

**EMILY ORTON** describes how she turned an unplanned gap year to her advantage by gaining valuable work experience teaching English in Spain and organising events for a big media firm in London

# Taking time out



BSES EXPEDITIONS

**T**he idea of taking a gap year had never appealed to me and consequently never figured in my plans for when I would leave school. I had no burning passion to see the world just then or take a break from my studies; if anything, I was keen to continue them straight away at university. Yet in the aftermath of results day, I took the drastic decision of giving up my place at Durham University to study French and Spanish, in favour of a “year out”, worse still, a year completely free of any plans at all.

The decision was not quite as impromptu as this. Since I had been rejected for a place at Cambridge, the idea of reapplying had been loitering in the back

of mind. But with the chance of a second rejection and my cut-your-losses logic, I plumped for a place at Durham, which I was starting to really look forward to. Come August however, with results in hand, the idea of reapplying reemerged and, once and for all, I decided that reapply I would.

## Deflated at home

This left me with the daunting prospect of a vacant year to fill. With excited friends piling off all over the country to their new universities and colleges, it was rather deflating to find myself the only one left behind at home. It was the first time in my life that I had such a lot of spare time, and I was forced to think on my feet and use my year as best as I could.

The first thing I did was to arrange two weeks of work experience. I found a two-week placement with a trade magazine for civil engineers in London for September and in the intervening weeks, I did pub work to keep myself busy. As I was working in the editorial section of the magazine, I was able to accompany one of the reporters to a press release, complete minor editorial tasks and even get my own by-line in the magazine. I was also given the task of arranging a survey to be carried among engineering consultants for a forthcoming editorial feature. In doing so, I got a feel for the set-up of the civil engineering sector, and I enjoyed the novelty of working in a professional environment.

### Straight to Spain

On finishing work experience, I went straight to Spain. This was organised at short notice, as I was lucky enough to have a Spanish friend, who lives in the North of Spain. Mariola and her family welcomed me to stay with them, in the small village of Ayerbe where they live, and I set off, eager to practise my Spanish. I stayed here for six weeks, during which time I was able to get two teaching jobs in the nearby town of Huesca, with the help of my friend and the local papers.

I soon learnt that teaching your own language is not as easy as it sounds, and explaining the rules, guidelines and exceptions of English grammar was not my strong point. I'd even go so far as to say that I pitied my struggling students at times. My oldest student was three years older than me, and paying for private tuition out of his wages, only to have to listen to the sub-standard ramblings of a pupil-turned-teacher, more accustomed to being taught than teaching, whose only qualification was that she was English!

So, working on the basis that merely being in the presence of an English-

speaker would get them through their exams, I muddled my way through. I was surprised at how much preparation one hour's lesson needed, and even more surprised at the pitiful rate of pay with which all that effort was rewarded. I earned less as an English teacher than I did as a waitress at home! But the experience was excellent, if a little trying, especially when it came to my infant classes.

**'I earned less as an English teacher than I did as a waitress at home, but the experience was excellent'**

### Discipline is difficult

Finding myself the sole "profesora" of ten excitable Spanish children during their lunch hour was enough to try anyone's patience! As you can imagine, discipline is difficult at the best of times, without the language barrier getting in the way. I soon discovered that getting them drawing pictures was the best way to stop them reaping havoc in the classroom. Having said this, things got worse rather than better over the ensuing weeks, as

rowdy children got rowdier and lazy children got lazier. The job's redeeming factor was the group of pupils eager to learn. Moreover, it put me into a completely different context in which to practise my Spanish, conversing with both young children and employers.

Apart from my jobs, merely being in Spain was enjoyable. From a language point of view, living with a Spanish family, watching Spanish television and reading Spanish newspapers was ideal. Also, I liked getting to know the region; I spent one weekend in a beautiful village in the Pyrenees and another (admittedly spent mostly in a delightfully large shopping centre) in the city of Zaragoza. The culture of Spain, with its long lunches, late dinners and general liveliness, suited me down to the ground.

### University interview

In November, I returned home, in plenty of time for my university interview in December. With that out of the way, I enjoyed Christmas at home with family. But as the seasonal festivities slowly ground to a halt and the household quietened again, I began to feel restless. Not for long though.

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After a brief stint of working in a carpet and curtain shop on Sundays (before which “boredom” was just a word), I got a job back with New Civil Engineer magazine in London. The vacancy was only for a week but was extended to four weeks. I performed a various tasks including compiling testimonials for an Olympics supplement and even writing a brief news report for the magazine. Within a couple of weeks of finishing this job, another came

**'A working gap year is an excellent way of gaining professional experience'**

up in the publisher's business development department. Labelled “researcher”, awarded a six-month contract and reallocated two floors up, my job entails helping to organise events and researching companies, individuals and organizations in the construction industry.

**Media industry**

As a commuter, I enjoy travelling into the big city everyday and have found the train journey an excellent time to catch up on my reading! The job itself has given me a good idea of how the media works as a

business, and how the construction industry fits into this business arena at large. My work has been mostly interesting and varied, working with a small team of people in a big media firm. I was even able to stay at a four-star hotel once, the night before an event.

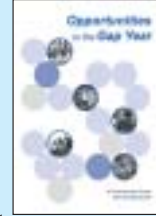
A working gap year is an excellent way of gaining professional experience early on, especially for those who are unsure of what career they would like to pursue. Already I have something worthwhile to put on my CV. It is also makes good sense financially; I have provided for at least my first year at university and will not rely so heavily on my student loan.

This autumn I begin my course in French and Spanish at Cambridge. I am naturally looking forward to it, not least the sprawling holidays. Immersed in language and literature, the working days of my gap year will, no doubt, seem like a distant memory. However, in those not-so-distant days as jobseeker (much as I like to blank out my post-student future), I am assured that my experience will stand me in good stead. And if all else fails, I will still be able to privately refer to myself as a nationally published freelance journalist.

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