

ASIA: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING — GUEST EDITOR, TOMMY LAMONT

Editor's Note: For student comments on the study tour, please see the online supplements for this issue at www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea.

Encompass Southeast Asia A Unique Experiential Learning Opportunity through the University of Richmond

By Bob Spires and Monti Narayan Datta

The Office of International Education (OIE) at the University of Richmond (UR) developed Encompass Southeast Asia (Encompass SEA) as part of a pilot program to engage students who have not historically participated in study abroad opportunities at UR and its partner institutions. Participants included students from challenging socioeconomic backgrounds, nontraditional students, students of color, athletes, males, and students with limited travel experience. Historically, such cohorts have not participated in semester-long study abroad programs due to the prohibitive costs, time commitments required, and social stigmas. The Encompass program, fully funded by a donor, included all travel expenses for student and faculty participants.

Encompass SEA developed from discussions between the two faculty member authors and the dean of OIE, Dr. Martha Merritt, with several goals: (1) build more connections between UR and partner organizations in Asia; (2) focus these connections based on the prior research expertise of both authors in the realm of anti-human trafficking studies; (3) provide students an immersive cultural experience that went beyond touristic experiences in Southeast Asia and instead illuminated the operational dynamics of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in their counter-trafficking work; and (4) bolster research collaboration opportunities and outreach between UR and nonprofits, other organizations, and educational institutions in Thailand and Cambodia. The faculty leaders for Encompass SEA also envisioned growing a cohort of faculty across UR with diverse interests in Asia and a collective desire to deepen connections between the university and Asian institutions. The faculty leaders of the trip created an itinerary that combined visits with nonprofits in Thailand and Cambodia, engaging with the children and youth served by these nonprofits, shopping in local markets and cooking Thai dishes at the home of local Thai colleagues, and visiting key historical and cultural sites in both countries.

Trip Preparation

In preparation for Encompass SEA, the faculty members, along with staff and leaders in the international education office, had multiple preparatory meetings with the participants to introduce the group to each other, share preliminary travel tips, and build group cohesion. Faculty members created a course page using Blackboard where informational articles, videos, and other posts were shared. Next, a trip blog was developed to allow participants to share their experiences in real time. Although the trip did not involve course credit, faculty leaders recommended that each participant select one of the following topics to frame their trip experience: Buddhism and Hinduism, NGOs and anti-trafficking, migration and the Khmer Rouge, education, women's rights, or public health. Student participants conducted varying amounts of preparatory research prior to the trip, and some of the students conducted follow-up research as topics and issues of interest arose during their travels. Faculty leaders encouraged the students

after the trip to write follow-up blog posts reflecting back on the trip and the topics they learned about. The students who were the most invested in the topics encountered while abroad were those who had both personal and intellectual connections to these topics and were able to integrate the personal experiences from the trip with the discourse and academic debate surrounding the issues. Further, our institution's School of Business has a long-standing partnership with Thammasat University in Bangkok, and we invited the two Thai students doing a semester abroad in the US to an early trip meeting to discuss Thailand with our trip participants. We also planned to meet while in Thailand, because these students would return to Thammasat just before we arrived in Bangkok.

Travel Schedule

Encompass SEA had an eighteen-day travel itinerary with approximately one-third of the trip spent in Bangkok, one-third of the trip spent in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and the final one-third of the trip in Siem Reap, Cambodia (with a one-day drive to the border city of Poipet). Faculty leaders facilitated meetings with colleagues at various organizations in each location and mixed these meetings with visits to cultural sites.

During the Trip: Nonprofits, Historical Sites, and Human Connections

In Bangkok, the first NGO participants collaborated with was **Wat Arun Rajvararam Community Learning Centre (CLC)**, founded by Hartanto Gunawan. Originally a businessman from Indonesia who spent six years as a monk in Thailand, Hartanto started the NGO to support and provide education to disadvantaged girls from rural areas who are referred to him through the Thai police and governmental social services agencies. Girls in his program matriculate through a one-year nursing assistant program and are guaranteed jobs upon graduation with partner medical organizations in and around Bangkok. The youth at the CLC have a rigorous and disciplined schedule that begins early in the morning and ends in the evening with meditation. In between, the girls focus on school and learn a variety of life skills at the center, including the English language, computer literacy, and community service. While the Encompass SEA group was at the center, participants engaged with these youth to learn more about their lives and their experiences in the CLC program. The students from the University of Richmond discussed and critically assessed the merits of the Buddhist approach to daily meditation and discipline, and debated how cultural gender norms within the CLC diverged from American practices back home. Throughout the remainder of the trip, this experience sparked group discussions around the comparison with, and contrast between, Southeast Asian and American perspectives on social issues and effective approaches to addressing these issues.

The group spent a day with Sebastian Boll, researcher with the **United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons**

(UN-ACT) and **Development Programme (UNDP)** who spearheads a collaborative task force that brings together many anti-trafficking NGOs from the greater Mekong subregion countries to share their work, discuss best practices, and facilitate cross-country communication between non-profits. The group gained new perspectives on the challenges faced by large organizations as they attempt to address social issues like human trafficking and the exploitation of workers. Students discussed and debated with Boll on what some of the most effective ways to end human trafficking might be in the region and then received a tour of the United Nations Bangkok facilities, followed by a group meal. The visit to the UN offices offered a contrast to the grassroots NGOs that the group visited throughout the remainder of the trip.

The same evening, the group dined at a restaurant uniquely named Cabbages and Condoms, a social entrepreneurship venture of the largest Thai NGO **Population and Community Development Association (PDA)** with Australian scholar Dr. Simon Baker, who has conducted re-

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search on trafficking, child labor, and HIV/AIDS in Southeast Asia. PDA was founded during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Thailand to improve reproductive and public health across the country, and Baker gave the group some background on the organization and its influence on Thai policy.

The group had an opportunity to connect with University of Richmond alumni John Quinley, who runs the Bangkok-based NGO **Step Ahead** with his wife, Kimberly. They have spearheaded foster care and child-rights efforts in Thailand for many years, and the group was able to discuss his organization's efforts and experiences living in Thailand. The group also coordinated the meal with Quinley to coincide with meeting one of the Thammasat students who was at the University of Richmond the previous semester and another who would be coming from Thammasat the following semester, giving students and the Thai exchange students an opportunity to converse and build connections. Before departing Bangkok, the group met with staff from the nonprofit A21 that serves trafficked children, youth, and women in Southeast Asia, including providing legal resources and educational services to victims.

In Chiang Rai, located in the more rural setting of northern Thailand, the group spent several days engaging with **The Freedom Story**, an anti-trafficking NGO focused on prevention through education. The organization provides educational scholarships for K-12 children, as well as university scholarships for those who complete secondary school through their program. We learned about the social issues in rural Thailand, the pressure on children to work, and the vulnerability to trafficking that rural children and youth face. Group participants were able to engage with university scholarship recipients at a local tea and dessert shop, where we conversed and played games like charades together. Our students, being the same age as the Thai students, gained new personal connections. The evening's purpose was to give the Thai students a chance to practice their English skills, as well as a chance to demystify and de-exoticize northern Thai youth issues for our students. We spent the following day

Thailand and Cambodia Travel Itinerary

Tuesday, May 21: Arrive in Bangkok, Thailand.

Wednesday, May 22: Bangkok. Lunch near the hotel. Afternoon: Learn how to use the BTS Skytrain, visit Siam Square for shopping and people watching. Evening: River boat ride on the Chao Praya River.

Thursday, May 23: Bangkok. Explore the Wat Arun, Temple of Dawn, and visit Hartanto Gunawan's community learning center.

Friday, May 24: Bangkok. 10:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m. meeting at the UN-ACT with Sebastian Boll of UNDP to discuss efforts by the UN to address human rights and modern slavery in Southeast Asia. Lunch at the UN cafeteria. Dinner at Cabbages and Condoms and meet Dr. Simon Baker.

Saturday, May 25: Bangkok lunch with UR student and visit Wat Po, the Royal Palace, and Asiatique night market.

Sunday, May 26: Bangkok. Free time for students to explore in groups. Dinner with John Quinley, University of Richmond alumnus from Step Ahead, a community development organization based in Thailand.

Monday, May 27: Travel to Chiang Rai. Depart Bangkok and arrive in Chiang Rai at 2:30 p.m. Evening visit to the Chiang Rai night bazaar for shopping and dinner.

Tuesday, May 28: Chiang Rai. Visit to Mae Fah Luang Art and Culture Park. Shop with Aor and Au for food in the Chiang Rai street market. Cook Thai food with Aor and Au at their home. Visit a pagoda and goddess statue.

Wednesday, May 29: Chiang Rai. Morning and afternoon: Meeting with staff at The Freedom Story to learn about their programs. Evening: Meet with TFS university scholarship recipients, socialize, and play games.

Thursday, May 30: Chiang Rai. Morning and Afternoon collaboration with The Freedom Story on their monitoring and evaluation efforts, including reviewing survey instruments and data. Evening: socialize and play games and sports with the K-12 scholarship recipients.

Friday, May 31: Chiang Rai. Do laundry and relax day.

Saturday, June 1: Chiang Rai. Morning visit to the White Temple. Afternoon journey to the Ban Daam Museum, also known as the Black Temple. Evening shopping in the weekend market.

Sunday, June 2: Travel to Siem Reap, Cambodia. Depart Chiang Rai and arrive in Siem Reap at 8:15 p.m.

Monday, June 3: Siem Reap. All day exploring the Angkor Wat temple complex.

Tuesday, June 4: Siem Reap. Sunrise at Angkor Wat. Morning visit to Angkor Thom and Ta Phrom temples. Evening: Dinner and attend a performance at the Phare Circus.

Wednesday, June 5: Drive to Poipet, Cambodia. All-day travel to Poipet and volunteer at Love Without Boundaries.

Thursday, June 6: Return to Siem Reap. Afternoon visit of the National Angkor Museum. Evening dinner in Siem Reap.

Friday, June 7: Travel to Bangkok and visit the Apopo organization. Evening dinner in Siem Reap. Depart Siem Reap and arrive in Bangkok at 8:35 p.m.

Saturday, June 8: Travel to USA. Depart Bangkok. Arrive at Dulles International Airport at 10:40 a.m.

collaborating with The Freedom Story staff on their monitoring and evaluation measures, and offering feedback on their survey instruments and data. The group decided to move forward on a long-term research collaboration focused on The Freedom Story's anti-trafficking work.

One of the most memorable experiences was in Chiang Rai. The group went on a local market shopping trip and participated in a cooking class alongside local Thai colleagues of one of the faculty members who runs a private English- and Thai-language tutoring company called Homie English. We shopped in the market for fresh ingredients for several signature Thai dishes, and then we all chopped fresh ingredients and prepared a meal for the entire group, including our local Thai hosts. After a hearty

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and diverse authentic northern Thai meal, we spent the evening socializing with our hosts in their home for some casual conversation and relationship-building. Several of the students on the trip remarked that this evening was one of the most memorable because it felt more authentic.

When we first arrived in Cambodia, our first days were spent visiting the Angkor Wat complex, which also included the Angkor Tom and Ta Phrom temples featured in many movies. In addition to the breathtaking ruins of the ancient temples, we hired a local guide for the day, which became an interesting and immersive cultural experience in itself. Our local guide was particularly outspoken politically, as well as vocal about his racist anti-Chinese attitudes, not only toward the Chinese government but also toward Chinese tourists in Cambodia. This conversation was a stark contrast with our time in Thailand, where discussing national politics is generally discouraged in public. The students were at first shocked and then defensive about our guide's prejudicial attitudes toward all Chinese people. This experience made for some interesting and engaging debates among the group during the rest of our time in Cambodia. After returning to our hotel, one of the hotel staff overheard our discussion, and upon hearing that we would be visiting Poipet, a city known for Chinese tourists to their casino district, made the statement, "We've already lost Poipet and Sihanoukville to the Chinese." Another powerful moment occurred while at Angkor Wat, when one of the students witnessed a small girl digging through a garbage receptacle on the grounds and was affected emotionally. Later, she purchased nonperishable food and went back to Angkor Wat to offer the food to the girl. She was unable to find the girl, but found another scrounging through garbage and offered her the food. The student relayed the story of not being able to find the original girl tearfully to the group.

In Cambodia, we visited the Phare Circus, run by the **Phare Ponleu Selpak** NGO that focuses on providing arts training to economically disadvantaged youth. Their circus in Siem Reap is world-class and impressed the entire group. We spent the day near the Thai border at the **Love Without Boundaries Cambodia** program, which includes two schools and more. Our students engaged with staff and children served at the school and traveled around the border region with staff who showed us the stark realities of rural Cambodian life. We were shown a large garbage dump where several families live and whose children go to the NGO schools.

The director gave the group a tour through the casino area of Poipet along the Thai border and discussed the dramatic wealth inequality between foreign investors from China and Thailand, and the local villagers along the border. One student (mentioned above) was so moved by the experience in Cambodia, and at Love Without Boundaries specifically, that she has since volunteered with the organization long term. Finally, we visited the **APOPO** ("Anti-Personnel Landmines Removal Product Development," acronym is for the Dutch name) organization that trains African rats to safely identify landmines throughout Cambodia and learned about non-profit government collaborative approaches to dealing with unexploded ordnance. Each of these organizations gave the students glimpses into important facets of life in Cambodia.

Communication

The combination of group discussion and debate in real time while on the trip and the ability for students to write about their own individual thoughts and feelings from these experiences through blog posts gave the participants a comprehensive set of opportunities to process their trip live and contemplatively. Several weeks after the return from Southeast Asia, we also asked the students to write a "final thoughts" blog post. Overall, trip faculty and staff considered this varied and differential approach to communication on the trip as a very productive way to integrate academic learning, personal experience, emotional connection, and personal relationships with those we met into a flexible yet structured accumulation of experiences and reflections. ■

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