

Student life: Semester at Sea ^[1]

September 2, 2014



As the saying goes, pictures are worth a thousand words. But do photos capture every nuance of feeling, like one or two lines of poetry can?

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William DeSena, a CU-Boulder film studies student who spent the spring 2014 semester at sea through CU-Boulder's Study Abroad program, found that in poetry he could capture the steps of his journey in a way that retained sensory detail, beyond the still imagery of a photo. DeSena spent four months on a Semester at Sea (SAS) ship, visiting 12 countries that spanned from Japan to Morocco -- his favorites were Vietnam and Myanmar. Aboard the ship, DeSena spent time writing poems and re-creating what he experienced on land. When he met Nick Clement, a CU-Boulder alumnus who was the SAS videographer for the trip, they collaborated and made a video. The video features one of DeSena's poems.

"When I found out there was a videographer for the ship, I just wanted to talk to him," said DeSena, who planned to make his own video from the trip. "We hit it off right away and

became really good friends.”

DeSena and Clement spent several of their travel days together, including the ancient city of Bagan, Myanmar.

Knowing that DeSena had been writing poetry on the ship, Clement asked him to write a poem about his experience in Bagan. The video and poem reflect the scenic views of the land, with scattered pagodas, an orange sun and “unexpected smiles.” DeSena added that with consideration of the socio-political conflicts throughout Myanmar’s history, he and classmates didn’t anticipate the very warm welcome they received from the native Burmese.

“I think the people, more than anything, blew me away in Myanmar... They were some of the most honest and kind people we met on the trip,” DeSena said, sharing a story about one Burmese man they encountered, who went an hour out of his way to help a group of SAS students.

“We were on mopeds, trying to find a pagoda,” he said. “And this guy was on his way to work. Somehow we got through the language barrier and he figured out which way we were trying to go. He went an hour out of his way, just to bring us there.” When they got to the pagoda, the Burmese man turned around and drove an hour back.

DeSena took three courses on the ship, including "African Cinema," "International Business" and "Poetry." He said that by reading and discussing poetry, while experiencing the many rich moments of travel, he felt inspired to write some poetry himself.

“In poetry, if you can figure out how to link a couple words, even if it’s just one, two, three or four words, what they can mean in such a minimalist structure is amazing to me,” DeSena said. He added that all of his poetry came out on the ship, usually when the sun rose around 6 a.m.

“Being on the ocean... something was so powerful... the smell of salt water, and the spray... It’s so isolating but in a beautiful way,” he said. A native of Cape Elizabeth, Maine, the ocean has always been one of DeSena’s most prominent sources for inspiration.

In addition to poetry, DeSena caught video for his own project, a “poetic narration” about life, family and friends. As a burgeoning creative in the film industry, one of the reasons he chose to do Semester at Sea was because he wanted to create an inspirational travel video.

“I was thinking about it more and more, and thought [SAS] might be the perfect program for the video,” he said, adding that because SAS brings students to multiple countries over a four-month time span, the diversity in footage would be more suitable for what he envisioned.

DeSena plans to combine his footage with archived footage from his family’s old VHS tapes.

“It’s not going to be a full on storyline... more about life, family and friends. On that trip, it really hit me how much family and friends mean to me,” DeSena said, mentioning that his biggest takeaway from traveling around the world was the relationships he built with other people. “Since there are no shields up, and you have such little time, everything just pours out right then and there. Everything about you, all of your emotions, especially when traveling.”

DeSena urges students considering SAS to “absolutely do it,” referring to his trip as one of the

most powerful experiences he thinks he'll ever have. Though he warns, now getting antsy when finds himself on the couch, "the travel bug is very real."

To learn more about Semester at Sea and studying abroad, visit the Study Abroad Fair on Thursday, Sept. 4, from 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. in the UMC fountain area.

Photo: William DeSena on top of a sand dune in Morocco, one of 12 countries he visited during his Semester at Sea in spring 2014.

Photo courtesy of William DeSena.

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CU-Boulder student William DeSena captures the steps of his journey to 12 countries through poetry.

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