

# A Voyage of Discovery: The Semester at Sea Experience

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It was Krempt, the rainy season, in my newly adopted home of Ethiopia where I was serving as a Peace Corps volunteer. Since school was out, I took a much-anticipated holiday to nearby Kenya, Tanzania and the Seychelles. After a trek up Mt. Kilimanjaro and a safari through Ngorongoro Crater, I found myself in the port city of Mombassa, Kenya. As I stood on the dock, I watched the ships coming in and out of the port. I told myself, "One day, some day, I would travel the world by ship." It was about that time that I had first heard about the Semester at Sea program. Now, some twenty-odd years later, I had been selected to serve as the assistant librarian for the fall 2003 voyage.

The Semester at Sea program is operated by the Institute for Shipboard Education and affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh, which serves as the accrediting body. A ship, the S.S. Universe Explorer, becomes a classroom and the world becomes a place to explore. The mission of the program combines both academic and experiential components:

The Institute for Shipboard Education exists out of the recognition that, in an increasingly interdependent world, there is a vital need to advance the exchange of knowledge and understanding between cultures. The Institute is defined by its on-going commitment to combine academic excellence with challenging experiential programming, in order to remain at the forefront of global education.<sup>1</sup>

The program was first known as the University of the Seven Seas and then as World Campus Afloat. Since 1977, the program has been called Semester at Sea. It is currently affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh but has a short history with the University of Colorado, Boulder, which sponsored seven round-the-world voyages. This may explain why students from the University of Colorado, Boulder were the largest single population on the fall 2003 voyage. Seventy-five percent of the total number of 572 students were from the University of Colorado, Boulder; the University of Pittsburgh; George Washington; the University of California, San Diego; and the University of California, Santa Barbara. The students hailed from 48 states representing 239 colleges and universities. Sixty-six

percent of the students were female. Twenty-four faculty were joined by 39 staff, 21 family members (as young as six years old), 10 senior adult passengers and 200 officers and crew, for a combined total of over 900 voyagers. One can only imagine the economic impact that we had on a smaller country such as Vietnam.

The fall voyage sets sail from Vancouver, Canada, and lands in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The spring voyage travels in the opposite direction, setting sail from Nassau in the Bahamas and lands in Seattle, Washington. Voyagers on the fall voyages probably adapt better to the frequent time changes than those on the spring voyage. We all anticipated the announcements to set our clocks back by an hour allowing us an extra hour of sleep. Voyagers on the spring voyages set their clocks forward, thus losing that extra hour of sleep. An hour may not seem extreme, but if set forward five or six days in a row, as was the case on the Pacific Ocean, it can be extremely wearing.

Our original itinerary included Vancouver; Kobe, Japan; Hong Kong; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; Myanmar; Chennai, India; Mombassa, Kenya; Cape Town, South Africa; Salvador, Brazil; Havana, Cuba; and Ft. Lauderdale. Shortly before departing, we were informed that we would be going to Bangkok, Thailand, rather than Myanmar and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania rather than Mombassa, Kenya. Since safety is of utmost importance, there was a need for flexibility in scheduling.

## ACADEMIC LIFE

Over sixty courses were taught, primarily in the humanities and social sciences. Philosophy, religious studies, history, political science, and even music were taught with an international point of view, emphasizing the history, economics, social aspects and culture of the individual countries on the itinerary. All students were required to take Global Studies, an interdisciplinary course that met daily and attempted to prepare the students for the upcoming countries as well as the role of the United States in the world today. All offices, the library, the computer center, and the Internet café were closed during Global Studies. Only a doctor's note excused a student from attending Global Studies. The class was taught in the student union, but spilled into

classrooms equipped with closed circuit televisions.

One lost track of time on the ship. There were A days and B days with classes held on their respective days. There were no holidays and no weekends. Classes were held when the ship was out to sea but suspended when the ship was in port. Thus the library and most offices were open every A day and B day and closed when the ship was in port. Classes were held on Labor Day and finals were held on Thanksgiving due to the vagaries of the schedule. Between Vancouver and Japan, classes were held and the library and other support units were open ten straight days. On the other hand, the ship was out to sea only two days between Hong Kong and Vietnam and two days between Vietnam and Thailand, giving the students little time to absorb what they had observed or prepare for the upcoming country.

However, port time does not necessarily mean that the students were on vacation. Students could travel independently, which required extensive planning and research, or they could sign up for one of many field programs or faculty directed practicums (FDPs). It was possible to visit tourist attractions or events such as the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, a safari in Tanzania, Nelson Mandela's cell in South Africa, or an audience with President Fidel Castro. However, it was

just as likely for students to visit an orphanage in India, crawl through the Cu Chi tunnels in Vietnam, play soccer with children in an after-school program in a South African township, be a witness to the in-your-face sex trade in Thailand, tour the "Hanoi Hilton" where POW John McCain was detained, discuss health care policies with Cuban medical staff, or observe cooperative projects such as a cocoa plantation in Brazil.

#### THE LIBRARY

As does any academic library, the C.Y. Tung Library supported the curriculum program on the ship. A librarian, always a University of Pittsburgh librarian, an assistant librarian selected from a national pool, and a number of work-study students, staffed it. The library was opened from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. daily that the ship was at sea and was closed daily for approximately one and one half hours during the Global Studies class.

The library was located in a former casino in the bow of the ship. Although it was probably the most attractive room on the ship, its location in the bow meant that the library was subject to extreme rocking, and special accommodations were necessary. These accommodations included strapping down printers with bungee cords, installing special guards on the shelves, dropping down rods through the handles of the video



*It would be impossible to run an academic library without capable work study students. Sporting T-shirts from a variety of countries are: Victoria Vallejos and Vanessa Vallejos (front row), Dawana Whyte, author Janet Lee, Timeka Burston and Dana Troy (back row).*

cabinets and strategically placing motion sickness bags. And once between each port we would hear the sound of six short blasts and one long blast of the ship's horn alerting us to a mandatory lifeboat drill. We would clear the library; run to our cabins; don long pants, long-sleeve shirts and closed toe shoes; and run to our muster stations.

A 12,000-volume library would not seem large enough to meet the needs of nearly 600 students and 30 faculty, but it was a carefully selected collection reflecting the global curriculum and a basic core collection found in all libraries. Primary collection development responsibilities were assigned to a full-time librarian at the University of Pittsburgh and a former Semester at Sea voyager. She also set up the online catalog and circulation system, worked with faculty prior to the voyage for specific recommendations on book purchases and gathered and input circulation records for reserve articles. When we arrived on the ship, we were ready to go.

Internet was available on the ship at fifty cents a minute and the library was allocated a set number of hours throughout the semester to be available for academic research. Students and staff could access the Internet in the Internet Café and fees were billed directly to their shipboard accounts. For those with a

laptop, a wireless card could be rented and an Internet card could be purchased in \$50.00 increments. Wireless access was very cost effective if one had the capability to work offline and upload and download email messages. For the most part Internet access was quick and reliable. But all too frequently, the system would be down for hours or days at a time and could not be remedied until the ship was in port. Much of this was related to the reliance on satellite technology or the position of the ship.

Access to journal information was limited to a SIRS CD, which met the needs of most journal inquiries. The librarian would use photocopy money (\$.25 per page) to purchase English language materials in port. Faculty and other voyagers would also pick up current reading material and donate it to the library. There was a real hunger for current affairs.

Reserve materials were the most heavily used service in the library, with faculty providing a limited number of copies of a vast quantity of articles and books for student use. Skeletal bibliographic information was input into the system with a simple accession number for a call number. F125 was simply the 125<sup>th</sup> item entered for the fall semester. Travel guides were also heavily used as students planned for independent travel or verified information for their journals and papers from



*Author Janet Lee with children viewing their digital image outside a day care center in Langa township outside Cape Town, South Africa.*

past ports.

One would think that limited Internet access would diminish the quality of service that we could provide, but that is where creativity and basic library skills came into play. Most queries could be answered with basic reference tools such as encyclopedias, almanacs and handbooks. Exchange rates were found in a recent copy of the *New York Times*. An author of a book was found in a book review in the SIRS CD. A short biography of activist Angela Davis was found in a reference title *Africana*. An adult passenger had spent hours compiling a list of countries with the idea of tracking population. His wife approached me about using the Internet to speed up the process. We found the information he was looking for in the latest *World Almanac*, with five and ten-year projections, all on one two-page table.

Since the Semester at Sea program was separate from the University of Pittsburgh, we did not have access to Pitts' licensed databases. Part way through the voyage, we were set up with a trial of *Academic Search Premier*. Finally, we felt confident about the students using the Internet for research. But the unpredictability in access to the Internet made even the use of this database problematic. The sluggishness of the response time compelled us to recommend that

students pull up html files rather than pdf when the html was available. We also suggested that students come in during non-peak hours to do research when the local network was under-utilized. It may be surprising to some, but not all of us, that few students knew how to access their home libraries remotely. They would have found that they had a wealth of information had they only known.

The library was connected to the computer lab by an open doorway. This definitely had its advantages and disadvantages. Since the icon for the library's online catalog was on all of the computer terminals in both areas, we could direct students to the computer lab if the two library workstations were busy. On the other hand, books, reference materials, dictionaries and style manuals soon migrated to the computer lab. Printing was also free in the computer lab and it had a high-speed printer. We would direct students to print journal articles in the computer lab, and its proximity was beneficial.

The computer lab was also responsible for the Intranet. A course folder was set up for each faculty member to post syllabi, power point presentations, and guidelines for museum visits or journals. A public folder was also created for students to post digital photographs and personal reflections about the past port. Access to



*Students studying for their national exams at the Guguletu Public Library in Guguletu township, South Africa.*

these folders was available in both the lab and the library.

### STUDENT LIFE

The vast majority of students fell into the age of the traditional college-aged student, late teens and early twenties. For this reason, Student Life planned activities nightly. These included movies, port reflections, student or club-sponsored activities, and pub nights. There was a general feeling among the faculty and staff that the students were over-stimulated and not dedicating enough time to their studies. There were also two TBA days, one immediately after India and the other shortly after crossing the equator for the first time. Neptune Day, crossing the equator, was a day of contests and rituals culminating in becoming a Shellback. The library was open both days because not all students wanted to kiss a fish or have pulverized fish guts dumped on them.

The students were housed together on decks, called seas, separate from the faculty and staff. Each sea had a resident director much as they would in a land-based dormitory. There was a laundry service and crew available for janitorial service. All voyagers could eat in one of two dining halls or a fee-based snack bar. The food was plentiful and varied unless you were a vegan. Crew picked up trays and cleared dirty dishes immediately. All of the crew, be they cabin, deck, or dining hall, worked extremely hard and made the voyage a very pleasant experience.

There was also a medical clinic staffed by a doctor, a nurse, and three physician's assistants. Someone was on call twenty-four hours a day. They took care of common illnesses, tropical diseases, motion sickness, birth control, major and minor accidents, and intervened when students needed to be hospitalized.

### PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I did not have the life-changing experience that the students were told by faculty and staff to expect. My life-changing experience happened while I was in the Peace Corps. I had lived among those who suffered from abject poverty. I had seen diseases beyond the imagination. I bore witness to the subjugation of women through prostitution or lack of child labor laws. The only time I was shocked on this voyage was in returning to Tanzania and seeing the roadside littered with plastic bags and plastic bottles. Gone were the days when people reused newspapers to wrap sugar, rice or other sundry items.

I did leave the ship with hope for the world. Vietnam was a delightful surprise, especially for someone of my generation. South Africa was disconcerting but is drawing me back, thus the choice of using the photo of the Guguletu Public Library on the cover. It was in

Guguletu that I had my most profound experience and now even months later I find myself unable to totally comprehend the experience. I find myself reading anything and everything I can about South Africa.

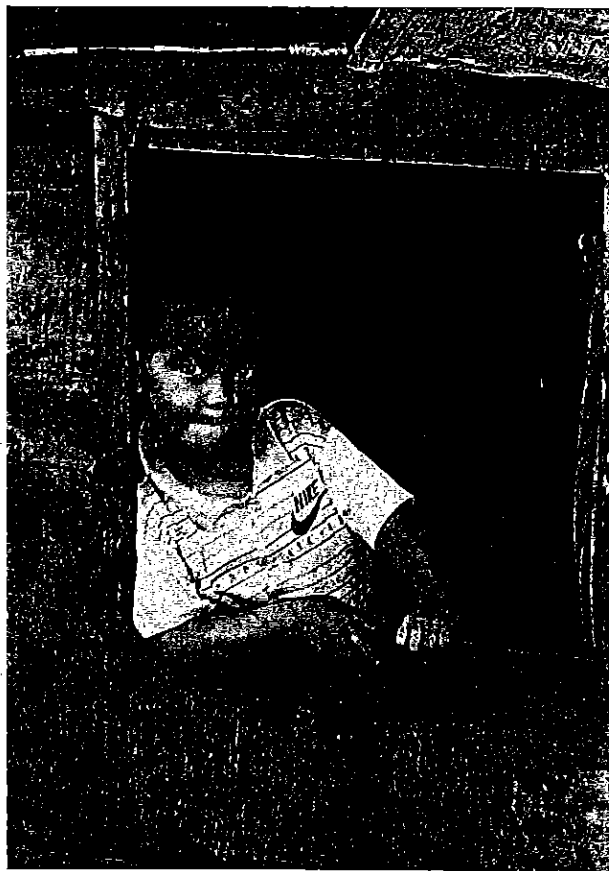
Would I do it again? Yes, after some thought. I would spend my time in the ports differently. After all, I have climbed the Great Wall. I would see if I could visit more libraries and arrange to visit with current Peace Corps volunteers. But in the meantime I could work on issues of diversity, libraries in the third world, and then there is that one work-study student who indicated to me that she wants to go on to get her MLS.

### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Shipboard Education. *Our Mission*. <<http://www.semesteratsea.com/aboutus/mission.html>> accessed on Jan 2, 2004.

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*Child in a houseboat on the MeKong River in Vietnam.*