

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Denzel Johnson

Dates	October 2011 to May 2012
Locations	Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Columbia, Panama, Costa Rica, USA, Spain
Activities	Independent travel, language course, work, volunteer, hiking, climbing, geology expedition



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I wanted a different experience and to try learning things in a new way. I wanted a break from the formal way of learning in a classroom.

I was interested in travelling independently in a different part of the World, while learning a new language to help experience and document cultures. I wanted to live with different groups of people with different beliefs and also volunteer with small local projects. I wanted to travel through Patagonia all the way to the most southern city in the world. All of that would give me a broader view on the people and challenges that shape the world, and in turn that experience would support me as a geography undergraduate.



What did you do on your gap experience?

I spent 9 months travelling between 9 countries. I spent 7 months in South America with a month in each country. I started off in Quito, Ecuador and spent two weeks learning Spanish and working with a University before moving south to Salinas de Guaranda, a small village introduced to me by the University. Salinas offered me a chance to live and work in a small village that was the countries best example of community run development. At the time, I also began writing for Raxa Collective, a community collaboration & conservation team based in India but with links in Latin America. From Salinas I went back to Quito and then to visit the Oriente. I then went to Cuenca where I met a great industry in Ecuador's most attractive city. After getting myself a Panama Hat, I moved onto Peru and visited one of the Inca ruins in Kuelap. After Kuelap, I went onto Lima where I stayed for a few weeks, getting involved in a volunteer project with Peru's Children Charity. The time I spent with PCC opened my eyes to some of the inequalities. I then headed south and visited Cusco and Machu Picchu. I went to a few more cities, then crossed the border to Bolivia, visited Lake Titicaca, and went to La Paz where I spent Christmas and New Year. I worked in a bar in La Paz, to save myself some money then moved on south to the Bolivian outback, then across the border to Argentina. While in Bolivia, I'd managed to buy a tent which would be essential for a month of my journey





across the border.

Argentina came and I headed to some of the northern cities Salta first and then Mendoza, but with the intention to keep moving south trying to get to Patagonia, once in Patagonia I spent an amazing month living out of a tent and hiking around some of the continents best national parks, including Torres Del Paine in Chile. I eventually reached the most southern city, Ushuaia. From there I went to Buenos Aires, to learn the Tango. I travelled back north again through Bolivia to Ecuador. I decided to go to Colombia and spent a few weeks there. From there, I flew to Panama and then Costa Rica. I then flew to Colorado in the USA where I spent two weeks climbing and on a Geology expedition in Utah and Colorado. I then went onto Chicago, and travelled south in Illinois. I flew south to the Live music capital of the world in Austin, Texas and spent a few weeks there seeing the music scene before moving across through Texas, Louisiana, Georgia and Virginia where I spent some time in Charlottesville. From there I visited Washington DC and New York city for a few weeks, before visiting Boston and flying home.

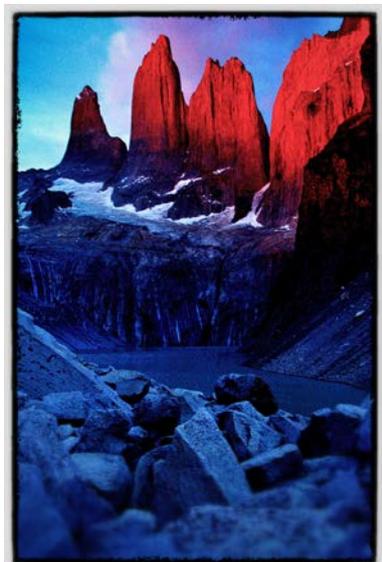


Once I got back home, I managed to find another job which would let me travel, and that was in Spain, I went and worked in Spain while improving my Spanish.



What did you find easy and challenging

Organising all my pre-departure plans was a challenge, the only reason being so much was involved, the amount of detail especially for areas where I had allowed for some flexibility. It was impossible to know how safety standards would be with different charities, and so this meant I had to use my better judgement once I was there. Everything after my departure was easy enough and seemed to flow naturally, Latin America allowed me to relax and just enjoy a free flowing schedule, especially since nothing ever went as planned and that took getting used to but was an easy process. Speaking Spanish in Argentina and Chile took a bit of getting used to and that was difficult for a while



What impact has your gap experience had?

Before leaving for my gap year, I had considered myself a human geographer, but being out and moving between different landscapes in the slowest way possible, meant I grew to appreciate the other side of geography. On top of that, I know South America like the back of my hand, it's a place I learnt the simple things about life.

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

Without a doubt, living out of a tent in Patagonia for a month, I was waking up and crawling out into my favourite part of the world. I found myself really appreciating the physical side of



Geography, hiking every day, climbing mountains just to sit there for breakfast and watch the sunrise. Not to mention going weeks without needing to speak English.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

Colombia was unexpected, to start with at the beginning of my trip I had formed an opinion thinking Colombia is a dangerous place but it was the opposite for me and Colombia easily became my favourite Latin country. I wasn't expecting such a huge cultural difference between Latin America and the USA. There was a difference between South America and Central America and shockingly even across the US. I don't think anyone can really understand how big the US is until they actually get there, sit on a bus through the different states.



How do you think this experience will help you now?

I am a lot more confident and willing to take risks. I'm more open to other people and their values, and a lot more patient!

What you are intending to do as result of this gap experience

I have a series of photographs that show some of the brilliant landscapes and people in the Americas', so I want to present a gallery showing some of those photographs. I had an amazing experience and it needs to be shared.



What do you plan to do next?

I'm starting my Geography degree at The University of Plymouth and in between University and holidays I plan to travel more and improve my Spanish. I have a job offer again for next summer in Spain, but also a planned trip to Asia and Cuba. After my degree I would like to go back to Latin America, to live and work for a while. At the moment I want to be involved at the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

All photographs ©Denzel Johnson