

The World is Our Classroom, the Ocean Our Playground

Four months. 11 countries. Circumnavigate the globe with Semester at Sea as the program celebrates its 100th voyage.

“400 durham? You’re kidding.” Spending the equivalent of \$45 on a Moroccan ceramic sun was just not an option.

“Okay...you, I like. Good price.” The stand owner realized I wasn’t a hesitant negotiator.

“That guy down the street sells this for 90.” *More like 200*, I thought to myself. *Oh well, lets see how low I can get this guy.*

“You pretty eyes. Pretty eyes, better price. 300.”

“If my eyes are that pretty, give it to me for 100.”

“Oh no, this hand craft. Hand craft! See how good? Okay, you pretty eyes, I give 200.”

Apparently the power of my eyes disappeared after a few more minutes. He wouldn’t budge past 150 durham. Paying \$16 for the souvenir was most likely still a rip off, but such is the learning curve in the art of bartering.

It’s just another day in the classroom.

Brilliant sparkles of coastal city lights. Soft ocean swells rolling as far as the eye can see. Ancient buildings entombed with hundreds of years of history. The Semester at Sea study abroad program is not a typical educational experience. Students sail between 11 countries in a handful of continents. Stargazing near the equator, traversing the Atlas Mountains, camping in the Sahara Desert – as a past participant, I can personally attest that a true global education is nonexistent in the traditional college realm.

Semester at Sea is like Chanel – the prestige and value last forever. The alumni network is nearly 50,000 strong. Notable past participants include Olympic gold medal gymnast Kerri Strug, “Sex and the City” actress Cynthia Nixon, and “Sleepless in Seattle” film producer Gary Foster. Graduates use SAS as a springboard for political, business, and journalistic accomplishments.

Just ask Scott Siemens, co-founder of Crocs, Inc. shoes; former Colorado governor Richard Lamm; and Joan Lunden of “Good Morning America.” Through developing individuals’ cultural awareness and enriching global perspectives, Semester at Sea sets applicants apart in the job market. It is undeniably a golden résumé stamp.

The experience of a lifetime isn’t tagged with a sale price. 2010 program fees range between \$21,000 and \$32,000 for one semester, depending on room and board preferences. But according to participants, the impact over time is worth it. In a survey of Semester at Sea graduates, 97% report SAS as their most significant college experience.

Fall 2009 marked its 100th voyage around the world. The concept of a floating campus picked up steam in 1963, the year the program began under the name “World Campus Afloat.” It was renamed “Semester at Sea” in 1978 with sponsorship from the Institute of Shipboard Education, a non-profit organization located in Charlottesville, VA. Semester at Sea rotated through three university affiliations over the past 35 years, but is currently sponsored by the University of Virginia.

“Semester at Sea is totally worth the money. There really isn’t any price you can put on what we did,” says SAS alumni Sylvie Nelson of New York.

Spring 2009 participant Scott Flora, Colorado, agrees. “If one were to travel to each of these countries independently, the cost would outweigh the cost of SAS ten-fold,” he says.

Ship Life

The world is your classroom, and the MV Explorer is your home. The 590-foot, state of the art ship clocks a maximum speed of 28 knots (about 32 mph), making the vessel the fastest passenger ship of its kind. Seven decks hold a thousand students, faculty and crew. A fitness center encourages activity, while a wellness spa offers a variety of relaxing massages, haircuts, and pedicures. Pick up a game of basketball or volleyball while overlooking the ocean on the outdoor sports court, or dive in the pool to cool off.

“I am surrounded by skinny, toned, and manicured girls. I’m rocking the jeans and t-shirt look, but dresses and heels are pretty common. But there isn’t nearly as much pretention as I imagined. There are a few of “those people,” like the guy who dropped \$5,000 in Barcelona clubs for private table service. But people are generally easy to get along with. I couldn’t immediately tell the difference between the Boeing company CEO’s daughter and other students on the ship. It’s great to live in an atmosphere where everybody seeks adventure and opportunities to meet new faces.”- My personal journal

From exclusive family names to the working middle class, students come from a variety of social backgrounds. What else comprises a floating university? Undergrads choose from over 70 classes in 20 disciplines, such as biology, economics, political science, and global studies. Curriculum ties closely to each country visited in order to facilitate a well-rounded understanding of the subject matter. It is one thing to memorize dates in medieval history, but quite another to travel the same route of Marco Polo.

Additional cultural programs supplement classroom time on the ship. Semester at Sea adopts a “learn by doing” approach, replacing the landlubber’s education of stale lectures and empty memorization. Guest speakers have included Fidel Castro, Indira Gandhi, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela. Not too shabby for a morning lecture.

Ocean Travel

Circumnavigating the globe presents unique challenges. Because class is not held when in port, every travel day at sea is in the classroom. Class might be held eight days in a row regardless of weekends or holidays, but then stop for a six day stretch in port. Staying on top of studies can be a challenge.

“It’s official; I have completely lost all sense of time. My schedule next week consists of arrivals, travel days, and departures – my brain no longer works in days of the week or calendar dates. Throw in military time and that’s the end of that.”- My personal journal

The hectic schedule takes a toll on bodies. Nausea becomes as common as a headache, with seafarers popping Dramamine like Advil. It's perfectly normal for students and faculty alike to run out of the room at inopportune times. Others suck lollipops in an attempt to keep seasickness at bay.

SAS alumni Cassie Corbyons of Florida describes the challenge of adjusting to time changes. "The ship is like a giant cradle. All you want to do is sleep," she says. The clocks spring forward each time the ship crosses a time zone. Losing hour after hour of precious slumber feels like eternal jet lag.

Though according to Scott Flora, the contained nature of ship travel was the biggest obstacle. "I was most intimidated by the lifestyle change. Ship life is very different from what I'm used to. Living in a confined place with no privacy - not even in your own room - is something that was a little scary to me," he says.

Adaptability is a crucial personality trait for a world traveler and a dominant theme of Semester at Sea. Classes are important, but developing these personal characteristics is the crux of an SAS education.

Port Adventures

It may seem intimidating to step off the ship, hail a taxi in a foreign land, and see what the day brings. Yet this is the overriding philosophy of SAS travelers. Never mind that you hardly know what city you're exploring, let alone the direction. Ignore the fact that you don't speak the language and lack the correct currency. Hakuna matata.

"It was a pretty spontaneous trip – I didn't have anything planned for Spain, so I just bought a plane ticket only two days before port. It was the true definition of independent travel: no plans, no place to stay, buried Spanish skills, zero clue what's even in Barcelona...it was daunting, but amazing. I had never traveled completely on my own like that." - My personal journal

Opportunities are endless. Touch the marble of the Taj Mahal. Sled the sand dunes of Namibia. Observe Japanese fish auctions. Barter for Moroccan ceramics. Lack of time is the only restriction for in-port excursions. Semester at Sea sponsors pre-planned trips that are available for an extra cost. All meals, lodging, and major sightseeing are included on these outings. Paying more is worth the peace of mind, but independent travel is definitely the cheaper route.

“Traveling independently also helps you grow more as an individual,” declares Sylvie.

Scott agrees. “Independent traveling can offer some great experiences, stories, and lessons,” he says.

He recalls the need for creativity and being quick on your feet. Missed the last bus out of town because of a confusing foreign schedule? With only two hours to make it back to port before ship departure, he had to execute a backup plan. In the world of Semester at Sea, having several other alternatives in mind isn't a bad idea either. It's a rarity for plans in life or travel to work perfectly, and SAS shows that rolling with waves is much easier than fighting them.

Food

Many impressionable stories stem from mealtime. Culinary adventures create some of the best memories of a semester abroad. Try eating fresh tuna sushi at 7am, or sampling waffle cookies from street vendors in Vietnam. Snack on Spanish fried minnows or chunks of African ostrich.

“The waiter lifted the ceramic lid, revealing a hunk of lamb in its true form –cartilage, fat layers, bones and all. It was cooked, but it was up to me to somehow dig out edible parts around the arteries. What little meat I found tasted amazing, but I had to wonder what parts of the lamb drained into the slowly congealing liquid in the bottom of my dish.”- My personal journal

Every forkful delivers both an adventure and a reminder to avoid taking things too seriously. Personal growth occurs outside of a comfort zone. Soaking in an experience bigger than one's self is what SAS is all about.

Coming Home

For some travelers, the transition back home is seamless. Students feel content to deepen relationships and simply revel in memories. Semester at Sea develops an appreciation of freedom and a new admiration for your country. The stark contrast of poverty across the globe is especially harsh in comparison to America's opulence. What we label as "lower class" is considered successful in underdeveloped regions of the world.

"Every country relies on America in some way. We play a huge role in the world," Scott says. "SAS opened my eyes. Before sailing, I had a tunnel-vision view with America as the only country, but now I'm concerned about global issues. We are all closely related and can rise or fall with just one little event."

For others, returning to the rigid structure of the real world is as jarring as the original departure. Certain relationships become like a favorite pair of old jeans: loved, but just not the right fit anymore. Weekend parties become trivial, replaced with a desire to accomplish something great in the world. Perspectives broaden and priorities change – in essence, people grow up.

"It's definitely an eye-opening experience and worth every penny," Cassie says. "If given the chance, I'd drop everything I'm doing now and leave again."

One thing is for certain. Once the world becomes your classroom, life will never be the same.