

RETURNEE OF THE MONTH

APRIL 2019



ABOUT KALEA OBERMEYER

Program: Semester at Sea

Duration: Fall 2018

Major: Youth & Social Innovation

MOST INTERESTING CLASS & WHY?

The most interesting class I took was Death, Dying, & Grief. While the name sounds a bit morbid, the content was interesting in the context of every country we visited. As travelers, we oftentimes visit places with a one-track mindset; we want to seek out famous dishes, explore the night life, and have only brief conversations with locals to quantify having "immersed" ourselves. But rarely do we ever explore beyond surface-level interactions. In particular, we never question how nuances in another culture may vary from our own, such as traditions in life and death. For the first time, I studied bereavement in Ghana, India, Vietnam, and China, something I never thought I would do before going abroad.



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HOW WAS EDUCATION ABROAD DIFFERENT THAN ANTICIPATED?

I had a lot of expectations about my journey before I went abroad. In the months prior to embarking on Semester at Sea, I had a very linear mindset about how I was going to change: I would board the ship, meet a few cool people, dive into my coursework, and then have a new worldview after the first country we visited. But in reality, it was quite the opposite. My adjustment to ship life was slow, and for the first month and a half I felt as if my growth had plateaued while at UVA. I had a lot of cultural sensitivity training prior to SAS because of the activities I'm involved with on Grounds, so a lot of the material covered in Global Studies felt redundant depending on the subject. I only really started noticing a change when I started connecting to people on the ship more, and traveled in-country on my own rather than through SAS-sponsored programs. So, while the classes were interesting and I never lost interest in learning more from studying each country's culture, studying abroad only became more worthwhile when I started sharing my journey with others. It was the conversations I had with locals, and with SAS friends, that made the greatest impact on my experience.

NUMBER ONE WAY THE EXPERIENCE CONTRIBUTED TO YOUR GROWTH

My growth could not have come without the presence of a shipboard community. Traveling to 12 different countries in 4 months is impactful in and of itself, but doing it surrounded by 460 other college students from around the world is unparalleled in every way. There's nothing like crossing the equator and prime meridian alongside the cheers of hundreds of your peers, rooting for your sea in Sea Olympics, or gathering in your favorite spots during pre-port logistics meetings and waiting for Dean Bob to point to our location on a giant, inflatable globe. Not to mention the movie nights we had cuddled up in cramped cabins, or impromptu dance parties to pre-downloaded to High School Musical soundtracks. And while we had fun on the ship, there were moments of clarity as well: I had the unique opportunity to work as a Student Life Student Assistant, meaning I was able to moderate the Student Diversity Panel, create SAStained Dialogue seminars, and lead discussions on country crisis like the Rohingya Genocide. Being in such close quarters with your friends and classmates allowed us to bond even faster than a traditional study abroad program and allowed us to dive deeper into challenging conversations that many students would shy away from at home. On SAS, we were trusting, honest, and caring in ways I haven't experienced before.

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FAVORITE LOCAL HANGOUT, AND WHY?

On the ship, my favorite place was on deck 7 port-side. I would camp out midday before class and do my readings, or edit videos with the sound of the waves in the background. On a good day, my favorite spot would be covered in half sun, half shade, and you could feel the sea mist on your face. I even caught a glimpse of some dolphins swimming just below the deck one time! And even when it wasn't a sunny day, you could see the rain roll in over the waves in the distance, a rainbow only minutes away. I'm not sure any place on Grounds can compare.

MOST INTERESTING/DELICIOUS CUISINE TRIED

The best four meals I ever had were:

- Berlin, Germany: mango curry at Sadhu, an Indian Restaurant
- Tema, Ghana: blackened chicken with Jollof rice and plantains
- Mekong Delta, Vietnam: homemade spring rolls with my host family
- Shanghai, China: Xiao Long Bao (Shanghai Steamed Soup Dumplings) & a churro



SEMESTER AT SEA IN 3 WORDS

Circumventing

The

Globe!

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MOST INTERESTING/MEANINGFUL INTERACTION WITH A LOCAL

My tour guide in South Africa, Abraham, was the most influential person I met on Semester at Sea. I met Abraham on a tour of Robben Island and Cape Town. Throughout the day, Abraham informed us about the history of apartheid and how people of color were forcibly removed from their homes in District 6, his family being one of the first. He showed us where his family was forced to move, and shared his experience of losing everything as a five-year-old. His words shook me in the moment, and still move me today. And what also surprised me was how familiar the story felt; I told Abraham the history of Charlottesville and the citizens of Vinegar Hill. Sometimes I forget that the oppression of Vinegar Hill was not an isolated event, but something that happened both across the nation and world. Touring Cape Town with Abraham helped me recognize the systemic oppression that plagues even international cities, and pull realistically close conflicts like Apartheid that felt so far away.

ANYTHING ELSE TO ADD?

I had a lot of reservations about Semester at Sea. I thought it attracted only one type of student, that I wouldn't appreciate each country because I wasn't there for an extended period of time, that I wouldn't find people who shared similar interests as me. But SAS was so much more than what I imagined. There is no better way to explore different cultures, learn various histories, and meet people with such incredible depth than through SAS. And if it's a matter of financial constraints, I can tell you that I applied as a low-income student and was able to sail for significantly less than what they advertise. There are scholarships available for everyone- it's just a matter of how much effort you put into it. Apply to Semester at Sea- I promise you won't regret it!

