

Editor's Note: Please see the experiential learning column for the spring 2020 issue "Encompass Southeast Asia: A Unique Experiential Learning Opportunity through the University of Richmond" by Bob Spires and Monti Narayan Datta beginning on page 64. In this supplement, students who participated in the experiential learning trip express what they learned during the trip and what they gained from the experience.

Student Comments and Blogs from "Encompass Southeast Asia: A Unique Experiential Learning Opportunity through the University of Richmond"
By Bob Spires and Monti Narayan Datta

Thai and/or Cambodian culture, or politics, or social issues

This trip helped me to understand how Cambodia's history affects modern-day society. The societal upheaval caused by both colonization, the Pol Pot regime, and the genocide led to poverty and the loss of millions of lives. I think these events are connected to the problem of modern-day slavery, as we learned that people in difficult financial situations are at a higher risk of accepting dangerous work to survive. In other words, the trip provided rich context to the issue of modern-day slavery in Cambodia.

What surprised you about traveling in Thailand and Cambodia?

The hospitality our group experienced during almost every interaction. When I've travelled before, I've felt either like an outsider because I was a tourist, or like an object of fascination because I was different. In both Thailand and Cambodia, I felt warmly accepted by the people we met. This allowed me to experience culture on a deeper and more connected level, which made for a more memorable experience.

What similarities and differences did you notice between the cultures of Thailand and Cambodia?

In both countries, Buddhism was a focal point for society and daily life. The architecture, activity around temples and holy spaces, and values of the people we interacted with were linked by Buddhism. From the areas we visited, I found that Thailand was more urban than Cambodia. There are many causes for this difference, including colonial history, the Cambodian Genocide, different resources in either country, etc.

What aspects of Thailand and Cambodia were most familiar to you?

The bustling streets of Bangkok reminded me of any big city I'd been to, like New York or Hong Kong. The income inequality that we witnessed in both countries (fancy hotels surrounded by impoverished villages for example) exists around the world and definitely exists in the United States. Finally, the aspect of religion felt familiar even though I had never been in a predominantly Buddhist country before. I have lived in places where other religions have been a central force in people's lives, so this strong presence of religion felt familiar.

How did the trip change the way you think about Thailand and Cambodia?

This trip helped me to understand how events that feel very distant to us, in the United States, are very real and still affect people in other parts of the world today. Specifically, I felt detached from the Cambodian genocide and from the idea of human trafficking before this trip. Now, I have met people that have been affected by these experiences and I am better able to empathize with people who have gone through these events. In short, the trip

helped me to internalize the idea that what we read about in books and in the news is happening to real people in real time. After the trip, I no longer feel as separated from the experiences of people in either Thailand or Cambodia.

How did the trip change the way you talk to others about Asia?

This trip helped me to further develop my understanding of Asia as a dynamic, vast, and diverse region. Through experiences in Thailand and Cambodia, I have a better understanding of the diversity in language, food, culture, income, environment, etc.

—Charlotte Bednarski

Eljoy Tanos: Encompass Southeast Asia Blog

When you travel, you enjoy being lost. When you travel with a group, you enjoy being lost together.

With these beautiful memories, we also encountered things that were hard to swallow. In Thailand, the tall infrastructures and luxurious malls contrasted the beggars who often awaited us in every block. In Cambodia, after an afternoon of playing with kids being served by Love Without Boundaries, we passed by a dumpster site that some of the kids were forced to call their home. A veteran who was no longer supported by the government came up to us while we were eating and asked us to buy one of the books he was selling. These were not bad memories. Truthfully, I think it was necessary for us to see them during our travel. While the two countries have their specific issues, economic inequality, corruption, and forced labor are issues that I grew up hearing and witnessing in Indonesia. While living in the US, these issues became less of day-to-day experience and more of textbook information. Coming to this trip and seeing how uncomfortable the people in my group got, I realize how different a classroom discussion is to witnessing something with one's own eyes. I believe that giving this kind of traveling experience to students are beneficial in many ways. You don't only learn more of what you already know but realize another side of things that you thought you previously do.

In Chiang Rai, Dr. Spires introduced us to one of his colleagues, Aor. She runs a school and tutoring program to help kids learn English on top of finishing their primary education. While our original plan was only to meet up with her to shop at the market and cook our own Thai dishes together, dinner with Aor turned out to be more of an immersive, dream-like day. Wasting no time, we directly went to search for fresh vegetables and meat at the market the first time we met. We held the grocery bags as she shopped for more food along the way. Then, she graciously accepted us into her house and tasked us to cut the ingredients. At this point, I kind of had a feeling of nostalgia.

Kelly Ortiz: Encompass Southeast Asia Blog.

I plan to use the insight I gained from my time in Cambodia and Thailand as a way to open more doors to all children. To share my travel thoughts like how to say hello in Thai, meditation, Buddhism, and the beautiful temples I had the privilege of visiting.