Sri Lanka Study Abroad offers unique cultural experience

BY MAURA MALONE 
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Holy Cross students going abroad next year will have yet another option to consider. Holy Cross has joined ISLE this year, the Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education program.

This program began in 1982 when a group of professors from Bowdoin College and Swarthmore College specializing in Sri Lankan studies wanted their students to gain first-hand experience with the culture. The program has grown now to include Bates, Bowdoin, Carleton, Colby, Holy Cross, Grinnell, Swarthmore, and Whitman Colleges, and is currently run out of Bowdoin.

Two years ago, one Holy Cross student studying Buddhism under Professor Todd Lewis of the Religious Studies Department participated in the program and returned with rave reviews. This prompted the school to consider adding it to the Study Abroad department. Students arrive in August and the 18-week semester is over by Thanksgiving.

The beginning of August, when ISLE students arrive, marks the beginning of a ten-day festival, Esala Perahera, which celebrates the prosperity and religion of Kandy by bringing in a sacred Buddha relic. Students are immediately exposed to the diversity of religion and ethnicity which make Sri Lanka such an interesting place to study.

While in Sri Lanka, they study at The University of Peradeniya, one of the most respected universities of South Asia. Studies consist of two required courses, Conversational Sinhala, and Material Culture, along with several electives including Buddhism, Environmental Studies, and Ethnicity. The program takes two tours of the island nation per semester, the first being an archaeological tour and the second focused more on geography and culture.

The last three to four weeks of the semester are also devoted to an independent project focusing on a topic of the student’s choice, be that something from a course or from an extracurricular activity, which include meditation, art, music, and dance.

The ISLE center connected to the University is located in the City of Kandy, a city of 100,000 and a mild tropical climate. Students live in middle class Sri Lankan homes, in which they are constantly exposed to the culture of the island. Many students in fact describe it as the best learning experience of the program.

Professor Lewis, the program’s Holy Cross representative, points out that students are taught by the best of the best in Sri Lanka. Only experts are included in the faculty. Opening up a book on Kandyan dance, he shows a picture of the dance instructor of the program. "This is the definitive book on Kandyan dance, and who is featured, but the instructor for the program," he says. In fact, the Kandyan Dance troop recently toured the ISLE schools and performed at Holy Cross on October 19th and 20th.

Though students in the program are exposed to the best of the best in Sri Lanka, there is still concern for the safety of Americans due to political unrest and a civil war in the north of the country. Professor Lewis, though, feels that students are never in any real danger. He says that students never go to the unsettled areas and that, in truth, they are in more danger of being involved in a traffic accident than in an act of political violence.

The ISLE program certainly offers a new and adventurous option to Holy Cross’s Study Abroad options. Prof. Lewis invites all those interested to attend an organizational meeting, Wednesday November 15, from 4-6 p.m. in Stein 443.

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