

SPRING 2021



Unpacked

RAMAPO COLLEGE



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“To England and Beyond!”

Miah Gomez '20

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND

SPRING 2019

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

My study abroad experience started in Cambridge, England in the spring of 2019. While I did focus on my studies, I was also able to visit the beautiful (and I do mean BEAUTIFUL) countries that were located nearby. Since my class schedule only had me in class three days a week, I had a four day weekend in which I planned all my trips away. In Italy I visited Rome and Pisa and saw landmarks that were even more breathtaking in person. I practiced my Italian and relaxed eating gelato while walking the cobblestoned paths. Paris was unbelievable and the Eiffel Tower is definitely a must see. But I must say the crepes and pastries France has to offer may keep me visiting for many years to come. I also went to Spain and learned so much history while sharing conversations with some of the friendliest people I have ever met. And let me tell you, nothing compares to authentic paella!

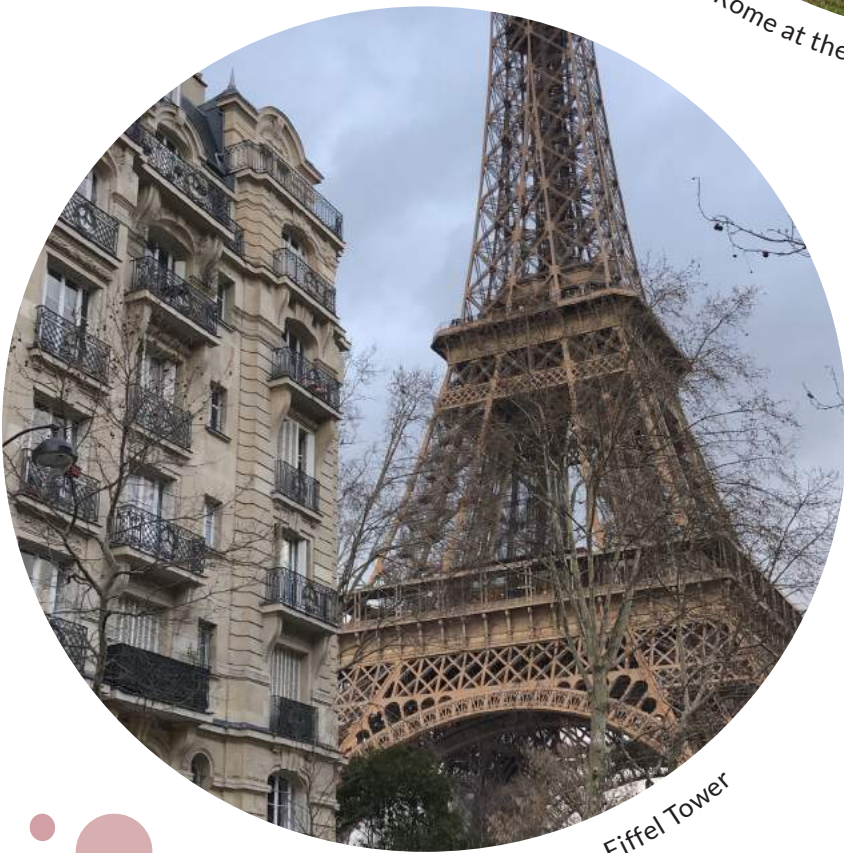
Back in Cambridge, I focused on my studies and was able to get hands-on experience in all of my classes. As a digital film major, I was able work with new cameras, get feedback from different professors, and also network with an even larger group of people. All that to say, my experience was once in a lifetime and I wouldn't change it for anything. The cultures were so rich and so different in each place I was able to see; it opened my eyes to so many new things. Even when I would spend the weekend at Anglia Ruskin University, London was so close I knew I would always have something to do. Although my study abroad experience started in England I had the opportunity to visit many other countries and I encourage you to do the same. Step out of your comfort zone and see what beautiful things you find!



An apricot pastry and a pretty view



Miah in Rome at the Colosseum



The Eiffel Tower



“Throw Some Miles on your Soul”

Tamara Ilizarova '21

BERLIN, GERMANY

WINTER BREAK 2020

CIEE JANUARY IN BERLIN

Studying abroad was incredibly essential to me. This was an opportunity for personal growth and a chance to add some miles to my soul. I studied abroad in Berlin for winter break and met some incredible people. I had the chance to visit a couple of countries and wander towards whatever caught my eye. I strongly recommend studying abroad. This is a great opportunity to visit the cities you have dreamt about and to gain perspective on what is really going on in the world.



My first day in Berlin, Germany.



Castles in Munich, Germany.



Quick trip to Venice, Italy.

"A Life in Greece"

Prasiddha Shakya '20

ATHENS, GREECE

FALL 2018

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF GREECE

On September 9th, 2018, I was ready to begin a new adventure. With a large suitcase and a carry-on, I was ready for a new semester in a new continent. New friends, new places, new cuisines and new culture-Greece was supposed to be my travel escape. As I stood waiting to board, I recalled the visa struggle, flight issues, and personal misfortunes I had overcome to make this journey. All I was hoping back then was that my semester in Greece would be worth it. Everything I'd read, heard, and Googled about Greece told me that the next four months would be a good time. Fast forward a semester and I realize that nothing I had envisioned about Athens, and Greece as a whole, compared to the real experience. Greece exceeded all my expectations and nothing I had read, heard, or Googled even came close to the actual time I spent abroad.

Athens, the capital of Greece, is mostly known for its rich history and the many museums it boasts within the small territory. We were housed in Aghia Paraskevi, a beautiful neighborhood roughly 20 minutes away from the main downtown. Known as the cradle of civilization, Athens today has incorporated its past while keeping up with modern trends to develop into a bustling and vibrant city that seems to attract tourists all year long. During the first month, we mostly travelled in and around Athens- which included the Acropolis, Temple of Poseidon, Parthenon and many more. I was also able to witness a concert in the Herod Atticus Odeon-a Roman monument that sits right below the famous Acropolis. Most of my weekends also included just strolling around Monastiraki and Plaka- two famous shopping alleys near Syntagma Square. Athens in itself had its own charm with so many eateries, bakeries and souvenir shops to choose from-all of which are similar but not quite the same. We spent countless hours just sitting outside one of these cafes with a Fredo Cappuccino and pastry in hand talking about random ideas while appreciating the laid-back lifestyle of the Greeks. The nights were equally enjoyable-with most eateries very lively and open until 2 am. Compared to other European countries, the driving and parking habits in Greece are indeed horrendous but the warm and hospitable nature of people do make up for it. It is said that Zeus Xenios, the god of hospitality, made hospitality not just a formality but a law of ethics, and such a sentiment continues to run even today- not only in Athens but all over Greece.

Greece is widely famous for its notoriously touristic islands-namely Santorini, Corfu, Aegina, Mykonos etc. But, instead of visiting those islands, I chose to visit Hydra- a small



Hydra, a beautiful Greek Island.

island near the coast that soon became one of my favorite destinations. The waters were crystal-clear and warm for a good swim. I was also able to go camping to Meteora-a UNESCO heritage site that housed seven different monasteries on top of large rock cliffs. The monasteries were originally made on these cliffs for its tranquility, but these sites have since become a worthy travel destination. I was also able to visit other cities such as Nafplio, Delphi, Pireaus and Glyfada-all of them unique with their own charm. But no matter which city I visited-all the bakeries I visited served great desserts-baklava, bougatsa, kandaifi to name a few.

Over the weeks that followed, I soon became accustomed to the Greek culture and the Athenian way of living soon started to grow on me. Now that my semester in Greece has ended, I have realized that what makes Greece so great is not just its history and landscapes but its culture. Athens, turns out, is not about the Acropolis or about the museums. In fact, however stunning the views are, Greece is also not about its many beautiful islands. The true beauty of Greece, to me, is its people. Yes, there was incessant honking and haphazard parking, shady-looking alleys, weekly protests and much more. But amidst all the chaos and the continued struggle to overcome its financial crisis, the Greeks always had a smile on their face and were always willing to help in every possible way. The real charm of Greece, after all, is not about visiting all the museums and beaches the country as to offer but rather appreciating its lifestyle- a life where amongst all the troubles and worries, people still find plenty of time to talk with each other over a cup of coffee and a nice smile on their faces.



Rome, Italy



The highest cliff in Hydra

“Que Bonito es Bilbao”

Christian Rizzo '20

BILBAO, SPAIN

SUMMER 2019

UNIVERSITY OF DEUSTO

When my Spanish Civilizations professor first recommended the summer program at the University of Deusto to me, I was admittedly quite hesitant. I had my eyes and my heart set on visiting Cuba over the summer, specifically with the RCNJ Revolution and Evolution program. Nevertheless, I kept an open mind, and sent an application. The Cuba program ultimately did not run this past summer, and so when I was accepted into the Deusto program, I was more than happy to accept the offer. I had not been out of the country since 2010, and I'd wanted to study abroad since I had been in high school. Soon enough, the day of my flight came, and before I knew it, I was on my way to Spain for the first time!

When I landed in Madrid, I was greeted at the airport by a representative from the University of Deusto and a number of my fellow classmates. From the airport, we went to a beautiful hotel in the city, and later that day we visited the Museo del Prado, one of Spain's most-visited landmarks, filled with gorgeous artwork. Over the next few days, we visited Toledo, an enchanting medieval city just south of Madrid, and other famous locations in Madrid itself, including the Royal Palace. At the end of our 3-day mini-vacation, we boarded a few buses and hit the road to Bilbao, where we would be spending the next 5 weeks.

As my professors had urged me, I chose to stay with a family for the length of my studies abroad. Bilbao-area natives and alumni of Deusto themselves, I shared countless delicious meals, engaging conversations (entirely in Spanish!), and many insights on contemporary Spanish politics and social issues, which I never would have received if I had chosen to stay in the on-campus dorms. But staying with a host family did not stop me from going out and enjoying Bilbao with newfound friends. During my time studying at Deusto, I even made a day trip to Biarritz, a stunning seaside town in southern France, and a weekend trip to Lisbon, Portugal. I enjoyed both of those adventures, and sharing them with people I had only met a few weeks before was a magical experience that I won't forget.

Not only did my study abroad experience in Bilbao fulfill a requirement for my major, it opened my eyes to the culture of a country which I had never visited before. At the beginning of the trip, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to hold a conversation in Spanish with a native speaker, that I would feel overwhelmed by the new experience, and that I would want to go home as soon as I made it out of the airport. My fears were quickly pushed to the side when I started meeting new people and seeing the beautiful sights and sounds Spain had to offer (a number of us went to an annual music festival held in Bilbao, BBK Live, and I can truly say it was one of the most magical experiences I've ever had.) Although my studies kept me grounded, there was still ample time to explore the city, and truly embrace everything Bilbao had to offer.



A neighborhood in Bilbao



A view of San Sebastián City Hall



Me at San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, where the scenes in Game of Thrones were filmed



A day trip to Pamplona during the Sanfermines

"Nepal Alt Spring Break Service Experience"

Danielle DeAngelis '22

NEPAL

SPRING BREAK 2019

RCNJ NEPAL: HONOR'S ALTERNATIVE SPRING BREAK PROGRAM

The Honors Program had a wonderful time on their alternative spring break trip to Nepal in March. On this journey to the other side of the world, fifteen Honors students (myself included) participated in multiple endeavors, from service in the rural farmlands to sightseeing in the center of Kathmandu.

On the first day of this service trip, the schedule was light yet busy. The students were alongside Dean of Humanities and Global Studies Susan Hangen and Director of International Student and Scholar Services Rajesh Adhikari.

Our group of seventeen total traveled from Kathmandu to Balthali Mountain where they stayed to later participate in service projects for the next few days in the communities nearby. On the first day of service, the Honors students were given a tour of the Mercy Corps' Health Center based in a rural area nearly an hour away from Kathmandu. With the information we learned, we then went to work. We helped build more sustainable roads by transporting rocks and creating a stone base on top of the previous dirt path. In addition to this, we also helped out on a local farm, from planting potato seeds to churning yak milk.

The next day, we went to a construction site near the original worksite. We helped build materials that would then be utilized in the building of local houses. I helped curl metal rods that would later be attached to tools to make the building process easier and more efficient for the Nepalese construction workers. Also, I gathered and transferred materials by wheelbarrow and shovel. This material was then used to be pressed into very strong bricks. Once they were pressed, they were washed off and left to dry in the sun, which would take multiple days to complete. A lot of the houses we saw were being rebuilt to be more sustainable for earthquakes, so it was a rewarding experience being able to help with that.

This experience was overall rewarding and unique. Before college, I would have never expected to participate in such an amazing opportunity where I would be able to directly help communities across the world. Next year, I am excited to see what the Honors Program has to offer as I am planning on embarking on another service trip experience as this one was so incredibly eye opening. I cannot wait to see what the next journey will be!



Gathering material to create earthquake-resistant bricks



Showing our Ramapo pride on top of Balthali mountain



Walking across a suspension bridge on our way to start our service projects!

“Ghana Through My Eyes”

Shannon Kane '21

GHANA

SUMMER 2019

RCNJ GHANA: PUBLIC HEALTH IN WEST AFRICA

“Travel makes you modest. You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world”. - Gustave Flaubert

To me study abroad is an international experience which is imperative for one’s career building. For many people, this experience may be exhilarating, scary, fun, or even life- changing. In May 2019, I just couldn’t pass up a chance to learn about myself and experience an unfamiliar culture. I was able to meet people from around the world with interesting accents, dialects, and lives far different than my own. I was able to discover what we have in common, how we were different, and I developed a better understanding of myself. Once again, I have learned how the world could feel really big and really small at the same time and how people who live thousands of miles away could have the same hopes, dreams, desires, and fears that I have.

Once we landed, we were greeted with much respect, “Akwaaba!” which I had to learn very quickly. Logically one would think being a foreigner, the language, and the hustle and bustle of the country would make people a bit anxious, but I felt extremely comfortable.

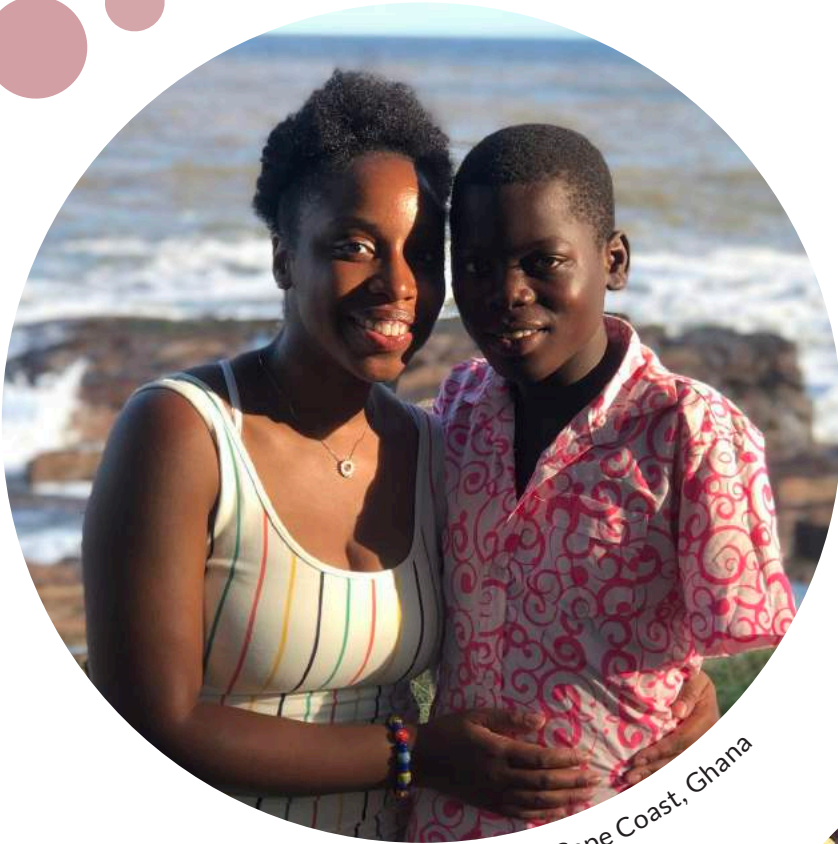
In every community, the most vulnerable individuals are women and children. They are the most affected when it comes to situations such as war, illness, and disparity and are at an increased risk of economic hardship, and discrimination. Therefore, they are the people that every society should focus on helping since they are also significant drivers of change. Over the years, health concerns of women and children have received a lot of attention both in the developed and underdeveloped nations. The improvement of women and children's health concerns in any society is an essential public health goal.



We were able to see a lot of differences in Ghana as well. Community health nurses in Ghana really has become part of their community caring for mothers and children knowing each one of them individually. In the villages one can also see how their upbringings affects the care they receive and the lack of resources they have within their community.

At Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital we were invited with open arms to learn and become familiarized with the acute care setting.

One never realizes what they truly have until being in another country that is different than their own. The people I met and the places I have seen are things I will never forget. I will forever be grateful for our host university Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST).



Cape Coast, Ghana



Kyekyere Village



Labor and Delivery Unit at Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital

“Spring Break in West Africa”

Mary Baldwin '19

GHANA

SPRING BREAK 2019

RCNJ GHANA: STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (SGA) LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

My heart races as I tightly grip the ropes in front of me. I can hear the gentle calls of birds lounging in the trees, their voices echoing for miles. I take a deep breath and fresh air hits the back of my throat.

“Open your eyes!”

I do, and the whole rainforest is in front of me. Trees as tall as giants surround the Kakum National Park, connected by narrow rope bridges like the one I am standing on. A misty haze swallows the greenery and, despite my deadly fear of heights, I cannot deny it is breathtaking. This was just one of the many adventures I had during my spring break in Ghana.

I went to Ghana on an alternative break trip with the SGA in the Spring of 2019, right before my graduation, and it quickly became one of my most memorable experiences since coming to Ramapo. Our group travelled for eight days around the country with students from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), where we spent the majority of the trip and where we were welcomed with open arms. Each day, we explored somewhere new and learned more about Ghana and its history.

The first day, we toured the Elmina Slave Castle, a haunting fortress that was used to house and transport slaves. Our tour guide was incredibly knowledgeable and explained to us how the Slave Trade has, and continues, to impact Ghanaian society. It was humbling walking through its stone walls, and was a grim reminder of history. A couple days later we visited the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, where we got to feed wild monkeys nuts and bananas that they eagerly enjoyed. We learned about the village of Fiema and how it has lived in harmony with the monkeys for several generations. The monkeys are almost seen as fellow villagers, and are even buried when they die. It was interesting to learn the history of the sanctuary and see how attached the villagers were to the monkeys. It was certainly unlike anywhere I had ever travelled before.

One of the things I enjoyed most about this trip was that we not only got to explore Ghana and meet its people, but we also got to give back. One day toward the end of the trip, we visited the Garden City Special School and we spent the afternoon with the children there. We played a game of soccer with them (which we lost terribly),



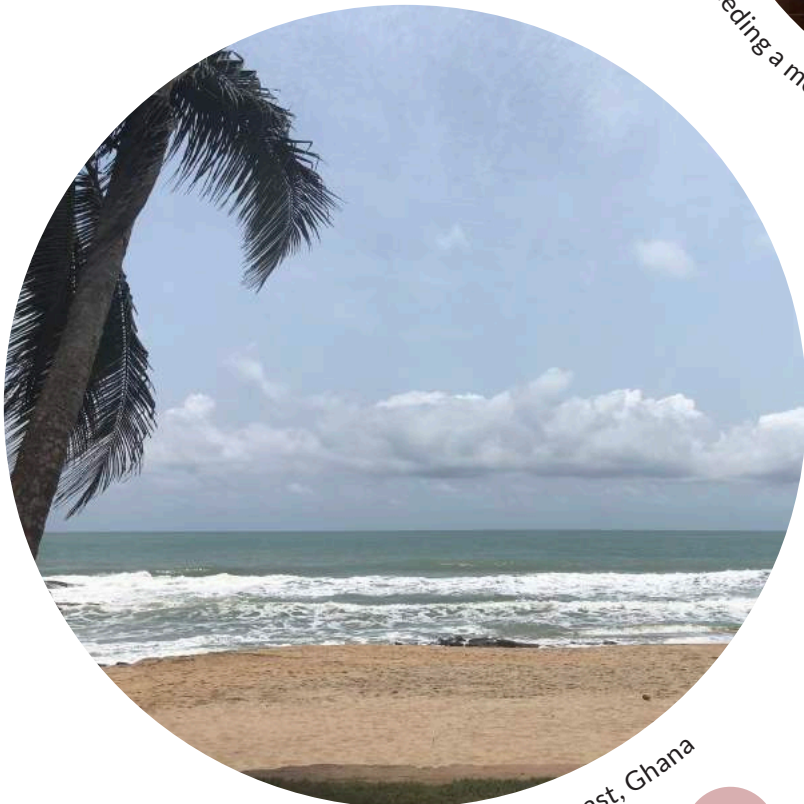
Walking the canopy bridges at Kakum National Park

and it was truly heartwarming to see how happy they were to be with us. Spending the day with those kids is one of my favorite memories from this trip, and one that certainly has left an impact on me.

I still am in awe that I got the opportunity to visit such an incredible country! It was an experience unlike any other and I know I will keep these memories with me for a lifetime. From meeting with the students at KNUST to walking along Cape Coast, Ghana was an incredible place to visit and has so much to offer!



Feeding a monkey at the Boabeng-Fiema Sanctuary



Ocean view at Cape Coast, Ghana



Canopy bridges at Kakum National Park

“Wander and Wonder”

Audrey Miller '21

JAPAN & SOUTH KOREA

SUMMER 2019

RCNJ: EXPLORING THE HARMONY OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SOCIETIES

On my trip to Japan and South Korea, I experienced some of the best moments in my life. I learned about South Korean and Japanese business and cultural practices from candid conversations with university students and professionals. I marveled at the historic temples, shrines, and palaces. I admired the mix of modern and tradition of Tokyo and Seoul. The program was seven days in Japan and four days in South Korea. My time in Japan and South Korea had the highest concentration of wonder I've ever had.

I learned about *raku* pottery from a feature on NHK, Japan's public broadcasting station. *Raku* is handmade, mostly used for tea ceremonies, and originated in Kyoto. I was enchanted by the care and mastery. During free time in Kyoto, I wandered with some peers around the Sannenzaka and Ninezaka streets. The preserved narrow pedestrian streets meandered and sold many goods. I took a chance and asked the pottery shopkeepers if they sold *raku*. We spoke English and even though we had a little difficulty understanding each other we had a nice conversation. I chose a red and earthy teacup that fit well in my hands. When I use it, I think of the kind store owners and Japanese culture. I am proud that I used my background knowledge well. I bought a souvenir that to me is more than a key chain or postcard. Personally, it represents Japanese handicraft. To me the cup was a gift from Japan.

The modernity of Tokyo and Seoul was most evident to me when I rode public transportation and went atop of Tokyo Tower and Namsan Tower. I could see the sprawling cities, impressive buildings, and the cities' achievements.

I used the bathrooms in Namsan Tower observation deck in Seoul.

Inside the bathroom stalls, next to the toilets, were floor to ceiling glass windows overlooking the view. In Seoul, Professor Chung offered to take us to see the Banpo Bridge. It was a bridge that shot water out of the sides, backed by lights, and the water danced to the music. Seeing the Banpo Bridge and skyline, I felt the same awe I feel when I look at the New York City skyline at night.

Another “wow moment” for me was riding the bullet train from Tokyo to Kyoto and seeing Mount Fuji. First off, the train ride felt like I was floating on air. Nearly the entire group sat on the edge of their seats waiting to see Mount Fuji out of the window. “What side will it be on? How soon and how long will we see it for? Is the weather clear enough?” we thought. When Mount Fuji came into view, I could not stop staring at it. The height, the blue against the sky, the way the clouds made the top look like it was exploding, the stillness of the mountain; I fell in love.

I also fell in love with South Korean food at the Gwangjang Market in



Our Ramapo group in front of Osaka Castle, Osaka, Japan

Seoul. I sampled as many dishes as my stomach could hold, then I saw one stall. I saw Cho Yonsoon's stall featured in a Netflix episode on street food. When I saw her cooking her knife-cut noodles, I felt like I saw a celebrity, walked into the TV, and was on the other side of the world (which I then remembered I was) all at the same time. The soup was delicious and comforting. I tried to tell her thank you in Korean, but I accidentally told her hello. I was so embarrassed, but she laughed it off.

I also learned not to resist cultural differences and that the people I meet make travel spectacular. In Osaka, my group and I were on a crowded bus. A passenger stood up from a seat next to me and got off the bus. I was standing but I did not take the seat, instead I made eye-contact with an elderly woman entering the bus and motioned her to sit. Her face lit up when she sat, and she started talking with me. I had trouble understanding so I was nervous about miscommunications. Suddenly she took my bag from my hands and put it on her lap. I was more nervous having a stranger hold my belongings. My inner New-York-City-training told me that I was robbed. I looked at my professor who was a bit further from me wondering what to do, she had a smile on her face and told me it was fine. I learned after we got off the bus that passengers offer to hold the standing passengers' bags. That instance was the most unexpected cultural difference that I overcame.

I will remember the love-inspiring and wonder-inspiring moments during my trip. I am so grateful to have moments traveling in Japan and South Korea. I am grateful for Professor Chung, the Roukema Center, the coordinators, my scholarship patrons, and my classmates, for making the trip amazing. The future consists of aspirations (and inevitability). I aspire to go back to Japan and South Korea for a longer adventure.



Architectural detail in Changdeokgung Secret Garden, Seoul, South Korea



A group photo after our traditional tea ceremony, Tokyo, Japan

“Details.”

Alyssa Capasso '22

NANJING & BEIJING, CHINA

SUMMER 2019

RCNJ CHINA: COMMUNITY HEALTH AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

The exhilaration felt from that first moment is relentless; that first moment of clarion thought where your mind makes the decision that, “I’m doing this”. That you, or I, will make the decision to travel 6,841 miles to China, to immerse oneself into a place and culture that you have never truly experienced before. That travel-lucky exhilaration drives an individual to evince images of every dazzling experience that can be envisioned by a singular human being. I was no exception.

I could envision indescribable sunsets, ancient architectural wonders of sheer magnificence, skyscrapers which dominated the skylines as professionally as the ones in New York City do. They were moments of desideratum. A desire to imagine something greater and to experience it just as advertised. I envisioned these bravura moments birthed from exhilaration-and they came true. However, it was the seemingly miniscule interactions and details which truly portrayed the unique culture and personality of China.

The eerily picturesque backdrop of a ragingly quite storm, its gloomy gray skies a stark contrast against weathered stones of greatness. The draping temple flags, dancing with a subtle gust of wind, entrapping drifting plumes of smoke within their fabrics. A kind smile, leathered with years of time, whispers of wisdom carving their mark upon gentle yet firm, unyielding hands. Infectious laughter, mingling in with the barking of dogs. The quiet begging of a human voice saying “坐” and the delightful happiness when a treat is tossed.

The unanimous smiles that spread across a hospital room, as we witness babies floating with tiny pool rings and rubber duckies in personalized hospital bathtubs. The passing scenery of a car window, its mountains ridges indescribable. It is these details which have stood out to me, even weeks later after my trip from China, and these are only the surface of a deep pool of memories.

The enormity of culture and love that I received in China has taught me to appreciate the details. To see life not through a lens of chasing the perfect moment, but rather to find them within the most mundane actions, and simplistic scenery. I ask you to look for the details, to seek these when you go abroad to another country, and in your daily life.



Alyssa sitting on the Great Wall of China, (Beijing, China)



Zifeng Tower, Nanjing China



Temple of Heaven, Beijing China



The Great Wall of China, Beijing China

“Stepping into Uncertainty: My Rite of Passage Through Birthright Armenia”

Maral Karjabyan '13

ARMENIA

OCTOBER 2018-JUNE 2019

BIRTHRIGHT ARMENIA

“I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship” ~Louisa May Alcott

****Written in July 2019 with updates noted in italics.*

Reflecting upon where I had been located for the past eight months after making the decision of stepping outside my comfort zone, it still feels surreal to me the immense joy I felt through my international experience in Armenia. It was certainly not an easy decision to leave what I perceived as my comfort zone for a longer term than I was accustomed to when it comes to travel, but to step into what became my “optimal zone” through this experience, it has helped me become more aware of what it feels like to be aligned with my full potential. As an Armenian American, I made the decision last year to apply to Birthright Armenia feeling the need to reconnect with my ethnic roots, and my stay in Armenia has been more than a Birthright experience for me. I



feel I experienced a Rite of Passage where I have been able to surrender to allowing curiosity to take me on a quest into the unknown. Allowing this curiosity to guide me these eight months has made me feel I am living my life fully and confidently, and

I have become further aware of this sense of freedom when I allow myself to be curious and step outside the parameters of comfort. From this perspective, the content I have been feeling throughout this international experience of moving past self-imposed barriers to come to allowing myself to ride a current not knowing exactly where the flow is taking me equals a Rite of Passage for me.

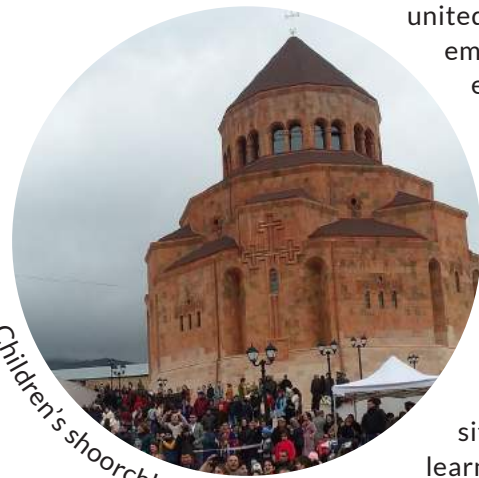
Accustomed to what can be described as an autopilot lifestyle, I realized I couldn't ignore the yearning to sign up for this program even though I felt a level of discomfort of having more questions than answers. I realized I needed to make the choice to accept the not knowing, release attachment to expectations in order to be able to allow my curiosity lead the way and experience my experiences for what they are. And my experiences have been amazing: more amazing than I could have imagined! What has been especially meaningful for me throughout my time in Armenia is the volunteer work I engaged in and the incredible individuals I have met along the way. From October 2018 until March 2019, I served as a volunteer with the Children of Armenia Fund (COAF). I developed COAF's Civic Education Program curricula by creating lesson plans and projects to be implemented in COAF beneficiary schools in villages throughout Armenia as well as launched and taught yoga programs for children in the beneficiary villages of Myasnikyan and Hatsig in the Armavir Province. In Artsakh (also known as Nagorno Karabagh; see description on Artsakh below under “10 Facts About Armenia”), I volunteered for six weeks in the capital city of Stepanakert at Mesrop Mashtots University and visited village schools throughout

Artsakh creating professional development workshops for university lecturers and worked with a professor to advocate education reform through revitalizing curricula to incorporate critical and creative thinking in the classroom. Following Artsakh, I made my way to Vanadzor and joined Teach for Armenia to help organize the Kids Education Revolution Summit which brought together students, teachers, principals and other stakeholders to gather, discuss and unveil students' roles as change-makers in the process of education reform. I also worked with COAF, this time at their SMART Center in Debet, introducing and teaching yoga classes for mothers and their children. All in all, I was in Armenia until the end of June 2019 and returned back to the United States to pursue graduate studies in Education Entrepreneurship at the University of Pennsylvania (Update: I successfully completed the program in August 2020 obtaining a Masters of Science in Education!).

The individuals who have impacted me the most throughout my experiences in Armenia are the youth with whom I have worked with whose bright smiles and enthusiasm shone forth the joy of learning. The excitement to meet and work with volunteers, Birthright Armenia staff and co-workers made my experience in Armenia evermore enjoyable! These interactions, whether it was in remote villages or cities, have served as moments for me to reflect on the questions I came with and to come up with even more questions. I have come to realize having more questions than answers keeps me curious!

You may be wondering whether I feel more Armenian at this point? What I feel is I belong to a society that extends into a large family. Thus, I feel I am a member of this larger family, known as Armenia. Armenia is a place for me as a Diasporan Armenian that I identify as my home and feel united and free to fully embrace and live my ethnic identity.

Being present day in and day out to hearing and speaking the Armenian language, meeting fellow Armenians and exchanging views, site seeing and learning about the Armenian nation's history



and current issues affecting Armenians, I have developed a wider perspective of components that make up the Armenian nation. What I enjoy and feel symbolically celebrates and upholds this unity, belonging and being a member of this extended family is the Armenian Shoorchbar ("Circle Dance"), frequently danced during parties, weddings, among other occasions. Coming together as a group to experience this dance, whether holding hands or shoulders, moving in unison, embodies and solidifies for me the joy of being a member of this extended family. We may step to the left, then right, maybe forward and then back, reverse steps, but we move together, honoring the flow of the dance. Honoring the ease of going with the flow. Journeying through my Rite of Passage in Armenia, whether it is on a current or in a dance, allowing the flow to guide me, I can fully appreciate where curiosity has led me.

(Update: I successfully completed the program in August 2020 obtaining a Master's of Science in Education!).

(Update: Most recently (July 2020 to November 2020), Artsakh and Armenia came under attack by Azerbaijan in what formalized into a war, displacing approximately half of Artsakh's population (75,000 people), loss of over 3,700 lives, invasion of historically Armenian territory and vandalization of Armenian cultural heritage sites. For Armenians globally, this war echoes the traumas of ethnic and cultural cleansing committed against Armenians during the Armenian Genocide of 1915. (Deutsche Welle 2020) ("Fund Official: 1,600 Armenian Servicemen Still Missing from 2020 War" 2021)

10 INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT ARMENIA

1. Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia, is older than the ancient city of Rome. Yerevan celebrated its 2,800th anniversary in October 2018.
2. Armenia is making strides towards becoming an IT and tech hub within the Caucasus region. PicsArts, founded by an Armenian and with a headquarter office in Yerevan, is a leading image editing and collage app.
3. American University of Armenia is a U.S. accredited institution in Yerevan offering undergraduate, graduate, certificate and study abroad programs for domestic and international students. Yes, you can study abroad in Armenia!
4. Known as the “Armenian Stonehenge,” Karahunj is an archaeological observatory site in the Syunik Province of Armenia.
5. A historically Armenian territory, Artsakh (also known as Nagorno Karabakh) is a de facto independent country that declared its independence from Azerbaijan in 1988, underwent a war of independence and entered into a ceasefire in 1994. The tension continues, interfering with conflict settlement efforts as well as with aspects of daily life for Artsakh inhabitants who are ethnically Armenian. Update: Most recently (July 2020 to November 2020), Artsakh and Armenia came under attack by Azerbaijan in what formalized into a war, displacing approximately half of Artsakh’s population (75,000 people), loss of over 3,700 lives, invasion of historically Armenian territory and vandalization of Armenian cultural heritage sites. For Armenians globally, this war echoes the traumas of ethnic and cultural cleansing committed against Armenians during the Armenian Genocide of 1915. (Deutsche Welle 2020) (“Fund Official: 1,600 Armenian Servicemen Still Missing from 2020 War” 2021)
6. Armenia is the first country as a nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion. The Echmiadzin Cathedral is one of the oldest churches built in the world with the majority of the construction completed during the 4th century.
7. Eduard Ter-Ghazaryan is considered to be the founder of micro miniature, a fine art form creating art smaller than the eye of a needle. His work is in display at Ter-Ghazaryan’s Micro Art Museum in Yerevan.
8. To visit the Tatev Monastery, you can ride the Wings of Tatev which is the longest reversible cableway in the world (5,752 meters).
9. Chess is a compulsory subject taught in schools throughout Armenia. No wonder Armenia boasts having the most chess grandmasters per capita than any other country!
10. Armenia celebrates Book Giving Day on February 19th to simultaneously celebrate the birthday of the renowned Armenian literary figure Hovhannes Tumanyan.





Gandzasar Monastery in Artsakh



Instructing students Tree Pose during a yoga class at the Hatsig village school



Beautiful landscape in Artsakh





AMANDA GORMAN

Studied abroad in Madrid, Spain while completing her sociology degree at Harvard University

“Across the board, in every single class I was in, the teachers recognized that my passion for coming to Spain was so much larger than just being in the classroom,” Amanda shares. “It was about ‘how will this experience at IES Abroad Madrid making me a better poet, a better person, and a better student so that when I come back to Harvard, I have all of those blessings to take with me.’”

“It was so life-changing and phenomenal; I don’t think that I would be who I am today without that experience.”

- Self-identified wordsmith and change-maker
- National Youth Poet Laureate
- Youngest inaugural poet in U.S. History