

My Gap Year

To Gap Year, Or Not To Gap Year

Whether or not to take a “Gap Year” is a question that runs through the mind of every sixth form student. Whilst some find it easier to answer than others, it is no doubt an important one, and hence should require some thought.

By lower sixth I had made up mind, ‘a gap year is not for me’ I had decided. As whoever is reading this can easily decipher, I changed my mind, and to this day I consider the sequence of events that led to my decision to take a gap year as somewhat serendipitous. Long story short, as an aspiring medical student I failed to reach my desired grades, and hence had to reconsider my options; I am now on course to study biochemistry at Edinburgh.

I chose to take a year off, in order to have more time to decide what I wanted to pursue both at university and as a career. This turned out to be one of the best decisions I have ever made, and I cannot recommend taking a gap year more. A well-planned gap year can without doubt teach vital lessons about ourselves, and the world around us.

Moreover, not heading straight from upper sixth to university can allow students to broaden their horizons, mature and relax, which I believe better equips us to handle the pressures of studying at the next academic level, university.

My Gap Year plan

Having decided to take a gap year, I then had to choose what I should do in order to make the most of my time. I had to both reapply and retake, which was a slight inconvenience as it meant I had to pack most of my gap year into 6 months, in order to better my personal statement and provide time to study.

Planning a gap year is no easy feat, and although some of my earlier ideas proved to be difficult to facilitate logistically, I managed to shape my travels over 2 main events. The first would provide with a youth leadership at sea award and included a 2-week sailing trip with the Jubilee Sailing Trust, JST. The second was 10 weeks volunteering in Madagascar (which included a mixture of forest and marine conservation, teaching and construction). This allowed me to be finished by December, so that I had time to reapply.

With regard to planning time abroad, the best advice I can give is to start early. I used a Gap Year organisation called ‘The Leap’ in order to help me plan my travels, and another helpful organisation is the International Volunteer Headquarter (IVHQ); both of which can help organise time abroad by offering many different travel and volunteering programs around the world.

Part One- The JST trip

Before I first cast my eyes on the ‘Lord Nelson’ in all her glory, I did not know what to expect from the trip. I hadn’t really sailed before and I knew I was to buddy someone who was not able-bodied, yet my prior experiences with disability were somewhat limited. All I knew was that my mother had completed a trip onboard what was soon to become the rival, “Tenacious”, and said with confidence that it was one of the best experiences of her life. I soon decided this was an opportunity I did not want to miss.

Stepping onboard my first tall ship I remember a feeling of trepidation, however this soon dissipated as I met the crew who were to become my friends and sea mates. I also met my buddy Edu who as befits his character was late, and whilst we were worrying about his whereabouts, arrived wondering what all the fuss was about. Edu initially suffered from severe bouts of seasickness but as he grew accustomed to life onboard, his bubbly, vivacious character soon shined through.

We spent a lot of time together and being his buddy came with its own set of challenges. Of course for someone with a degenerative condition similar to that of Multiple Sclerosis, I quickly learnt that everyday activities which I take for granted are not so easy for Edu, getting dressed or getting into bed to name but a few. However Edu did not hesitate to show that he was never afraid to crack a joke and his get-up-and-go attitude was truly inspiring.

Having never sailed before, learning the ropes (literally and metaphorically) was tricky and took some time, the sheer amount of technical terms onboard a tall ship does not make this task an easy one. However once I knew my Flemish horses from my futtocks shrouds learning to sail was a delight, and I found my niche 150ft high up on the masts; whether it was harbor stows, or sea stows any opportunity to climb up and gaze at the open ocean from up on the mast was one I seized swiftly. One of many cherished memories includes on the 8th day when we spotted what we thought were a few dolphins, however once we had climbed up to the topgallant to get a better view, it turned out to be an 18 strong pod, including a young calf. Unfortunately the wind for much of the trip was somewhat unkind to us, and bar a few special moments, we could rarely accommodate Nelly's full sails, and often had to motor, the drone of which sounds not dissimilar to a low flying aircraft.

I was also lucky enough to be accompanied by some of the most spectacular people I had ever met, many of whom had equally spectacular lives and stories. From Dylan who had made it through the Bay of Biscay in a wheelchair: to Mislav who was a seasoned veteran onboard Nelly and Tenacious: to Simon who didn't even break a sweat when cooking 3 meals a day for over 50 people. Edu had not even left his home region of Catalonia before, and here he was on a 2-week sailing voyage with nobody he knew prior to leaving Cadiz; a great testament to his determined nature.

Aside from performing our duties as crew members by helping to sail Nelly, cleaning the ship during Happy hour (everyone's favourite time of day), and looking after Edu: My time was spent largely with my watch group, 'Aft Starboard' during our watches. Some watches were found at nicer times of the day than others; however waking up at 2 AM for a four-hour watch soon became second nature. These night watches did however have their benefits; there are few sights more spectacular than the night's sky at open sea. Our watch leader Abi was inspirational, and though she did not have the use of her hands, this was not going to stop her from sailing.

My time onboard 'Nelly' was special. Not only did it completely reshape my opinions on disability, and demonstrate the inspiring nature of many of those less physically fortunate than myself; whilst onboard I feel I developed a greater sense of awareness, understanding and as it says on the tin, improved my leadership skills.



The whole crew



My watch, Edu is on the bottom right



Nelly At Full Sail

Part 2- Madagascar

In my opinion, my experiences in Madagascar provided the bulk of my gap year both in terms sheer time spent abroad; as well as in the practical skills and life lessons I can take away from my travels.

'The Leap' organised a group of 13 like-minded individuals from around the world, each on a gap year, with whom I travelled to Madagascar, and later became some of my closest friends. Thanks to the wonders of the whatsapp group chat, we were able to get to acquainted with one another before our journey; and fast-forward 24 hours after leaving Heathrow, we found ourselves at the camp run by MRCI (Madagascar Research and Conservation Institute) that was to become out home for the next 10 weeks.

Our schedule allowed us to be involved in all 4 of the programs at camp - forest and marine conservation, teaching and construction - each of which presented its own set of challenges and rewards.

Whilst working within forest conservation I was able to witness the beauty of Madagascan wildlife. Due to its location as an island, Madagascar has an almost entirely endemic group of land species, and hence from lemurs to chameleons, the animals there are often endangered and can be found nowhere else. We surveyed habitats, monitored populations and tried to create sustainable ecosystems by raising awareness of deforestation, specifically the dangers of slash and burn techniques within the island that the camp was situated in, Nosy Komba.

With construction and teaching we were able to actively engage in the community and see real and immediate changes. As a result of our work local kids had the opportunity to learn English, paths between towns were restored, families crammed into dilapidated houses had their homes rebuilt and the list goes on.

I was also lucky enough to be taught how to dive on site, and received my advance PADI qualification. Subsequently I was able to take part in surveys in which we monitored coral, and protected endangered turtles both in the water and, out of it: by insuring safe passage for hatchlings that were otherwise threatened by local poachers. I also had the opportunity to spend a day free diving with whale sharks over 30 feet long; a thrill like none other I had experienced beforehand.

Travelling in the 5th poorest country on Earth did not come without its challenges, poverty was clear in most areas and crime was ever present in the more populated cities. However, having never previously been to Africa: Madagascar was without doubt the most visually stunning place I have ever been (specifically Nosy Iranja) and the opportunity to travel around it and witness the wonders of Madagascan culture and society was an experience like no other.

On our 7th week at camp I played in a charity football match whereby locals played the volunteers at camp: and upon reflection I realise that in an age where society often seems divided, and segregation still rears its ugly head, being able to bridge Western and African worlds through sport was a thing of beauty.

The camp's incredible cultural diversity, meant that I was privileged enough to spend time with and befriend remarkable people from all over the world; I now have good friends from Australia to America with whom I would otherwise never have met.

Overall

On a personal level, the benefits of taking a gap year were clear. I was able to travel to spectacular places I could not have otherwise visited, witness a whole range of different cultures and meet interesting people from all over the world.

Aside from a sense of personal growth and maturity and a vast array of wonderful experiences, it is some of the friendships I made over my travels, which have made my gap year so rewarding. Honestly I cannot recommend it enough, and I thank all those who made mine possible.



The views from camp



The charity football match



My 'Leap' group



Nosy Itanja