Humankind’s pursuit of knowledge has been intricately linked to ships and the sea. From early civilizations to the modern era, the exploration of distant lands, the exchange of ideas and commodities, and the search for knowledge has occurred in this manner.” This fundamental observation drives the mission of the well-known Semester at Sea (SAS) study abroad program, which offers credit-bearing fall, spring, and summer opportunities for U.S. students and faculty to learn through lectures and field trips about global concerns—the environment, population, foreign policy relationships, economics—in the context of the nations visited, and from the security of a floating campus. Academic credit and sponsorship of the program has been administered through University of Pittsburgh for many years but will be assumed by University of Virginia as of summer 2006.

Indiana University South Bend’s Scott Sernau, a sociologist whose teaching and research interests include globalization, inequality, and community development, took his whole family for a semester at sea along with almost 700 students and 24 other faculty from across the nation, on a voyage of discovery around the globe that lasted from September to December 2005. There were 10 ports of call, from the Caribbean, South America, South Africa and Mauritius, to Southeast and East Asia, and returning via Hawaii to San Diego. Sernau wrote detailed journal entries of his 100 days, posted from sea on an American Democracy Project Weblog published by IUSB (see below).

Sernau’s task was to teach three courses, International Inequalities, Race and Ethnic Relations, and Great Cities of the World, all with an international flavor and an outline that matched each of the ports where their ship MV Explorer docked. As he wrote at the start of the journey, “One of my greatest hopes is to provide a bit of insight into the great intellectual currents themselves that people have sought to explain our changing world, a way to tie together the images and experiences . . . . Even if [the students] forget the details of human ecology, political economy, or world systems analysis, I hope they will begin a lifetime habit of thinking deeply and caring deeply about the planet that is our common home.”

On the long ocean stretches between ports, Sernau and his fellow faculty members, joined by local “interport lecturers,” discussed with students the preceding or prepared them for the next port of call. This SAS voyage happened to have a distinguished interport lecturer, Bishop Desmond Tutu and his wife, who accompanied the faculty and students on the leg between Brazil and South Africa. Students learned about environmental issues in the Caribbean, the petro-economy of Venezuela; the history of West African slave labor in Brazil;

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deployment of NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) buoys measuring ocean currents; race and reconciliation in South Africa; historic trade routes and the scramble by colonial powers; the social complexities of India; “the beauty” (golden pagodas) and “the beast” (barbed wire) that is modern-day Burma/Myanmar; the multinationals behind Singapore’s success; and, almost everywhere, the stunning contrasts of wealth and poverty. At each port, the students spent four to five days on field trips that opened their eyes to totally new perceptions and perspectives about these countries. Many students also did special service projects arranged with local nonprofit government organizations.

During the long Pacific crossing that took the ship homeward bound, Sernau summed up what he hoped he and his students had learned together in his final weblog posting, “Tending the Planet”:

“It is . . . a precarious world. We just narrowly escaped the fury of Hurricane Katrina as we started south. We rerouted our voyage due to terrorist threats and later heard of an attempted pirate attack on a small cruise ship off of Somalia. The day we left India, the Asian news was filled with reports of massive flooding in the south and terrorist bombings in north.

My students have just about completed their semester at sea. Our final student panel debates the pros and cons of globalization. The truth is, however, that we have found few alternatives to the forces that are both uniting and fragmenting the world. Even the ostensibly communist countries we have visited are pursuing global capitalism with a vengeance. The challenge for us then is how to master and harness the forces that seem to be running away with the planet—growing inequality, spreading violence, and new environmental perils. Can we globalize in ways that are more humane and more respectful of the home that we share? I have become convinced that such a search must be our prime motivation for overseas study and for international travel.

I am intrigued by travel that truly encounters both the natural world and the human cultural world, but still I balk at the word “tourism.” One of our daily memos began with this quote from Daniel Boorstin: ‘The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes “sight-seeing.”’

Our goal from the beginning has been to be travelers rather than tourists . . . . Students around me take study breaks on the computers by cataloging great volumes of amazing digital pictures. Nice collections all, but will they move beyond “snapshots” to form a vision for the big picture for our planet? . . . Can they maintain that enthusiasm as they go on to tend the amazing natural and cultural heritage we have viewed, and to share it more equitably with our global neighbors? . . .

I share their excitement about coming home but also know a secret. We never left home. We need to see the whole planet as our home. And we need to straighten up our room. It is a beautiful place.”

—RMN

For the complete Sernau journal entries: ee.iusb.edu/index.php/?/adp/category/C75

For more about Semester at Sea: www.semesteratsea.com