

Sojourner Librarian: A Semester at Sea. California Academic and Research Libraries Conference, Irvine California, April 5, 2008

For the Spring 2007 semester I took a leave of absence from my regular job at UCSB to accept a temporary librarian appointment with the SAS study abroad program. The following presentation is an overview of that experience:

“On a ship, going around the world, at twenty miles an hour”. This is how we came to describe the Spring 2007 voyage of the Institute for Shipboard Education’s Semester at Sea (or SAS) Program. SAS is a study abroad program on a shipboard university that visits 12 ports in 11 countries, while circumventing the globe. Over the course of 100 days, 702 students and 48 faculty and staff (*including a registrar, deans, AV and IT coordinators, librarians, a medical team, and resident directors*) visited the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Brazil, South Africa, Mauritius, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, Japan, and Honolulu.

I had the privilege of being one of two shipboard librarians, the assistant librarian to the senior librarian (*the senior librarian is always UVA librarian, the program’s academic sponsor*). In today’s talk, I will cover information about – the library, life on-board the ship, traveling in the ports, how I how I got the job, and other FAQs. For a more detailed narrative of my experience see my Sojourner Librarian blog at: <http://www.sojournerlibrarian.blogspot.com/>
(SEE SLIDE 1)

The Library

The shipboard library has 9000 volumes and is staffed 12 hours a day, by the two librarians and five work study students. (*students also have proxy access to UVA databases*) There are two public terminals and limited seating. The library is not in a secure area behind

closed doors so there is access to the collection when the library is not staffed. The collection supports the liberal arts, itinerary-oriented global studies curriculum conducted on board the ship.

Librarian duties include, reference, circulation, reserves, cataloging, instruction (*one shots*), collection analysis (*gift review and cd recommendations*), and training and supervision of student workers. (SEE SLIDES 2-10).

Like any academic appointment, in addition to regularly assigned duties, you are expected to be an integral part of the shipboard community, which includes attendance in the interdisciplinary Global Studies course, which meets daily, and other service opportunities. For instance, committee assignments, and participation in social and educational programming activities. Staff can also volunteer to serve as trip leaders on any of the Semester at Sea field trips in port. Port days are holidays; while in port, the library and the rest of campus, except the dining halls, are closed. While in port, you can travel anywhere in country that you like.

Frequently asked questions from people who found out I was doing this included:

Q: Do they pay you?

A: Yes, \$2,900 stipend, plus room and board on the ship – another benefit is no cooking, laundry or cleaning for three months.

Q: Do you have to share a cabin?

A: Staff and faculty do not, only students

Q: Is there Internet access?

A: Yes, but it's very slow and expensive

Q: Do you get seasick?

A: No, but that doesn't mean I won't. I did experience a mild form of seasickness, which was sever fatigue from the constant motion

Q: Was your job supportive?

A: Not originally but after we discussed why I wanted to do it (it's a mental health issue), why they should grant me leave for two quarters (because I deserve it), and how my work would get done (loving and supportive colleagues), they reluctantly granted me personal leave without pay. I also mentioned the fact that I was prepared to turn in my resignation.

Q: Why would you want to do it?

A: Travel, learning, and librarianship are my passions and this was an opportunity to combine them.

Q: How did you get the job is a very

A: In 2005, I went to the SAS Web site and submitted an application for any voyage from Fall 2006 forward (*applications stay active for five years*). After applying, I cleared my schedule, let committee assignments expire, etc. and prayed. I interviewed for the fall 2006 voyage, but wasn't hired. The next semester, when I interviewed again, by a different senior librarian, I was.

The Ship, The MV Explorer

I'd never been on a cruise ship before, but compared to the ones that were docked next to us in the Bahamas, I'd say the ship is the size of a small cruise ship (*the Bahamas and Honolulu were the only places where we were docked at cruise ship terminals; other ports were in developing countries with no cruise ship tourism; so we were docked at commercial ports in industrial areas*). In addition to a library, facilities include a campus store, a union/auditorium, 2 dining halls, pool, pool bistro, piano bar, basketball court, wellness center (*for working out or sprucing up, - hair nails, etc.*), student life desk, faculty and staff lounge, administrative offices (registrar, deans, purser, field office), classrooms, and a multimedia lab. (SEE SLIDES 11-22)

The Shipboard Community/Culture

Living in a self-contained shipboard community is a cultural experience in and of itself. Very few people on staff or faculty have been on a SAS voyage before. Thus, day one is most everyone's first day on the job. This is by design, a SAS community building mechanism:

COMMUNITY BUILDING BLOG EXCERPT.

Sherri L. Barnes - University of California, Santa Barbara Libraries

i boarded the ship on wednesday, january 31 for orientation. i've only been off the ship once since then. january 31 was not only my first day on the job, but it was the first day on the job for every other staff and faculty person who will be working on this shipboard campus. combine that with the fact that classes start on february 6, and you have one unique situation. like most academic institutions one's first day on the job and the beginning of the semester entail a considerable number of meetings. thus, in between figuring out how the hell to do my job, or i should say in between figuring out how the hell "we" (erin, the other librarian, and I) run the library, i've been to a few meetings. the meetings have been about campus life, and have very little to do with how to run the library. finding out about shipboard life, who's responsible for what, campus policies, procedures, departments, etc, is good, but it doesn't change the fact that when consulting another department or faculty person, that it's their first week on the job too – this is the institute for shipboard education's (ise) means of building community. it seems to be working, we're all definitely in the same clueless boat – or i should say ship (they're very sensitive about certain terminology).

On the ship, time is very illusive. The academic calendar alternates between odd and even A & B days, not Monday-Sunday, and as we travelled west to east we would lose hours, at some points setting our clocks ahead daily. By the end we would have to have two April 30ths to catch up. Throughout the blog I refer to time issues. Toward the end of the voyage, in more and more hostile terms. Same with the dining hall food, but that's another story. (*See yellow handout with calendar and itinerary*)

Once things settled down, work, play, and programming become fairly routine. Regular evening shipboard activities included community college programming (*one-shot lectures, classes, workshops, etc. by volunteer resident experts*), student group meetings, films looping on the closed-circuit TV in the cabins; and faculty and staff happy hour in the lounge. Other organized events over the course of the voyage include a sea Olympics (*a student competition*); Neptune's day (a full day's activities to commemorate crossing the equator); the ambassador's ball, talent shows, fundraisers (*students of service*) etc.

It's actually a good thing that the more chaotic part of the voyage is in the beginning, because there is more time (7-10 days) between ports to adjust to work and life on-board the

ship. Later, once we hit Asia, there are only a 1-3 days between ports. And, in addition to working in between ports, time is also needed to plan travel for the next port (this is one advantage to having a significant other with you; while you're working they can plan travel). Yes, it's all pretty exhausting, but you'd be surprised how quickly one is rejuvenated once the ship is cleared (*once customs and diplomatic briefings are complete*) and you're able to walk off the ship into a new country.

Learn, Travel and Discover

The greatest thing about traveling with SAS is that before arriving at each country you learn so much about the social, cultural, economic, historical, and political aspects of the country – through the global studies course; cultural preports; diplomatic briefings; interport students and lecturers (*usually a student and professor from the country that we'll be visiting next. They sail with us to their country from the previous*); and other information made available.

With all of this inside information, combined with the opportunity to participate in SAS organized field trips, one's in country travel often gives one access to people and places that you wouldn't be able to visit during a normal tourist experience. Three good examples of this are my Brazil, Cape Tow, India, and Japan experiences, which are detailed in the blog. This excerpt from my India blog posting is a good example of what a SAS field trip can be like.

EXCERPTS FROM INDIA POSTING

i'm really glad i decided to be a trip leader for the nargercoil trip. myself and the four students had a great time with our host family, eating like indian royalty, and visiting various industries and cultural sites in the area. the afternoon we arrived in chennai we took a motorcoach the short distance to the train station where we met prof. prem kala and her niece mahisa, who was coming along for the fun of it. prem kala, a professor and native of nargercoil, was our local guide who would accompany us on our homestay and village-farm-plantation visits. we traveled to nargercoil on an overnight sleeper train.

the train left chennai at 5:30 pm and arrived in nagercoil at 6:05 am. the train was comfortable enough but i didn't sleep much because i was excited about the trip and was in a compartment with three strangers who came and went at different times during the night. also, at certain stops the attendant would knock on the door when trying to find the appropriate compartment for a passenger. on the way back i had a compartment to myself. i slept through the night. in part, because i was exhausted from trying to keep up with these young students who seem to be able to go 24/7 and need to experience everything. funny how they can go all day and night and anxiously agree to get up at 6am for more sightseeing, but can't get to global studies class at 9:20am in the morning.

our host family, the kumaraswami's, had a teenage son at home and a son at the university in chennai. they've traveled all over the world. their first stay in the u.s. was in santa Barbara. latha, mrs. kumaraswani, met us at the train station in the air-conditioned coach that would carry us everywhere the three days we were there.

after arriving at her home we cleaned up and had breakfast, the first of many incredible home cooked meals we'd eat with our fingers and occasionally on banana leaves. latha never gave us a chance to get hungry before we were fed again. the motorcoach we were transported in was also stocked full of snacks and beverages. i can't tell you everything we eat, because every meal was different, and unlike indian food in the u.s. we talked much about food, and any time we mentioned a certain type of food, it would be served at the next meal. while driving down the road, we passed a herd of goats. recalling the many west indian goat rotis i had in brooklyn, i asked latha if they eat goat. the next meal we had goat. after our discussion of crunchy and sweet plantains from puerto rico, fried bananas were served at our next meal.

we didn't realize exactly how wealthy the family was until we visited the rubber plantation, and thread factory. her husband was there to greet us at the rubber plantation and show us how the operation worked. it wasn't until the end of the tour that we realized that they actually owned the plantation. midway through the tour of the thread factory we asked if they owned that too. they did. we stopped asking.

we also saw how certain traditional products, coir mats (think pottery barn jute rugs and door mats) and pottery were made by hand, without any type of automation. because like products are being produced by machines at a much lower cost than the handmade ones, these industries and traditional ways of doing things are in jeopardy of being lost forever. the government is subsidizing what's left of the tradition to protect it. the kumaraswami's don't own these industries, but the easy access they have, and the respect granted them, was further evidence of their status and influence in the community.

nagercoil is near the southern most tip of india, where three bodies of water meet - the arabian sea, the bay of bengal and the indian ocean. kanyakamauri is the focal point of this very popular indian tourist area. latha took us there to see "the rock", where the vivekananda memorial is. Swami Vivekanandi meditated on the rock in 1892 before becoming one of india's most popular crusaders. the rock is an island about 400 meters off shore, and only accessible by ferry. the views from the island are peaceful and serene, despite the many hindu pilgrims who flock here. we were the only westerners. actually, in chennai, nagercoil, and kanyakamari, there were no sign of western tourism at all - no hotels, no tour operators, no westerners.

latha also took us inside a 3000 year old temple, with all of the hindu gods carved into the outside . the temple was created over the reign of three gods. i felt somewhat uncomfortable and out of place, but latha really wanted to share it with us. we bought offerings for the god that was being honored that day, and visited three others. worshipping all could have taken hours. latha called it the short cut version. ghandi's shrine is also in this area too. although the attendants at the temple didn't give any indication that non-practicing foreigners weren't allowed, i don't think we would have been permitted in if latha wasn't with us. with latha, mahisa and prem kala by our side, the attendants guided us around and explained the significance and history to us.

latha's family also owns and operates a school we visited. instruction is in english. we spent time at the school interacting with the students, who were finishing up there end of the year exams. the students' native language is tamil, the language of this part of india (tamil nadu). in chennai, hindi is the lingua franca.

(SEE SLIDES 23-49)

Probably the most interesting part of traveling around the world for me was how I, as a black American woman, was perceived in the different regions. The first half of the voyage, in the Caribbean, South America, and Africa, until I spoke, I was frequently mistaken for a local. I wouldn't be off the ship long before people started asking me for directions, time, or just speaking to me in the local language. I had travelled in Latin America and Africa before so I was comfortable traveling independently in these areas, and I did. One benefit of being mistaken for a local is being able to walk the markets without being pressured to buy from the market women and men. Once they realized that I wasn't a local, it became a game to guess my nationality. Few easily identified me as American. It was the same for many of the black students. However, it was a little disconcerting for the students. I think they saw it as a loss of a perceived privilege.

Because I had never been to Asia, and I had heard that it's a harder place to travel independently, once there, I did the guided tours offered by SAS, which were your standard hop on hop off bus agency tours. In Asia, including long-time democracies like India, my locks drew a lot of attention. That combined with my skin color made me quite a novelty. The women

workers in the pottery cooperative that we visited stared hard and long at me with big smiles on their faces. Likewise, women from the feminist cooperative, Working Women's Forum, in Chennai, that provides micro loans to women also found me to be a huge curiosity and stared at me throughout our visit there.

In the Forbidden City and at the Great Wall I was more of an attraction to the thousands of Chinese tourists than the actual sites. People gathered around me wherever I went, whispered and pointed. The brave ones, approached me, positioned me for photos and snapped my picture. The first time it happened, at the top of the Great Wall, a woman grabbed me, and before I knew what was going on, positioned me next to her, while her husband snapped the picture. This occurred so often that the people I was traveling with began taking pictures of me getting my picture taken. (SEE SLIDES 50-54)

In Conclusion

People always ask what my **favorite country was**. I have two South Africa and Vietnam. South Africa for its multiculturalism and beauty, and Vietnam for the culture and the people – their kindness, sophistication, and resilience (*“Some countries have earthquakes, flood or tsunamis, we have invaders. We’ve come to expect it, deal with it, and move on, without any animosity”*).

Since Vietnam has opened up to outside investment and have been adopting free-market economic policies, they have managed their growth and values in ways that you don't see in rapidly emerging countries like China and Malaysia. The western big box stores, malls and chain stores haven't taken over the landscape; they're there, they're just not a big part of the aesthetic. People still rely on motorcycles, rather than SUVs and cars, to get around, and the

really quaint French and Chinese influenced aesthetic is used for the many modern boutiques and eateries that can be found on the streets of Saigon. (SEE SLIDES 55-81)

Other frequently asked end of voyage questions are:

Q: Would you do it again?

A: Yes, but not by myself again, and not anytime soon.

Q: What will you miss?

A: Although I live on the California coast, I'll miss the awesome views while at sea. The cloud formations, endless horizon, big sky, and sunsets are spellbinding.

(SEE SLIDES 82-87)

How to Become a SAS Librarian

To learn more about how to become a SAS librarian visit their Web site

<http://www.semesteratsea.org/>.

(SEE SLIDE 88)