

Here's my Study Abroad Story

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Major: International Relations with a Sequence in Human Rights, Genocide and Holocaust Studies

Program Description: I studied abroad with the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) - Khon Kaen, a program that focused on development and globalization.

Throughout the semester, my peers and I researched topics such as world food production, slums and landfills, water, and mining. My program functioned on an alternative education model, so instead of enrolling at the local university, we had a staff of American and Thai professors that lectured and took us on site visits. For example, we would spend a week learning about sustainable agriculture and then we would spend the following week traveling to villages to live and work with farmers who were practicing that agriculture.

Typical Day: During a lecture week, a normal day would start at 7 am. I would wake up, leave my flat (which I shared with a Thai roommate), walk down the street and buy breakfast from a street vendor (usually, sticky rice and chicken- the locals love heavy breakfasts!). Then I would go to the CIEE classroom for a day of Thai language classes and lectures. During a week spent on a site visit, a regular day would start at 5 am (or earlier). I would wake up and help the villagers tend their animals and crops and then make (or catch) breakfast. I'd spend the day learning about the farmers' issues (Were their land rights being violated? Were they being poisoned by pesticides?), and then me and my group would meet with NGOs and local government officials to talk about these problems



Highlights: Everything adventurous that happened: swimming in the Mekong River, riding motorcycles, protesting among villagers, eating spicy food, sleeping in huts, working alongside scavengers, struggling to use Thai language, partying with locals, sleeping in mosquito nets, working with 30 other U.S. college students to make a difference in villagers' lives.

Challenges: Learning to be sympathetic, but not pitiful towards villagers. Because my program focused on development, I encountered many people who lived in poverty and slums or scavenged for their food. But the funny thing is, they were the happiest people I'd ever met. In witnessing this, I learned how to sympathize with them, but not feel sorry for them.

Advice?

If you are studying abroad in a tropical climate, do your research and get the appropriate vaccines, pack the appropriate medicine and first aid supplies. Also, bring the right types of clothes, you want to feel comfortable!

2. Immerse yourself. It sounds silly, but try to be in the country, in the moment. It took me at least a month to feel less like a tourist and realize that I was in Thailand! The sooner you can be in the moment and away from Skype, Facebook and emails, the more you will get out of your experience.

3. Travel! Try to travel to countries near your host country because it will be cheap to take a lot of short trips. Plus, when will you ever be in that region for five or six months again?