PASSAGE | 2011-2012

Images & Reflections of Study Abroad
Table of Contents

TEXT
7 Anna Witte “Take a Trip with Me”
11 Kellea Floyd “Kinkakuji”
12 Rachel Cohan “Desert?”
16 Erin Donevan “Two Dead Goats, a Motswana Family, and a Lekgoa”
21 Douglas Colton “Our Personal Karaoke Bar”
22 Katy Sly “Chaos Drift”
26 Emily Wolf “Thap Theem”
28 Saskia Boggs “Kenya: A Love Letter”
30 Britta Seifert “The Final Installment”
32 Contributors
34 Special Thanks to...

PHOTOGRAPHS
4 Mirae Guenther “Downtown Strasbourg on the Ill River”
5 Ellen Murphy “Above Granada”
6 Emily Wolf “Nong Mai”
8 Angela Frakes “Zaragoza Alley”
9 Jonathan Posner “Gammel Scrand”
10 Kellea Floyd “Kinkakuji”
12 Christine Lewis “Toubab Diallo”
13 Milo Madole “Reykjavik Harbor: 4am”
14 Saskia Boggs “Maasai Mara at Sunrise”
15 Theresa Hale “Ancient Sassi”
17 Daedalian Derks “Street Market Vendor, Athens”
18 Nathan Gilmour “Panzano”
19 Meredith Quinlan “Suma Wa Ker” (Wolof for “my family”)
20 Erin Donevan “Bina” (Setswana verb “to dance”)
22 Meredith Quinlan “Touba”
23 Katy Sly “Pirogues”
24 Anna Miller “Cusco Plaza”
25 Theresa Hale “Rural Traditions”
27 Saskia Boggs “London Traffic”
29 Jamie Schaub “Learning from the Spirits of Children”
31 Erin Donevan “Hitching”
33 Angela Frakes “Les Champs à Paris”
34 Zachary Holden “Barfu Camp”

Front Cover | Daedalian Derks “Ikaria Countryside”
Inside Front Cover | Christine Lewis “Car Rapide”
Inside Back Cover | Zachary Holden “Hell’s Gate”
Back Cover | Nathan Gilmour “Night Train”
Letter from the Editors

No matter where we go in the world, everyone on study abroad encounters the excitement, lulls, and lags of traveling. We take transportation to get from one place to the next, whether that is by way of stuffy airplanes and subways to the beautifully painted, metal skeletons of the Senegalese car rapide. Movement means not only survival on a daily basis for most, but also change, exploration, and experience. These elements are very present in the memories and stories shared by students in this year’s Passage. From Erin Donevan and Anna Witte’s adventures that start in the bed of a pickup truck to Kellea Floyd and Douglas Colton’s sardine-packed experiences with public transportation in East Asia, movement is the precursor to many of the amazing stories and images that we see here.

As we saw this pattern emerging, the Passage staff decided to open and close the Passage with the theme of transportation. The cover pages, both inside and out, of this year’s Passage embody modes of transportation, whether fuel powered, people powered, or no longer powered, like the cover photo “Ikaria Countryside” by Daedalian Derks.

In doing study abroad, we often say that “we went,” but we also say that “we lived” in the countries where we studied. The everyday moments fill the gaps between the coming and going by way of planes, trains, buses, cars, and bikes. The inner pages in this year’s Passage from Emily Wolf’s photo “Nong Mai” to Meredith Quinlan’s photo “Suma Wa Ker” (Wolof for “my family”) move beyond the blurring landscapes and allow us a glimpse into the intimacies of everyday life, and meaningful memories that emerge when life slows down. These moments allow us to reflect, connect, and most of all digest all the food we have eaten.

Katy Sly, Editor-in-Chief
Nathan Gilmour, Photo Editor
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Ellen Murphy | Above Granada
We’ll start in the back of a pickup truck. Five eager students bounce up and down as they wind their way up and through mountain after mountain. Into the heart of the forest, hours away from telephone service and junk mail. Miles away from paved roads and traffic jams. Worlds away from the city life you’re accustomed to.

Now you’ve arrived at Huay Tong Kaw, greeted by your smiling moogas and pawtees (aunts and uncles). It is a village with a vibrant and close knit Karen tribe community eager to share their culture, their time, and more than a few laughs with their new children. Don’t worry, it takes no time to get accustomed to life in the mountains. Waking up to the chickens, a not entirely welcomed personal serenade welcoming you to join your family around the fire...which is providing the only heat and light as the sun has yet to be awakened by the poultry choir. A couple hours of slowly and steadily cooking eggs, pumpkin, and peppersauce (always accompanied with rice of course) all the while singing songs in Bawkenyaw, a way for Mooga Napal to simultaneously teach and poke fun at her silly foreign children. All the while Pawtee Sakoo scurries about busily, making bamboo cups, feeding the pigs that grumble hungrily underneath the tree house-esque, stilted bamboo fortress where you are residing.

Don’t get too comfortable though, as soon as you’ve finished your delicious fill of never-ending rice it’s off to the rai/na/...rice field. A half-hour walk of bumbling to keep up after 70-year-old pawtees while trying to soak in the view, by the time you arrive somehow your moogas have already started working (Wasn’t she still at the house when you left?) and your breath is already gone—taken away by the vastness of your family’s land amid the surrounding peaked landscape...a field of food, several families’ sustenance surrounded by wilderness.

But now is not the time to be out of breath, it’s time to work. Four hours of struggling to keep up with our guides and you’ll never take rice for granted again. They have the triple f’s down to a bowing T—fun, fast, and ‘Fficient’—so efficient they don’t need the ‘e.’ It becomes a beautiful rhythm, cutting bunches with a sickle, tying the bundles with a clump of dried husks without sacrificing any grains (this step a swift dancing twist of the hand and husks for the teachers—a slow tangle of limb and lumps for the struggling student).

Don’t worry, a break is in store...a trip to the “sabai shack” for lunch. Today’s menu: more rice! With a side of more pumpkin, another type of equally deliciously spicy pepper sauce and upon special request: zoo, a Bawkenya delicacy. Commonly known to foreigners as wild rat. Freshly skewered and roasted personally by Pawtee Papu and cooked specially in front of your eyes right in the sabai shack itself. If that’s not guaranteed freshness I don’t know what is.
The bus slowed down. I stood up and made my way to the front, “excuse me” pouring constantly from my lips like a Buddhist chant. Despite the sheer number of people on board, the line moved quickly. Once I reached the front, I paid my fare and stepped into the snow.

Snow. That’s why this morning was special: this was the first time it snowed since I arrived in Japan, and it happened to be on New Year’s Day. It was my opportunity to see Kinkakuji—the Golden Pavilion. Most of the people I knew had already visited the temple, posting glorious photos of the temple surrounded by lush, green forest on Facebook. I decided to wait; I wanted to see the temple during the winter and waited patiently for snowfall. I woke up that morning and realized my prayers had been answered.

I walked down the narrow side streets, following the trickle of people that turned into a flood when I reached the gates. People in orange vests herded us down narrow winding paths. I stepped over mud patches and gripped my camera with numb hands. There was a large crowd of people in front of the lake. I slowly pushed my way to the front.

The temple was like a crown sitting on a throne of white silk. The sky, already cloudy gray, became dingy in the contrast; the pristine snow covering the sloped roof as well as the trees, caused the temple to radiate a majestic glow. It stood out so beautifully from its surroundings I wondered if the temple was merely an illusion caused by the chill.

Most of my friends had seen the temple during the summer months, when it was surrounded by clusters of lush, green vegetation. I didn’t believe such a thing could exist.
Deserts are supposed to be filled with sand
I dust the dirt off my cuff when I come inside.
Deserts are supposed to be red and brown
The grass and trees surround me, covering me in green.
Deserts are supposed to be empty
Life surrounds me, bringing me into the culture.
Deserts are supposed to be quiet
Music can be heard at all hours of the day.
Deserts are supposed to have cacti
Trees cover the landscape and give shade.
Deserts are supposed to have vultures
Cats circle me as I eat, waiting for remains.
Lessons Learned at the Cattle Post:

1. Road trips laying in the bed of a truck and looking up at the vast and beautiful array of stars are much more enjoyable than road trips packed into the back of my family’s mini-van.

2. My Setswana sucks. I was getting all cocky throwing out my “Dumela raa’s,” “Ke tswa kwa’s,” and “Ke a rata’s,” but after spending a weekend trying to communicate with someone who spoke no English, I’ll fully admit that I don’t know jack squat.

3. Batswana wear more clothes when it gets hot, as opposed to Americans who wear less. My hosts were perturbed by my exposed skin. They had a hard time understanding my desire to cool off and get darker when they spend their summer covering their skin with long sleeves and long pants, trying to stay as light as possible. (On a related note, the warning label on the malaria pills wasn’t joking around. Direct exposure to sunlight really should be avoided while taking them).

4. Goats bleed when you kill them. A LOT.

4.5. It’s hard to eat goats after you petted them and then watched them bleed.

5. Batswana waste nothing and eat everything. Liver, lungs, heart, stomach lining, intestines. Yeah, I mean everything, and I’m proud to say that I tried all that I was served. If you know me, you know that this is a huge development. Under any normal circumstances I wouldn’t even eat a mushroom, let alone the insides of a goat that I watched slaughtered and skinned and prepared. What they couldn’t eat (the large bowls full of coagulated goat blood and the little baby goat fetus—surprise, one of the goats was pregnant!) they fed to the dogs.

6. Batswana like bathing, a lot. Also, they pronounce it “baahthing,” not “baything.” I honestly don’t think I’ve ever been so clean in my life. A bath in the morning, then one at night, then a bath again in the morning. I also learned how to “properly” bathe, as my first attempt was apparently all wrong. However, I am proud to say that, after a detailed demonstration, I now know the ins and outs of the bucket bath. (On a related note, Batsawna don’t mind being naked).

7. The Batswana are lovely hosts, they don’t beat around the bush trying to be polite, but they are open and caring and laugh with (and at) you as you navigate the new and unfamiliar culture!
National Holiday and all the Chinese students, including our roommates, have a week off. They seem to always have a holiday. Thankfully, we at least have today off. Two other “K” students and I decided to go to Xidan today, by far the busiest day I have seen in China so far. Imagine the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday. It’s like that, but bigger, due to Beijing’s size. Instead of being confined to particular shopping centers or Best Buy, it’s the whole city center. Being students, using public transportation was our only option (although taking a taxi would not have been better), which made getting anywhere a fight. We almost got separated as we left because I barely made it onto the subway train. Getting off the subway was no easier because Xidan’s station was just as packed as the subway train. People are not few.

Given the option, right then, I may have chosen to go home, but we went to shopping malls instead. In the mall we found nothing but expensive (by American standards) designer clothing. Some other day I will go to the silk market where the cheap knockoffs are. We ate lunch there, Big Mac with fries – although there are some slight differences, the McDonald’s still tastes familiar. Paul met some people while John and I went into a book store and I bought a Harry Potter book that I hope to read; I think that I will be able to understand it since the story is really familiar.

The two girls Paul met today are deaf. Since he knows Chinese sign language, he recognized their sign language when they were talking with each other. After butting in on their conversation we all spent the evening together.

Unfortunately, I don’t know how to say or write their names right now, but I know how to sign them out (and my name, and Paul’s, and how to say subway). They are freshmen at another university in Beijing. We went to Tiananmen Square with them, to stop by the biggest party I have ever seen. There were also some decorations in the square, including temporary gardens and a fountain, installed just for the holiday. We got a lot of weird looks, both as Americans on a Chinese Holiday and as sign language users. Afterwards we all went to eat dinner at a restaurant near Capital Normal’s campus.

After returning to the dorm, I joined a group of classmates for KTV or OK (Karaoke). This was a great time! We tried a couple Chinese songs, but we mainly stuck with English songs because they were more recognizable and the Chinese song lyrics were too quick for us. KTV is very exciting here, instead of being in a bar or on some other public place, Chinese KTV is in private sound proof rooms sizable enough for a crowd of 15 people. Although there is a pseudo stage and a mic stand, there are a few more mics placed around the room for everyone to join in. Add some boisterous Americans to the equation and everyone starts singing (yelling). This is great because no one is put on the spot and everyone gives energy to each other. We had a lot of fun.
Flag down the yellow and black.
*Asalammalekum.* God be with you. Metal on metal halt.
And also with you. *Amalekumsalam.*
Rusty ship with windows cracked. Accidents are rare, they say.
Dust clouds release from the seat cushion like mushroom spores.
*Nanga def?* What are you doing?
Sunlight peeking through door frames, back windows stickered with brotherhood names. *Cheikh Talibe.*
*Mangi fii.* I am here.
In the chaos drift.
In the chaos drift of fumes and bumps and ruts, and the road rules?
Chugging near but clear
of the other yellow-black mirrors,
and I wonder what would happen to this poor machine if there were
hills in the land of *teranga.*
Blog entry: August 25, 2010

4:45 am. Wake up. Still have not recovered from jet lag, apparently. Wander around, check email, read my comfort book (Princess Bride). Go back to sleep.

6:30 am. Wake up. Dress in school uniform with difficulty because I am too sticky from the heat to put on any articles of clothing. Awkwardly go to the kitchen, where Mae Aun has laid out a vast and improbable breakfast for me, so far having included:
  a. A citrusy soup with whole chilis
  b. Lots of rice
  c. A huge, excellent omelette
  d. JUST THIS MORNING: an entire fish, scales, head, eyes, and all.
  e. Thick soy milk with strange Western cereal

6:50 am. Have confusing conversation with Mae Aun about how I am going to get to school. Almost always, she recruits one of her many “children” — really, just other students — to drive me via motorbike.

7:00 am. Try to get ready fast enough, always fretting that I’ll forget something. Alerted by Mae Aun banging on my door from the outside that her kid is ready to go. I stumble out, grabbing spare pens on the way.

7:05 am. Awkwardly mount motorbike in knee-length black skirt and don huge white helmet.

7:05-7:15 am. Exciting/terrifying ride through the city. Every once in a while glimpse of speedometer reveals speeds of 80, which puts me in a brief panic, but then I remember it is in kilometers and is more like 55 or so.

8:00 am. Commence 4 hours of mind-numbing Thai lessons. I am in a class with five other “K” students. If a native speaker happened to hear our class, they would probably be filled with pity/fear at the mangled Thai we keep shouting/trying to read.

12:00 pm. Lunch. Amazing array of Thai food and fresh fruit. Everyone, mentally exhausted, eats way too much and shares stories about homestays/exciting food.

1:00 pm. This week, orientation. Ajaan Mark ("teacher") scares everyone straight with horrific stories about students who have done drugs or gone to brothels only to end up dead or in Thai prison for years. We are outside and are soon stuck to our seats with sweat.

3:00 pm. Occasionally, the class goes to the back patio area, changes into workout clothes, and participates in Crossfit training, which is insane. The 90+ degree weather makes everyone almost pass out. Our trainer plays Fergie and Lady Gaga, which I discover I have not escaped.

4:00-5:00 pm. Get a ride home from Ben, my host sister. She is a better driver than some of Mae Aun’s other children, and spends less time accelerating as intensely as possible.

5:15 pm. Arrive home, shower (maybe), collapse and rest for a little while.

6:45 pm. Ben and Nat and I hang out. Occasionally they tell me about something they are taking me to do. Sometimes we go out to eat, other times we sit in Mae Aun’s tiny kitchen and eat the huge quantities of food she puts down in front of us.

8:00ish. Wash dishes outside. Hang out a little more. If possible, study Thai a little bit.

8:02 pm. Fall asleep as soon as body is horizontal. Repeat.

Today I asked one of the Thai instructors what Mae Aun’s nickname for me (thap theem) means, and found out that it means pomegranate.
My whole life, or at least ever since I was a freshman in high school, on a plane touching down in San Francisco, en-route to my uncle’s Chico-dwelling family, I’ve thought of the earth as a woman’s body, framed in undulating hills and narrowing valleys. Being in Kenya has only strengthened this belief. Standing on the ocher-red soil that doesn’t develop the cracks and fissures I’m used to seeing during drought, I am safe in the embrace of the mountain ridges, the cupped valleys, the hollows between earth’s soft arms and softer breasts.

Outside the dust and pollution of Nairobi, the air in Kenya is spicy, rich with the scent of fresh-crushed greenery and naked wood. Clouds swoop down and kiss the hills straining towards the sky. Driving through the Great Rift Valley, seeing highlands rise up sharp beside me, I wonder: is this the roof of the world? I realize: No. It’s her backbone. They say that Kenya is the cradle of life, and I don’t doubt this for a second. With each new expansive vista, I am invariably driven to the brink of tears, at the wonder and wild beauty of it all. I want to reach out and touch everything I see. I want to lie down near one of the giant cacti sprinkling the savannahs, under the weight of the enormous sky, and come up again with grass tangling in my hair and dirt smudging over my skirt.

I love the sun as it slowly roasts me, and the frigid night breezes. But, even more than that, I love walking home from the matatu stop every day under jacaranda trees, slowly losing their flowers to the red-stained street in luscious blue drips, past mimosa and palm and acacia trees, through flowers that smell even more vibrant than they look. I love the splashes of color that burst through on the smoggiest days. I love the way that, from our classroom, you can see mountains beyond the city limits if it’s not too cloudy.

I love, always and unabashedly, coming up on the first overlook over the Great Rift Valley, the way that there are levels of distance: on the closest, you can see the farms and the train tracks and even some people; on the farthest, it’s just smudges of color and stark mountains in the background and so much cloudy air that everything just seems ethereal and, honestly, makes me feel like I’m in “James and the Giant Peach,” watching the cloud men make their weather, because the few things I can make out seem so fantastical and far-away foggy.

I don’t love the trash littering the ground, or the fact that the spray-painted warnings on certain walls about no dumping rubbish in front of them are necessary. I don’t love that the matatu stop to get into town in the morning smells somewhat like human feces. I don’t love the exhaust when it rises up with the dust and chokes me, and I certainly don’t love the prolific mosquitoes. I don’t love the gashes cut into the forests to squeeze out another hectare of cash crops.

But the body of the earth in Kenya, although it is blemished, is not ravaged, and when I’m driving along the highway, watching mountains rear up over great plains, sometimes brown-dry; sometimes emerald and moist, but always full of trees that look sometimes familiar and sometimes like a van Gogh painting, even when the roads are full of unmended potholes and speed bumps that leave me airborne for seconds at a time, all I can think is: I am safe inside a mother’s warm, sweet-smelling, dusty embrace. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.
When my family arrived, the plane was only an hour late, which is punctual by Indian standards. Apparently four Americans and their luggage were too much for the small car I’d hired to pick my family up at the airport, because it broke down halfway into the city. We split up into two rickshaws and completed the ride to our hotel, during which my mother seriously doubted that she would ever see my father and me (who were in the other rickshaw) again. I’d forgotten to tell her that it’s normal for rickshaw drivers to take a detour to buy some *paan* (chewing tobacco) along the way—no, they’re not trying to kidnap you, Mom.

The rest of our time in India was filled with the trials and excitements that should be a part of any trip to India. My family was awed by the sights and sounds and smells of Varanasi. We took a boat ride down the Ganga—though I think they found the careening auto rickshaw ride through the crowded streets to be more of a thrill. We had dinner with the family of Prastuti Mishra, my Hindi teacher. I was so happy that my U.S. family got to meet my Varanasi family—and eat the delicious food that I’d come to love!

We left Varanasi by train, the first of four overnight trains on our journey. I’m proud of my parents for handling these long train rides with such grace. Even the time we all had to jump onto a moving train and spend four hours sitting on the floor next to a stinky bathroom was laughed about the next day. We saw the Taj Mahal, in all its majesty—even though one member of the family had to conquer a nasty bout of food poisoning to make it there. We visited the Jodhpur, the “blue city” of Rajasthan and wandered through a magnificent centuries-old fort on a hilltop. We saw the sights in Delhi—including the Gallery of Modern Art, the *ghat* where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated and Indira Gandhi’s house—and met up with friends the Chopras, who had so wonderfully taken care of me during my time in India.

After a whirlwind week and a half, my father and sister were headed back to the States. But my mother and I still had a week left in India, so we headed north—to the Himalayas—which quickly became our favorite place in India. McLeod Ganj, a small mountain village outside of Dharamasala, is home to tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The town is quaint and clean, with lots of Tibetan babies to warm your heart and delicious Tibetan soups to warm the rest of you. My mom and I visited sites around the town—such as the temple complex that is home to His Holiness, and a Children’s Village that houses orphaned Tibetan refugee children. We relaxed at cafes with our books and wandered the shops. We ate great food—Tibetan soups and *momos* (dumplings), and even some remarkably delicious Burmese mutton—and took a cooking class, struggling to form dough into delicately pinched *momos*. One of our favorite things to do was walk the path that circles the Dalai Lama’s temple complex—it is lined with prayer flags and prayer wheels, and each day we saw tiny elderly Tibetans walking the path to complete their prayers. All in all, McLeod Ganj was wonderful—clean, beautiful, calm and delicious.

After a nauseating car trip down winding mountain roads, we took a plane to Delhi. From there, my mom flew home—but I stayed another night, with the Chopras. On my second day in India, back in July, the Chopras had shown me around Delhi and welcomed me into their home, insisting that I come back to visit (as I later did) and alert them if I had any problems in India. It seemed fitting to spend my last night in India with them. My first visit in July seemed so long ago; so much time had passed and so much had changed—or maybe just I had changed.

The next night, December 12, I boarded a plane—on to Thailand and then home, to snowy Michigan, just in time for the holidays. The sprawling lights of Delhi disappeared into the dark as my plane took off, and I didn’t quite know how to feel. Goodbye, India. It had been quite a ride.
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**Special Thanks to...**

The Center for International Programs, especially our advisor Angela Gross for her encouragement and direction, Narda McClendon for administrative assistance, and the Peer Advisors for their help with spreading the word to the campus community.

Lisa Darling, Director of Publications, for providing guidance and support through the publication process.

Shoshana Schultz for her mentoring, brainstorm sessions and soup-making that helped create this year’s *Passage*.

On behalf of the Center for International Programs, we thank all the students who submitted their photographs and writing.

Support for the publication of the *Passage* is provided by the Maynard Owen Williams Fund of Kalamazoo College, honoring the memory of Maynard Owen Williams, a 1910 graduate of “K” whose career in journalism allowed him a lifetime of international study and who as foreign editor of National Geographic published more than 2,250 pages of his own writings and photography. Additional support is provided by the Center for International Programs.

*Passage* is a Kalamazoo College publication which contains writing and photography by students who have participated in the study abroad experience. The magazine circulates to students and their parents, alumni, friends of the College, prospective students, and members of the Kalamazoo College community. Students are invited to submit stories, poetry, photography, and artwork for consideration.