

THAILAND



Adventures in global health

When it comes to study abroad experiences, an elephant ride in Thailand is pretty hard to beat.

“The entire time we were around the elephants, I was smiling uncontrollably,” says Gilad Segal, a microbiology major. “It was amazing to interact with them and get a sense of their personalities. Riding on the back of an elephant through the jungle and into a watering hole is something I never imagined I would do.”

And it was a great way to learn about the animals and efforts to protect them. Located in the “Golden Triangle”—the fabled convergence of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos—the Anantara Elephant Sanctuary improves the health and well-being of elephants by renting them from their owners and then caring for the elephant, the owner and his family as they continue to work humanely with tourists. In that part of the world, elephants frequently are

victims of exploitation in the tourist industry, where their owners, called “mahouts,” earn a living by offering rides and having elephants perform tricks, often while not receiving adequate care.

“This solution allows the mahout to still live comfortably in that the camp provides them with a place to live and a monthly stipend for their elephant,” explains fellow microbiology major Lauren Raasch. “The elephants are cared for and are not overworked for tourist purposes.”

The students also examined the elephants’ microbiota by swabbing various parts of the animals and isolating and identifying microorganisms back in the lab at Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

The elephant camp was only one of several excursions during the seven-week, five-credit study abroad experience. The combined Microbiology 304/ Languages and Culture of Asia 300 program was the brainchild of bacteriology instructor Jon Roll BS’88 PhD’96, who developed the idea with biology advisor Todd Courtenay and teamed with Anthony Irwin, a doctoral student in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, to lead the course’s cultural components.

The program debuted last summer with 14 students and is poised to reach its cap of 20 students in summer 2017. It satisfies a required field study component for the popular Undergraduate Certificate in Global Health, a CALS-administered program in UW–Madison’s Global Health Institute.

Roll got the idea when visiting Mae Fah Luang University to explore research collaborations. “I saw their instructional lab facilities and was very impressed,” he says.

The course kicks off with a week of cultural orientation at another institution, the International Sustainable Development Studies Institute in Chiang Mai. There students learn some basic Thai and become acquainted with various aspects of Thai culture, which include wearing uniforms to class (a white top and dark pants or skirts); not pointing at things (which is considered rude); taking shoes off when entering a home; eating dinner food for breakfast (the Western idea of breakfast food doesn’t exist); and, above all, keeping voices down. “Tone it down like 10 notches,” advises Raasch in a blog she kept on the trip, noting that the Thai communication style tends to be quieter and less confrontational.

Wet and wild: UW students capturing their elephant ride on a GoPro.





(Left) UW students pose in their “uniforms” at the International Sustainable Development Studies Institute in Chiang Mai and (below) work with instructor Jon Roll at Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai.

(Bottom) Students visiting the Academy of Buddhist Economics in Chiang Rai, which includes studies offering Buddhist perspectives on agriculture and health.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JON ROLL BS'88 PHD'96

In addition to the elephant camp, field trips included meeting with SOLD, a nonprofit that offers job training to young people at risk for sex trafficking, and learning about nutrition and food safety from a monk who is well known for his scholarship in those areas.

As for the basic science component, although Microbiology 304 is a demanding course, students appreciated the program’s hands-on, in-the-field approach to learning.

“The microbiology lab helped me learn a lot not only about microbiology, but also how science applies to everyday life,” says biology major Therese Renaud.

Students came home with a much bigger picture of the world.

“I just want to talk forever about everything I had the opportunity to experience,” says Raasch. “The cumulative experience of adapting to and gaining an appreciation of a new culture was by far the most memorable part.”

—JOAN FISCHER

