

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Tara Wales

Dates	November 2012 to February 2013
Locations	Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and New Zealand
Activities	Volunteer in centre for street children and school, trekking and independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I was keen to get out explore and experience things for myself, rather than learning about geographical problems in a classroom. I hoped that these first hand experiences would be able to link into my study at university. I wanted to further my personal development. This was also a chance for me to help others that are less fortunate than me.

What did you do on your gap experience?

The first country I visited was Ethiopia. I stayed in Addis Ababa for two weeks and volunteered with a company called Retrak which helped to reintegrate children back into their families or help them to get a job in the city (if they were old enough). I was based in a drop-in centre for these street children. I was involved in helping with their English, Maths and Science.

For my last week in Ethiopia I trekked in the Ethiopian Highlands with a company called Tesfa (Tourism in Ethiopia for a Sustainable Future Alternative). This was a real eye opener seeing people living on natural resources and subsistence farming. We trekked for about 7-10 hours each day and stayed in local villages (consisting of about 5 mud huts with no water or electricity). The families we stayed with were very interested about life in England and I had many lessons in the local language Amharic. Unfortunately, a member of our team got ill and the trip had to be cut short to four days as opposed to five. I spent this extra day and the free day before my flight back to Addis Ababa exploring Lalibela. This was a local town that had many fascinating rock-hewn churches within it. I then flew to Zimbabwe where I spent most of my time in a small town called Kadoma. Here I volunteered as a teaching assistant at a nursery for one week. I volunteered for the next two weeks in a primary school. During the weekends I helped in an orphanage, painting and decorating and organising their library. I also got to explore the country a little.



My next stop was South Africa where I visited Soweto with a guide. Half of it was poor shanty towns and the other half was very developed consisting of large prospering malls and mansions. I found this place extremely interesting as there was such a contrast within such a small proximity.

After spending a great two weeks with my father in Mozambique I



travelled to New Zealand. During the first week, I inquired about the devastation caused by Christchurch's earthquakes and met with the head of civil defence in Christchurch, Mr John Lovell, and took a tour of the city with a local company. I was shocked by how Christchurch had been affected. Unfortunately most of the city was built on marsh land/swamps. This caused a lot of liquefaction throughout the city, even with aftershocks. Most of the citizens had to moved out of the city (about 10, 000 homes reported needing demolition). Most surprisingly was how badly a MEDC can be affected by natural disasters.

For the remaining four weeks of my gap year, I travelled the rest of New Zealand with a company called Stray Travel. I met amazing people who I am still in contact with. This is where I think I learnt the most about myself. It was fascinating to learn about the Maori culture and I was lucky enough to be allowed to stay overnight with a family.

What did you find easy and challenging

New Zealand was a country that I knew would be easy to travel through but I didn't expect it to be as easy and stress-free as it was. The local people were incredibly friendly and made it an enjoyable experience.

On the other hand, Ethiopia was the most challenging country in many aspects. I felt that the local people were not used to a young tourist in their midst and because of this I felt very uncomfortable. In addition, transport through the city was challenging. Although public transport was available, the area I was volunteering in was not safe enough to travel on local transport alone. However, to overcome this I used the same taxi throughout my stay.



What impact has your gap experience had?

My stay in Christchurch had a big impact on my understanding of geography. I was able to realise the full impact of the devastation caused by natural disasters. Speaking to local people as well as Mr Lovell was an insight to how the local area is affected and what strategies are put in place to prevent large scale damage next time. In Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, a first-hand experience was gained in how LEDC's suffer from their own problems such as poverty, overcrowding, a lack of a substantial health care system, few resources and the effects of AIDS.



What was the highlight of your gap experience?

The highlight of my gap experience was New Zealand. I had the most fun there and met so many interesting people with similar interests. Moreover, the country has a little bit of everything from beaches to glaciers, which I found mind blowing.



Were there any unexpected outcomes?

I had not expected the enormous personal gain I would experience from my trip. Whilst travelling I felt that I became a new person filled with confidence, independence, an ability to make my own decisions, working on my own initiative, as well as working in a team. Although I was a motivated person beforehand, I think that after my gap experience, I was more motivated in certain aspects such as volunteer work and focus for my new career choice; I have decided I want to be a part of disaster management.

On the other hand, the trek I did in Ethiopia was filled with unexpected outcomes. It was a lot harder than anticipated. The trekking was much more physically challenging than I had predicted. Moreover, when a team member became ill the difficulties of being in the middle of nowhere with scant medical facilities was a real challenge.

What do you wish you had known?

If I were to do this again, I would have gone to New Zealand first and Ethiopia last, allowing for self-development first. In Ethiopia I definitely experienced culture shock; it was a new world to me. I think that after New Zealand, I would have felt differently and been able to overcome problems more easily.



What do you plan to do next?

My gap year experience has helped me to see that I never want to stop travelling. I also would like to volunteer more in the future, and I am quite keen to volunteer with Retrak's base in Uganda. Having this gap experience as made me realise that I can do it alone next time. RGS gave me the safety net that I needed for the first time planning my travels and helped me to think of things that I definitely would have forgotten about.

Leeds University is where I will spend the next three years studying geography. I hope to do a Masters in disaster management afterwards. I have also arranged to be a part of my sixth form's next open day with the geography department.

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

Take a head torch, especially if you are going to any developing countries. In addition, I would recommend going for as long as you can. I don't know a single traveller who didn't wish that they had gone away for longer. Lastly, I would suggest that you stay as open minded and positive as you can. When travelling there will be many unexpected things thrown your way and to make sure you have the best experience. The only thing that will work is for you to be totally open to new ideas and experiences.