal for VE Day which caused many places to be closed in Beijing.

I don't think there is anything I could have known previously that would have changed my experience significantly. However, I think there are always small aspects that I would have liked to have known, for example the eight hour coach ride which I only chose because it was cheap: next time I would find an alternative means of transport!

What do you plan to do next?

I plan to do a BA Geography degree at Keele University. I then hope to do a Masters in a London university followed by a PhD. I will continue traveling and also writing, however I will also keep an open mind about my chosen career path.

What is your advice for others considering a gap experience?

1. Planning and organising are very important if you want to achieve your goals. Also, it allows you to do some research on events and places to go before you get there.
2. Despite my piece of advice above of would also suggest that you add some spontaneity to your experience as this will allow you to experience new things that may not have researched or planned online.
3. Finally, you may have the urge to over-pack and take as many 'essential' items as possible. However it often is the case that some items are really not needed.

