



SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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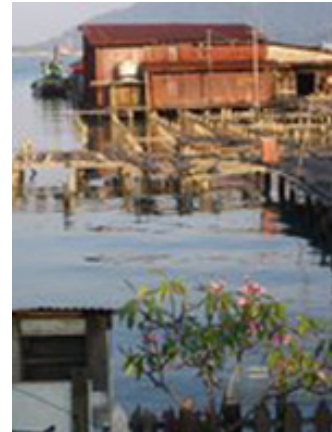
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Singapore, Sp06

This is Part II of Virginia's Singapore education abroad adventure. In this expanded Newsletter issue she recounts her five major trips to Borneo, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand.

Petite, clean and orderly, Singapore is a beacon of modern comfort and luxury in Southeast Asia. With a coastline as its only natural resource, Singapore developed itself into an economic powerhouse through rigorous innovation and formalized systems. In all its modernity and efficiency, Singapore is distinct from the surrounding countries of Southeast Asia. While studying at the National University of Singapore and traveling to its neighboring countries in the spring of 2006, I became intimately aware of the cultural distinctions and unique personalities of the countries that make up Southeast Asia.

BORNEO

I flew from Singapore to Miri, a city in Sarawak, one of the two Malaysian regions on the island of Borneo in the first month of my exchange program. I arrived in the coastal city with a group of 8 people, Americans and Canadians outfitted with backpacks and Lonely Planet travel guides. In Miri we ate local seafood at a restaurant that hugged a bay off the South China Sea. Our hotel cost US \$4 per night and it was easy to find a lively nightlife once the sun went down. Half of our group split off to visit Brunei, while four of us took a small plane South into the jungle. We flew to Mulu and walked a couple of miles from the airport to a national park that we called home for 4 days.



We hiked, climbed, swam, went boating and conned our way into a spelunking trip far beyond our experience level. We learned about the animals, the plants and the indigenous tribes of the jungle while we

sweated through hot afternoons. I traveled with Michael Zuvich, a fellow Penn Stater, and two Canadian friends, James and Marissa, who we met on campus early in the exchange program. Mike, James and I became travel partners for the rest of the 4 months that we spent in Asia.



MALAYSIA

I took a night bus from a dark, shady portion of Singapore to a dark, shady portion of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for my second adventure away from the University. James and I arrived in Kuala Lumpur at four in the morning and we ate at a prata shop to pass the time until we could check into a hostel. It was the Chinese New Year and the city was bursting with people on the go. After a couple of nights in Kuala Lumpur, we struggled to find an open bus to take us north to Ipoh, the city where James's grandparents live as British ex-pats. We arrived at their home, a



Borneo is the third largest island in the world. It has an area of 743,330 km² (287,000 square miles), and is located at the centre of the Malay archipelago and Indonesia. Borneo is considered to be part of the geographic region of Southeast Asia. Administratively, this island is divided between Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. - Wikipedia



Roti canai or **Roti Chen-nai** (known as **Roti prata** in Singapore) is a dish found in Malaysia, Singapore, and Kerala (India). Roti means bread in Hindi, Urdu, most other North Indian languages, and Malay. The term "canai" derives from "channa", a mixture of boiled chickpeas in a spicy gravy from Northern India which it was traditionally served with.

- Wikipedia



peaceful property with a gate and a lush garden, eager to enjoy local comforts. After a few days of five o'clock tea time

in the garden, morning meals at various roti cheni restaurants and plenty of beers at the FMS, a famous Malaysian bar, James and I went directly west to the Malaysian coast where we took a crowded ferry to Pankor Island. We rented a moped and were lucky to find an open room on the busy Chinese New Year. We rode around the entire island beach-hopping and exploring. The beaches were ideal with white sand meeting clear water beneath arching palm trees. I drove the moped once, and only once, because I successfully crashed it into a parked truck within the first 30 seconds of driving it! We returned to Ipoh later in the semester to see James's grandparents and relax in their garden.

INDONESIA

I spent spring break exploring the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. James, Mike and I flew to Manado, a city sitting on the northern tip of the northern arm of the island. We arrived in Indonesia without plans or contacts. We found our way to a small, rustic resort north of Manado. Owned by a German woman and her Indonesian partner, the Pulisan resort was reached by taking a bumpy van ride through coconut farms and impoverished villages to a small Christian community that lived in what seemed to be perfect harmony. Everyone waved with big smiles as we drove by and our smiles beamed back as they yelled "Hello Mister!" to our open windows. We hiked along a dirt path for about fifteen minutes and suddenly the trees opened up to the crystal blue ocean. Catherine, the German owner of the resort, was waiting with open arms and fresh juice. Being the only guests, we were taken care of by a group of warm and loving locals. We went boating everyday with a crew of four or five men. We stopped to go snorkeling or scuba diving and to visit small islands with hard packed dirt roads and beautiful, happy children.

One afternoon, as we napped on a beach after eating lunch, we were offered a bag of freshly caught lobster. We bought the lobsters for about US \$2 and brought them back to the resort with us. The cooks prepared them for us that night. The lobster was so wonderful and fresh that we found the same man the next afternoon and we bought even more lobster from him. Leaving Catherine's place was

hard but we had to return to Manado after a few days to meet three friends who were flying in from Singapore and we knew that it was time to continue our journey through the rest of Sulawesi.

With determination to reach the Banda Islands we flew Southeast of Manado to Ambon, a small island in the Moluccas. We flew to Ambon with caution as we understood that the region was home of continuing religious conflict. Catherine from Pulisan had a friend from the Red Cross who had recently left the region and she advised that, as long as we were cautious, we would be safe. Once we landed in Ambon City we tried every way possible to get to the Banda Islands. We could not charter a boat or plane to take us there and after a day of logistical confusion we had to give up on our dream. We planned on staying near the airport and flying somewhere else in the morning. At that point I asked a young man in a uniform if I could borrow his cell phone. He was the first person that I had met in the 30 hours we had been in Ambon who could speak English. I told him about our struggle and our concern in finding a place to stay. It turned out that he worked for the mayor and he considered our visit, the first visit from American and Canadian backpackers that he had heard of since the religious conflict started, a concern of the mayor. He called his office and was able to take off work for the rest of the day and before we knew it we were being driven, in one of the mayors cars, all around the island. The young man and his friend brought us to their favorite places which included a long dock that jutted into the magnificent bay and a small village where the "Snake Caller" used eggs to beckon huge eels into our hands. James, Mike and I went to dinner with our two new friends that night and we ate fresh fish on a street that was burned and scarred from the religious conflict. We asked if the conflict was personal to them and they replied quite simply that they did not believe in the fight. One of our friends was a Christian, the





other a Muslim. “We have no problem with each other,” they told us, “it’s the government that wants us to fight.” After dinner our friends told us that they had to go to the radio station because they were the hosts for the 10 o’clock spot. They asked if they could interview us for their show. The next thing we knew, James, Mike and I were live on the air in Indonesia. Teenagers called in with questions and by the end of the show a group of 10 to 20 people had come radio station to see if we were actually there. We spent the night drinking

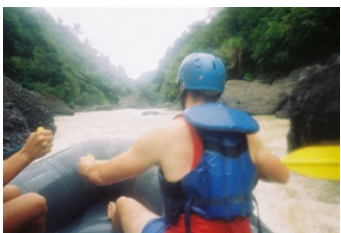


warm beer on the street corner with locals who wanted to know everything about New York City, American cars and, believe it or not, Tom Hanks. At that point we had returned the mayors car to his office, so we hopped on the back of our friends Vespas and rode back to the hotel. As we boarded the plane the next morning the stewardess brought us a brown

paper bag. We opened it and found gifts from one of our new friends: three wooden bracelets and a Vespa t-shirt.



We flew from Ambon to Ujung Pandang, or Makassar, and took a hot, 9-hour van ride into the mountains. We rode with a local man who worked for one of Catherine’s friends to Toraja, Indonesia. In Toraja we had running water in our little bungalows, a luxury we had been without until this point in this trip because showering in Pulisan and Ambon had consisted of scooping cold water out of a stagnant basin. We had an old land rover in Toraja and we rode on the roof through miles of rice paddies up into the mountains. We hiked through the fields with helmets and paddles until we came, exhausted and muddy, to the banks of a raging river. Two white water rafting boats were waiting for us and we spent the rest of the day on the river, stopping to climb waterfalls and jump off huge rocks.



Toraja is known for its unique funeral practices and a short story about my experience at a Torajan funeral touches on some of the traditional customs. We arrived at the funeral site along with hundreds of other people who were coming in on crammed truck beds. We were wearing black sarongs and we brought a big box of cigarettes as a gift to the family. We drank tea in wooden structures that had been erected as sleeping places for the



hordes of people who were coming to the funeral. We attracted a lot of attention, being the only foreigners at the affair. For this reason, we held the attention of the family for quite some time as others stared at us from behind thick cigarette smoke. When I walked into the center of these structures I was met by laughter from the men and women around me. Three older women came towards me with laughter in their eyes and smiles on their warm faces. They took the sarong off of my shoulders and began tying it around my waist. All eyes were on me as they changed my sarong from the “man’s style” to the “woman’s style.” I laughed with them and smiled at all of the men who were wide eyed at my presence.



We watched three water buffalo get sacrificed that afternoon. I sat on mat on the wooden floor and looked around me. I closed my eyes. I remembered sitting in the shiny blue taxi on the clean, palm tree lined streets when I first arrived in Singapore. I had felt so far from home at that time but now it seemed distant and easy. This moment eclipsed all feelings of independence. I watched the water buffalo being dragged down the hill, I felt dark eyes all over me, I watched a child stroke a pig that was being prepared for sacrifice and I cried with reverence for a moment that I did not understand.



VIETNAM

After a long weekend in Hanoi, Vietnam, my desire to live and work in Asia was cemented. James, Mike and I met a young German ex-pat in the passport line at the airport in Hanoi. He gave us the business card of the café/bar that he



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owns in the middle of the city. We found a hostel that was inexpensive but grand despite its decaying crown molding and chipping paint on its high ceilings. We could feel the French influence on our balcony and we matched it with dinner in a fine French restaurant. We were able to find the café/bar that our new friend owned quite easily and he joined us for a complimentary glass of wine. Chuck told us about the ex-pat life in Hanoi, fascinating us with his stories of the incredible life he had made for himself in northern Vietnam. Chuck showed us around the city the next day and brought us to the his country club to play a game of volleyball with an American, a recent Harvard graduate, who had been teaching English in Hanoi for the past 8 months. We went to a party with Chuck and his friends that night. We rode the back of mopeds to a small house that was full of light and excitement. Young Europeans and Americans who had made their home in Asia were hanging out with friends from Vietnam and its neighboring countries. “How long are you here for?” they would ask us and when I said that I was only in town for a few days they would gasp “Oh! But you have to stay longer!” They would tell me about the glut of jobs in the city, explaining that I could teach English at the drop of a hat and without much more trouble I could open a café or a hotel. “This city needs everything,” I was told by a young Swede in a Vietnamese head wrap. The next morning I stepped out onto the crowded street and found a local woman selling cut up pineapple from a basket on the back of her bicycle. Just being in the city made me feel like I was in on a wonderful secret.

THAILAND

Between exams at the National University of Singapore, I took a trip to Thailand. It was the last Southeast Asian country I traveled to during the exchange program and it was a trip that I took by myself. I left Singapore with the goal of relaxing, preparing myself for the end of my experience in Asia. My goal was to find time to reflect peacefully while experiencing more of the region of the world that I had fallen in

love with over the previous 4 months. Pang, the driver I mentioned in last month’s newsletter, picked me up at my dorm room at 4:30 in the morning and by 7:30 am I was off the coast of Thailand in a long boat in the Adaman Sea. The boat engine failed and I was floating in the blue water with a group of Scandinavians I had met on the mainland as our driver, a local tanned by life on the water, scanned the sea with a strong hand over his dark eyes. The breeze, as pure as the water, cooled our warm skin as we waited amongst beautiful rocks that jut out from the sea. About half an hour later another long boat, identical but for its unique configuration of colorful fabric on the front, pulled alongside us. We climbed onto the other longboat, squeezing alongside a group of Swiss backpackers. I stayed three nights in a small bungalow in a coastal resort of Railay Beach, Thailand. I read on the beach, I napped on the porch and I wrote by the pool in a 4-day retreat.



The brief but brilliant period of time I spent studying abroad in Southeast Asia will remain one of the most significant times of my life. Through a series of unique and exotic experiences I was able to develop my understanding of the world and my place within it. When I look at a map of Southeast Asia I am taken back to warm beaches, deep caves and dense jungles. I remember Singapore’s towering skyline and the piles of coconuts on farms in Indonesia. I think of the wonderful people who opened their lives to me for the few days that I was traveling through their home. I cannot wait for the next time that I am boarding an airplane that is headed to Asia.

- Virginia Heard