

Opportunities to Study in Asia

Spotlight on Student-Abroad Programs in South Asia

ASIANetwork spotlights four study-abroad programs that focus on South Asia. The programs are: Inter-Collegiate Sri Lanka Education Program (ISLE), the The New York State Independent College Consortium for Study in India, the ACM India Program, and the Davidson College Semester-in-India Program. We plan to spotlight study-abroad programs to other areas in future issues.

Inter-Collegiate Sri Lanka Education Program (ISLE)

John Holt, Bowdoin University

Since 1982, the Inter-collegiate Sri Lanka Educational (ISLE) program has introduced over 350 American students from Bates, Bowdoin, Carleton, Colby, Grinnell, Holy Cross, Swarthmore and Whitman Colleges to Sri Lanka's history, archaeology, environment, society, religion, literature, language, politics and art. ISLE is an atypical study abroad program. It is a demanding academic and intense cultural experience designed for highly motivated students with interests in various aspects of South Asian cultures and societies. Students are accompanied to Sri Lanka each fall by a faculty director from one of the consortial schools. The faculty director administers the program on site in Kandy and is especially responsible for supervising the required independent studies conducted by each of the 15-24 students enrolled in the program. All of the rest of the thirteen academic courses offered within ISLE's curriculum are taught by faculty from the University of Peradeniya, the tertiary institution in Sri Lanka with which ISLE has been formally affiliated since the program's inception. Many of ISLE's students have returned to Sri Lanka subsequently for further studies while on Fulbright fellowships or within the context of graduate study programs in the humanities and social sciences. As a result, ISLE has made a salient impact on the scope and focus of Sri Lankan Studies in the United States. About half of the members of the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies have been affiliated with ISLE either as students or as faculty.

While ISLE has made a considerable impact on the study of Sri Lanka in American academic circles, it has from its inception also sought to make a positive impact at the University of Peradeniya in Kandy as well. More than thirty visits to the United States by Peradeniya faculty seeking temporary teaching or research appointments have been facilitated by ISLE. When ISLE's Sri Lankan faculty teach on the campuses of the program's consortial schools, the experience enriches their own teaching of ISLE's American students back in Sri Lanka. Some of ISLE's Sri Lanka faculty from the University of Peradeniya have also

collaborated with American faculty from the ISLE consortial schools on research projects that have led to significant publications. In addition, ISLE has established a substantial endowment in Sri Lanka that supports a program of fellowships for junior faculty at the university who are seeking assistance in gaining advanced graduate degrees. Four "Wilhelm Fellows" (named after Dean Robert Wilhelm at Bowdoin College who was instrumental administratively in establishing the program) are supported on an annual basis to pursue their advanced degrees at universities in South and Southeast Asia. ISLE has also made substantial grants to the university for the purchase of library materials, for curriculum development and for subventions to publish scholarly works.

ISLE maintains a study center near the University of Peradeniya that serves as a hub for program activities. It contains an outdoor pavilion where some of ISLE's courses are taught and a library collection that has now grown to some 4,000 titles. Students also have borrowing privileges at libraries maintained by the University of Peradeniya and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. ISLE has cooperated with ICES in several joint publishing ventures. Recently, ISLE's Sinhala instructor, Kamini de Abrew, has published a new textbook for the purpose of introducing Sinhala to English speakers.

While studying in Sri Lanka on the ISLE program, students live with host families in three or four neighborhoods located throughout Kandy. Homestay families assist students with their acquisition of Sinhala and introduce them to religious, social and cultural activities. Many students comment that the homestay experience is the most personally rewarding aspect of the program. Students are also encouraged to interact with students at the University of Peradeniya by participating in various campus activity clubs.

Because the political situation in Sri Lanka has been quite volatile at times since 1983, ISLE has had to keep a tight rein on its students. Unsupervised travel during the program is largely prohibited. ISLE conducts two study tours during its eighteen or nineteen-week program (from early

August through mid-December), one an archaeological field experience in the ancient cities (Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa) of the North Central province, and the second a tour of the upcountry tea highlands, the southeast multi-religious pilgrimage site of Kataragama, and the southwest old colonial port city of Galle. Due to security concerns, time spent in the capital city of Colombo is kept to a minimum. Administrators of the program, both in the United States and in Sri Lanka, follow the political developments in Sri Lanka on a daily basis. The program did not operate in 1988 and 1990 due to security concerns.

Year in and year out, various challenges await ISLE students. In addition to general adjustments to a new and different culture that inevitably must be made, one of the most persistent problems that students in the program have faced concerns experiences of sexual harassment endured by women students in public contexts. The program continuously grapples with formulating appropriate strategies and disseminating information to help deal with this enduring problem.

ISLE's administrative director is Sree Padma, who supervises all aspects of the program in Sri Lanka and in the U.S. from her office at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. She reports to a faculty board of directors consisting of campus representatives from each of ISLE's consortial schools and maintains a website at <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/isle/>. Currently, Professor Roger Jackson of the Department of Religion at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, is the chair of the ISLE faculty board of directors. The board is charged with the responsibility of formulating policies for the operation of the program.

The New York State Independent College Consortium for Study in India

Joel Smith
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The New York State Independent College Consortium for Study in India sends a group of about twenty college students to north India every fall semester for a four-month study program. Founded in 1989, the Consortium currently consists of Bard, Hartwick, Hobart-William Smith, St. Lawrence, and Skidmore Colleges. After being based in Pune in 1990-92, the Consortium shifted the program's major site to Jaipur in 1993.

The rich and rigorous program is designed to provide both breadth (exposure to some of north India's diversity) and depth (a significant time period at each site). The program usually runs from mid-August to mid-December. After an initial week of orientation in Delhi hosted by the Educational Resources Centre Trust, students spend about six weeks studying Hindi at Landour Language School in the Himalayan "hill station" of Mussoorie and visiting

sites such as Yamunotri (a high point of the program), Surkhanda Devi, and Hardwar. After another week in Delhi, students spend about seven weeks in Jaipur, Rajasthan in homestays (another high point of the program), usually celebrating the Hindu festival of Dipawali (Diwali) during their homestays. Hindi study continues in Jaipur less intensively while students concurrently enroll in two courses, taught by Indian faculty: "Culture and History of India before 1947" and "Society, Politics, and Economy of Contemporary India." These courses are managed by Jaipur's Institute for Research in Interdisciplinary Studies. The group also visits nearby sites such as Ajmer and Pushkar. A one-week break occurs during the end of the Jaipur stay, when students can travel within India if they wish, subject to safety restrictions. Stays of ten days to two weeks in Varanasi (Benares) are hosted by the Society for Heritage Planning & Environmental Health, and include visits to sites such as Sarnath and Banwasi Seva Ashram. A final week in Delhi allows time for students to present to their peers the results of the directed field research they conducted throughout the program. The topic for their field studies are developed and approved before students leave their home campuses, and mentors are provided for each student in Jaipur. All credits count as standard credits for each college's campus, and each college's normal financial aid applies for the program.

A faculty director, usually from a member college (though occasionally hired from outside of the Consortium), travels with the group at all times, accompanied by an assistant of the opposite gender. The faculty director coordinates the curriculum and logistics at each site, grades the academic work (which includes an exam, essays, a specially structured journal, and the directed field study), and serves as the academic and personal mentor for students. The director's position rotates among the five colleges. While the basic sites and itinerary now remain essentially the same for every program, each faculty director makes his or her own unique contribution. In 2003, for example, the director developed several new rural sites in the Nagpur area that the program had not visited before. Past faculty directors have represented a diversity of nationalities as well as a diversity in gender.

While the program is designed for students of all majors, some program participants have gone to graduate school in South Asian studies, as well as returning to India on a Fulbright after graduation from college.

St. Lawrence University is currently the Consortium's agency college (a function which rotates among Consortium colleges every five years or so). Nancy Pierce at St. Lawrence is the Consortium administrator and can be reached at npierce@stlawu.edu. Prof. Richard Davis at Bard College is currently the chair of the faculty board, and can be reached at rdavis@bard.edu. The Consortium website is maintained by St. Lawrence at http://www.stlawu.edu/ciis/html/off_campus/india_consortium.