

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Emily Marsh

Dates	October 2012 to April 2013
Locations	Vietnam, India, Indonesia and Malaysia
Activities	Independent travel, volunteering with children in the slums and teaching



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I hoped to make any kind of difference to families in less developed countries, experience life in a different culture and personally become a stronger person.

What did you do on your gap experience?

My first stop was Vietnam in October for 11 weeks. Feelings of nerves and excitement were buzzing through my mind, a large rucksack on my back and the beginning of my adventure. I couldn't keep my eyes off the car window. I couldn't believe that I was really there. Mopeds, car horns, colourful market stools and bright blue skies flooded my brain. My adventure had begun! The first two weeks were a struggle; with little food and a whole new culture to grasp. As the days passed I could feel myself settling in. I kept myself busy by reading, drawing, teaching English and meeting my new friends. After the incredible experience of a Vietnamese wedding, I had landed myself with an English teaching job. Trips to Ho Chi Minh, the bike rides, and the night walks along the beach were definitely highlights of my time there.

My second stop was to India in January for 8 weeks. The excitement and nerves were building rapidly yet again upon my arrival. The coldness of the city instantly shocked me- why was I not prepared for that?! Five layers of clothes to bed and late night card games in our duvets kept our minds off of the freezing air. The first day in the slums felt unreal! Weekend trips to Jaipur, Udaipur, Agra, Rishikesh and Delhi gave me a real taste of the true India. Volunteering in schools, orphanages and hospitals changed my outlook on life and made me appreciate everything that I own. India changed me in a way that I will never forget. My Indian adventure was over quickly, however the memories will last a lifetime.

My third stop was Nepal in March for two weeks. Hardly any water and no electricity; I felt so ready for the challenge. A few days of sight-seeing in the fascinating cultural history of Kathmandu, were followed by a move to the monastery high up in the valley. I never expected such an incredibly beautiful building. Relaxation and tranquillity was surrounded by the loud gongs and prayers of the monks. I loved the boys, so cheeky yet still inspiring how they spend their lives so isolated from the world. Living without





electricity and water was surprisingly easy. However, as the feeling of homesickness began to whirl in my brain, I felt the need for contact with home. Mountain walks, trips to Thamel and Boudha Stoopah were wonderful. I learnt how to meditate and how to feel total relaxation of the brain - a truly unforgettable experience.

My fourth stop was Malaysia for two weeks. From the basic Nepali lifestyle to the luxury of a westernised Malaysian family felt like a kind of reverse culture shock. I worked in an international school, which was not exactly what I had expected. The manic schedule kept me busy, with just about enough time to explore the island, trekking through the jungle, walking around the historical George Town or tasting the most delicious food I have ever eaten.

My fifth stop was Indonesia at the end of March for four weeks. I began my trip to Bali with a home stay high up in the beautiful mountain village of Bedugul; surrounded by waterfalls, rainforests, lakes and wildlife. Bali is the most beautiful country I have ever been to. I met backpackers from all over the world with so many stories to tell.

What did you find easy and challenging

There were not many easy things about travelling; every challenge was a new experience that I could never have prepared myself for. However, meeting the most incredible and inspiring people along my way was by far the easiest thing. The kindness of total strangers in the same situations helped me to feel at home wherever I went. I must stress that my time in Asia was not as picture perfect or as problem free as it may sound. The emotional strain that it caused could really get to me.

What impact has your gap experience had?

The impact of my experience was much larger than I had originally thought. Geographically my skills had improved as my knowledge of different countries increased and my navigational skills improved greatly. On a personal level, my confidence, motivation, initiative and independence rose enormously. Upon my arrival back in England, I realised that there were also a lot of small things that had impacted my behaviour: from my mannerisms, to the life changing lessons that I have imprinted in my brain. These things have come together to turn me into a strong, independent young woman with a desire to explore the world. I am proud to say that I have changed for the better and I am so much happier with my life!

What do you wish you had known?

Before leaving for my gap experience, I wish I had known that there were not as many things to worry about as I had originally thought. I wish I had known that I would need to learn more Vietnamese, as very few spoke English in the area that I lived in.



Despite these, I would not have changed anything about my trip as each challenge that came was overcome by the knowledge and confidence that I had gained.

What was the highlight of your gap experience?

Vietnamese weddings, climbing to the mountain tops, the Taj Mahal, teaching such inspiring children, meditating in a monastery surrounded by monks, relaxing on a deserted island in Malaysia, standing under waterfalls in Bali and watching the sun set over the ocean whilst surrounded by my backpacker friends. During the times of the beaches is where the most unexpected outcome of my trip arose- facing and defeating my fear of water.

What do you plan to do next?

The trip has helped me to become independent and motivated to start a geography course at Queen Mary University London. Upon the completion of my degree, I plan to continue my travels and see where the world will take me. I hope to one day settle down in Canada and continue to help those unfortunate enough to live in terrible conditions across the globe.



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

Don't worry - every problem has a solution, no matter how big or small. Always take extra underwear. It's small enough to squeeze into your backpack and saves on washing if you have extra! (Especially handy if monks steal it, like mine!). Embrace all new experiences. You only live once, don't be afraid and give everything a go.