

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Tales From Studying Abroad



Leah Forehand '04 rides a yak in Tibet, where she studied interracial marriages in refugee camps.

by Susan R. Bushey '96

MOUNT HOLYOKE STUDENTS are not the kind to take their studies or college experience lightly. So while 40 percent of them choose to study off campus—most of them abroad—at some point in their four years at MHC, they're not looking for a carefree semester or year while they're away. The College expects students to take an equally rigorous course of study off campus. And students accept the challenge wholeheartedly. MHC students travel around the world in hopes of learning more, expanding their horizons, and simply drinking in the beauty of life everywhere. And most come back with a new outlook on life. Following are tales from some whose lives have been changed by studying abroad.

Illustration by Bidwell ID, based on photo courtesy of Leah Forehand



Left: All of MHC was a study-abroad experience for Puerto Rican native Carolina Pons de Vivó '82 (shown here on a 2003 trip to Spain).



Right: Joyce Stavro Vyriotes '96 models a traditional Maasai wedding necklace, flanked by members of a family with whom she stayed in Kenya.

TONGUE-TIED IN TIBET

The first thing Leah K. Forehand '04 did when she stepped off the plane in Tibet was stick out her tongue—a gesture she had planned to make since she was a preteen.

As a child, Forehand had a book that told of the Tibetan tradition of sticking out your tongue as a sign of respect. "I thought that was great," she said. But her mother disagreed, reminding her that she was still in the United States, where there was no such tradition.

At Mount Holyoke, Forehand was an international relations major, with a focus on Tibet. She studied one semester both junior and senior years in Tibet, Nepal, and India, in refugee camps and villages. While there, Forehand studied interracial marriages in Tibetan refugee camps.

Forehand said that without her MHC experience, she might not have felt able to work on her own and complete a journey so far from home. "I felt really prepared to do academic research and discussion. At Mount Holyoke and within the global community,

in Puerto Rico. She came to MHC knowing she wanted an experience she couldn't get at home, one where the students weren't all Latino and one where she would have to learn to be independent. "I wanted to study in a totally different place," she said, crediting MHC for giving her a new direction in life. Coming to MHC, she initially wanted to study history and politics. But then, intrigued by the lens through which fellow students viewed her native language and culture, Pons de Vivó realized how much she loved her own language and chose to major in Latin American studies and Spanish. "All of a sudden being someone from a different culture ... impacted me deeply and I started taking Spanish seriously," she said. But her true life calling was sparked when she had to read *Don Quixote*, a book she hated in high school. Reading it again at Mount Holyoke made her realize the universality of her language and culture. Did *Don Quixote* make Pons de Vivó a strong, independent woman? No. "Just being away from a Latin culture where everything is very conservative

“If I hadn't gone abroad, I would not be the person I am today.”

I could offer my own insight and analysis. Even going into [it], I had my own perspective on the world," she said.

Though she missed her friends, family, and hot showers, Forehand feels not an ounce of regret about studying on the other side of the world. In fact, she's going back. "It solidified my career path. It's my passion, and once I was over there, I realized it was possible to have a career abroad. I've found a second home," she said.

ROMANCING HER OWN LANGUAGE

For Carolina Pons de Vivó '82, her experience at Mount Holyoke was studying abroad—she was born and raised

... really helped me blossom," she says. "I could do things on my own, and being in a different culture expands your horizons enormously. If I hadn't gone abroad, I would not be the person I am today."

CENTER OF ATTENTION

After deciding three weeks into her first year at Mount Holyoke that Arabic was not a language for her, Joyce Stavro Vyriotes '96 didn't give up her dream of studying in Africa, she simply found a different path—through Kenya.

Since high school, the Massachusetts native had wanted to study anthropology in Egypt and figured she should study

Left: Sierra C. Thomsen '05 traveled to Petra, Jordan.



Right: After a tough first semester, Maya Aguilar '05 made the most of her year abroad in Salamanca, Spain.



Arabic so she could communicate once there. When that didn't work, with a push from her adviser, anthropologist Lynn Morgan, Vyriotes searched for programs in Africa whose main language was English.

After intensive study of Swahili—Kenya's other national language and much easier than Arabic, she says—Vyriotes was immersed in Kenyan life. "MHC prepared me for some of the diversity I would experience overseas, and I was excited to learn new things and get different perspectives." Vyriotes split her time between Nairobi, rural Nairobi, and "the bush"—extreme rural Kenya where some don't even speak Swahili and where she lived with a family in the Maasai tribe. Though some of her time was spent in rigid classes, much involved "experiential learning."

Vyriotes said there were times her race was a help and times it was a hindrance. Her white skin often brought extra, and unwanted, attention. Once, she and a classmate faced stares as the only white people in a van crowded with villagers and chickens. And, she recalls, "walking to school every day, I would have fifty kids walking around me touching my hair and my skin. It was a little overwhelming." On the other hand, completing her research was easier because Africans wanted to talk to a white person.

Among the life lessons Vyriotes took with her from Africa, she says, was "the difference between what I need and what I want. I certainly lived on a lot less than I had at home. It's OK to have things you want, but it's important to recognize the difference and be thankful [for] that luxury."

She also says Kenya helped her grow up. "I think it was the first time I felt really responsible for me. I increased my self-confidence; I realized if I can sleep in a bed with bedbugs for three weeks, I can do anything."

PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

What turned out to be an experience that changed Maya C. Aguilar's life was almost cut short. Aguilar, a 2005 international relations graduate, had been studying Spanish

since middle school and wanted to attend a school that was in a city yet small enough so she wouldn't get lost. She chose Salamanca, Spain. The experience "completely changed my life, but the first semester was very difficult," she remembers. "I wasn't ready for drastic changes, for cultural changes, for living with strangers, or interacting with others. ... I thought about coming home." It didn't help that the natives of Salamanca are known for being unfriendly. "My host family was great, but they were only three people," says Aguilar.

In addition to feeling like an unwelcome visitor, Aguilar, whose father is Ecuadoran and mother is Japanese, said she was challenged by her race, something she has never had to deal with in the States. "Until I went to Spain, I never thought my race was an issue. I was never put in a situation where I was made to feel uncomfortable. That was a huge awakening for me," she said.

But after a month home for the holidays, Aguilar gathered the strength to return and finish what she started. "I decided to go back with a positive attitude. I said I would see how it went and it turned out to be great. ... I found the inner strength to stick it out my second semester" through the help of a good friend she met in Spain who was going through the same thing.

When she returned to Mount Holyoke, Aguilar found herself missing the city that once nearly defeated her. "I missed the flexibility ... freedom, and independence," she said. But she found that many friends at MHC had gone abroad and overcome their own challenges. "We bonded tremendously over that," she says. "We were scattered all over the world, but we were still connected by this MHC link. It made our friendships stronger." □

WEB EXTRA

There are expanded versions of many alums' stories, and more photos, on the web at www.alumnae.mtholyoke.edu/go/new_world.

Left: Courtesy of Sierra Thomsen, Right: Courtesy of Maya C. Aguilar '05

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

REBECCA B. GARFIELD '05: TRANSITION IN CHILE

When I first moved in with Paulina de la Paz Novoa and her family in Viña del Mar, Chile, I wasn't allowed to help clear the table. Or wash the dishes. Or even enter the tiny kitchen where the poodle Lulú peed on the *Las Últimas Noticias* newspapers in the corner. Paulina served me breakfast in bed, washed and ironed my laundry, and left my sheets creaseless and my pillows fluffed. For five weeks she treated me like an American paying for an experience abroad in Chile. Then one day, finally, it happened. I had been homesick and asked Paulina for a hug. The next morning she left my breakfast—white bread, bland cheese, apricot jelly, fruit topped with yogurt, and tea—on the table next to her husband's. I became the *hija gringa*, Paulina's American daughter, her confidant, her cooking apprentice, her friend.

SIERRA C. THOMSEN '05: IRONY IN CAIRO

Squished into the back of a taxi, I am face to face with this bright red sign. In partially rubbed-off letters of clear Arabic script it says "absolutely, no smoking." I glance around: do any of my fellow cab mates recognize this irony? I nudge Claire and point toward the sign: "Does this mean what I think it does?" How can we be in a cab, blurring through this buzzing city where merely living here is the

equivalent of smoking two packs a day and have in front of us a no-smoking sign? We look up at the driver. "My father, he doesn't like the smoke, he says it makes the car smell bad," he explains as he reaches his hand out the window to ash his cigarette. Just as our immune systems have built up a tolerance for sweet potatoes off the sidewalk carts and tap water, our psyches have begun to accept without question the non sequiturs of life here.

KATY SMITH, '06: MORNING IN ITALY

I rush out of the house, throwing cheerful *buona giornatas* behind me as I tumble down the stairs, thrilled by the cool morning air and the prospect of a new day filled with learning and unlearning. A half-remembered song left over from the night's dreaming filters through my lips, and the long row of cypresses between me and the bus stop seems to come alive in a sympathetic dance inspired by these morning breezes. At the bus stop, which is represented only by a red-and-yellow sign hanging impudently from the corner of a stately villa, I peek through the gaps of my neighbor's gate and stare, once again, at the expanding countryside, which has laid itself delicately in folds and rifts upon the land. Vineyards, fields, castles, and one ever-present flock of sheep lead most enticingly to the very doorstep of Siena.



Katy Smith '06 with Giulio and Elena, part of the host family with whom she lived in Siena, Italy.



Sierra C. Thomsen '05 (in pink) with friends at Giza's Great Pyramid.

Jaime Tung



SOUND BITES

STUDYING WITH AN ICON

I think my studies with William Wordsworth's direct descendant, Professor Jonathan Wordsworth, takes the cake [for best story]. Every time someone asked me who I was taking my tutorial with, I'd say, "Oh, I'm reading Wordsworth... with Wordsworth."—Jaime C. Tung '06, Oxford University, England

DREAMING OF TRAVELS

When I returned to Mount Holyoke [after boarding in a Korean temple], I would wake in my Mead Hall loft to the sound of Buildings and Grounds staff hammering away on some project, and imagine, in that disoriented place between dreaming and waking, that it was the monks tapping their *mok-toks* for the morning chant.—Christabel Daly Hudson Choi '90

TEACHING MEXICANS SPANISH

I was learning Spanish immersion-style in Mexico, so I was shocked to enter the little world of this village where not even Spanish is spoken. The women were dressed in brilliantly colored taffeta-type skirts and clogs, but the men were dressed in jeans and T-shirts. I asked a man selling something in a covered dish what kind of food he had. He looked bewildered, pointed, and said, "tacos?" in a barely understandable way. It dawned on me that I spoke more Spanish than the majority of the Mexicans in this town.—Cait S. May '05, Guadalajara, Mexico