

LIMINALITY AND THE SHORT TERM STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

BY

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THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

To date the relationship between study abroad and tourism has been largely understudied. This is particularly interesting given that many frameworks and concepts seeking to explain tourist experiences could also be used to investigate and understand study abroad participants' experiences. Using a framework of phenomenology, this study explores the experiences of short term study abroad participants in a winter break program to Thailand. This study seeks to explore the concept of liminality as explained through short term study abroad experiences. Specifically, in-depth interviews combined with memento and photo elicitation of seven participants allowed for an investigation of the explanatory power of the concept of liminality to better understand tourists' studies. Findings indicated that study participants identified with the main tenets of the concept of liminality through many aspects of their study abroad experience. However, not all liminal tenets proved to align with the participants' described experiences. These findings are then put into conversation with the extant literature on liminality so as to extend our understanding and discussions on the concept of liminality.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Study abroad experiences have increasingly become central to the mission of contemporary global education and personal growth. To be sure, the number of study abroad programs offered to students is endless. Students have the choice of a vast variety of programs in countries all around the world varying in subject matter and length of the program. In particular, in recent years short term study abroad programs are increasing in popularity largely due to lower cost, and less time commitment than traditional semester long programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009).

While extant research on study abroad programs largely focuses on issues regarding foreign language learning or cultural adjustment, there is a gap in the literature regarding participant lived experiences in study abroad programs. These experiences are important to investigate and understand because they not only provide insight into how to improve study abroad programs, but they also provide greater insight into contemporary forms of travel and tourism.

While there are several ways to conduct research on lived experiences, this thesis is located within a discussion of the nexus of study abroad experiences and the concept of liminality. In particular this thesis approaches the concept of liminality as a state of in between as well as a space apart; and explores the concept as explained through short term study abroad experiences. This concept directly relates to students studying abroad given that the students often express their experience in such programs as something completely different from their normal life. Therefore, the central questions in this thesis are 1) How do short term study abroad participants describe their experiences? And 2) How do their descriptions align with the main

tenets of liminality? With this in mind, this study employs a framework of phenomenology, a common qualitative research method and approach, to explore the experiences of short term study abroad participants in a winter break program to Thailand offered at a large Midwestern university. Specifically, in-depth interviews combined with memento and photo elicitation of seven participants allowed for an investigation of the explanatory power of the concept of liminality to better understand tourists' studies. Findings indicated that study participants identified with the main tenets of the concept of liminality through many aspects of their study abroad experience. However, not all liminal tenets proved to align with the participants' described experiences. These findings are then put into conversation with the extant literature on liminality so as to extend our understanding and discussions on the concept of liminality.

### Purposes of Study

I took on this study in order to gain better insight into the short term study abroad experience as explained through the perspectives of students who have participated in a short term program. I then examined and explored those experiences through the conceptual lens of liminality. To be sure, study abroad can be seen as a branch of tourism and because liminality is commonly used to describe tourists and their experiences, my goal is to contribute to tourist studies by advancing a discussion regarding the tourist experience and liminality within travel and tourism.

I also conducted this study in hope that it would contribute to the development of study abroad programs and opportunities. I personally feel that it is important for the directors and managers of study abroad programs to understand their participants' experiences and

expectations. Indeed, study abroad programs can greatly benefit from research on participants' experiences given that better understanding of the participants is likely to lead to better and more successful programming. I hope that my research can be useful to programs seeking to evaluate the goals, objectives and outcomes of the programs and opportunities they offer. Moreover, I also expect this research to help study abroad offices better market their programs towards certain groups of participants.

Finally, I undertook this project out of my own curiosity and experiences with tourism and study abroad programs, as well as the experiences of participants. I have participated in several study abroad programs and I am very intrigued by my own and others experiences and how they can differ based on length and destination of the program.

This thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter two provides a review of extant literature regarding the concept of liminality, tourists' experiences, study abroad, and Thailand. Chapter three then explains my methodological framework and approach, as well participants' descriptions and data analysis procedures. Chapter four introduces and discusses my results. And, finally chapter five provides my conclusion and suggestions for future research.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Liminality, commonly described as a state of *In Between* (Turner 1967), is an important topic and concept in the tourism literature and research. It is most generally used to help explain and further understand tourist motivations. However, to date, most of the literature on liminality focuses on conceptualization and discussions regarding liminal spaces and the types of liminal activities that tourists partake in while on vacation. Yet surprisingly, there is little to no research or literature on liminal experiences of tourists while in these liminal spaces. Indeed, tourism studies generally assume that if the tourist is in a liminal space their experiences will also be liminal. This thesis looks to question and problematize such an assumption (i.e. that liminal experiences are the result of being in a liminal space) so as to better understand the nexus of liminality and tourist experiences.

In this section I will discuss the primary theories and frameworks, as well as extant research associated with the concept of liminality and how they focus on liminal spaces and liminal activities of tourists. To further contextualize my research topic, I will also include a review of the literature that discusses tourist experiences and how those experiences are conceptualized. I will then follow with a literature review on study abroad, specifically short-term study abroad programs, the focus of my own topic, and how liminality can be applied to study abroad experiences much like it can be applied to tourists' experiences. Finally I will conclude my literature with a summary of Thailand and two of the main sights that will be discussed throughout the rest of my thesis.

## Liminality

Liminality, which is derived from the Latin word 'limen' meaning threshold, was first introduced by Arnold Van Gennep in 1960 in his article *Rites of Passage*. In this article he states that a rite of passage is when one moves from one identity state to another for example boy to man, young adult to worker, young women to mother, etc. Van Gennep proposes three phases to demonstrate the process: separation, liminality, and aggregation. Specifically, Van Gennep sees the liminality stage of the rite of passage as the middle, neither before nor after, but what takes place during the actual rite of passage. This stage is often grounded in uncertainty as one does not know what will happen. Victor Turner took Van Gennep's concept of liminality and developed it further. Turner (1967) defines liminality as the state of 'betwixt and in-between', meaning there is no beginning or end and during this in between there is a state of ambiguity and uncertainty. Turner uses this concept not only to discuss and further understand the notions of regarding personal identity, but also within the concepts of time and space.

What follows is a literature regarding liminality. It is important, however, to point out that liminality is not a theory or a framework but rather a concept. The literature review on liminality is as follows. First, I will provide a review of the extant literature on liminality in terms of space. Second, I will discuss liminality in terms of activities. Third, I will discuss how liminality relates to the tourism context and finally I will conclude with a review of the relationship between liminality and identity.

## Liminal spaces

Largely literature on liminality deals with liminal spaces, in the sense of destinations or locations being in-between, a transition, or a space that is different from one's normal space. In

an article entitled “*The ‘System of Pleasure’: Liminality and the carnivalesque at Brighton*” Rob Shields (1990) discusses the liminal space of Brighton Beach. While, I will later go into further detail about liminality and the activities that relate to Brighton Beach, for now allow me to discuss the beach as a space itself. Any beach is essentially considered a liminal space because it is seen as being in a state of in between. It is neither land nor sea, but lies between the two (Shields, 1990). Along with this concept, beaches and seaside resorts are often viewed as liminal zones or spaces because they act as destinations for travelers, meaning that these places will be a liminal space for those tourists. Beaches and seaside resorts are places out of the context of the tourists’ daily routine. As Shields (1990) states, “The spatial movement concretized and made convincing the temporal shift from the routinized schedules of workdays and non-routinized holidays...” (p 48). This act of movement and escape from daily routines signifies that the destination will be a liminal zone.

Another study takes a look at a community college being a liminal space. Maria Lichtmann (2010) states that “The community college stands in a liminal space between world and school and between life experience and academy.” (p. 1) Here she is discussing the concept of being in between. I would further add that, not only community college, but all forms of higher education can be seen as a liminal space, because people are at an in between phase in their lives. They are in between in the sense that they are completing their degree in order to have a career, and most are unaware of what employment they will have upon completing their degree. Therefore here lies an example of the ambiguity of liminality. The university or college is also seen as a liminal space because in the United States, most students travel to a university and remain there only during the school year, returning home on breaks, and leaving upon

completion of the degree. This space is a temporary zone, something students view as an in-between stage in their life, not home, and not the future.

### Liminal Activities

As discussed, liminality is often described through spatial dimensions. However another important and central notion of the discussion on liminality is the activity that takes place while in the liminal space. Much like the research done on liminal zones and spaces as being considered spaces of in-between or out of the ordinary, liminal activities are also described as activities that are different from those of one's normal routine. Therefore liminal activities are those that normally take place in liminal spaces being that one is already out of their everyday space; providing them greater ability to partake in liminal activities.

To a great extent, liminal activity can be related back to the beginnings of liminality and Van Gennep's studies on rites of passage. Many believe that activities that are out of the everyday routine can be considered a rite of passage and something that everyone must go through. In Rob Shields' (1990) previously mentioned study on the liminal space of Brighton Beach he also discusses the notion of liminal activities that took place at Brighton. Brighton first began as a site for "medicalized bathing with its social parade" (Shields, 1990, p. 67) something its visitors could not achieve in their normal lives. During the mid 1800s more and more people started visiting Brighton beach as a holiday allowing them escape from their everyday work lives. "The spatial movement concretized and made convincing the temporal shift from the routinized schedules of workdays to non-routinized holidays, from clock time to body time." (Shields, 1990, p. 48) Once Brighton became known as a holiday hot-spot and more visitors came, liminal activities became more and more prevalent, mainly in the form of negative/deviant

activities. Indeed during the 1920s and to this day Brighton is known for its *dirty weekends*, meaning a spot for deviance and violence. Shields (1990) mentions that “carnavalesque social forms exceed moral forms of control” (p 67). Vacationers took part in drugs, alcohol, sex, and other loose moral activities as a “release from the restraints of domestic and everyday surroundings” (1990, p. 64). Brighton beach, a liminal space for its visitors was the perfect outlet to partake in liminal activities.

As mentioned in the Brighton beach study, vacationers took part in risky behavior while on holiday in a liminal space. In a study by Natan Uriely and Yaniv Belhassen they explain the phenomenon of drugs and risk-taking in tourism. They suggest that while tourists are in these liminal zones, “social constraints are suspended under the exigencies of tourism and of relative anonymity and freedom from community scrutiny” (Uriely & Belhassen, 2005, p. 344). What they mean by this is that tourists, particularly when they are away from the people and society associated with their everyday life, are more likely to take risks, and partake in liminal activities. This being because they feel they have extra freedom by being in a liminal space, that no one will recognize them or criticize them when they participate in risky or liminal activities. No one knows who they are and therefore cannot judge what kind of person they are. Uriely and Belhassen go on to state that liminal spaces, “allow or even encourage people to experience adventures denied to them in everyday life” (2005, p. 344). Examples of risky behavior are engaging in drug consumption, sex, and gambling, in places such as Las Vegas and New Orleans. These destinations facilitate such behavior as both places have a reputation of “what happens here, stays here” giving tourists the idea that it is ok to do things that you normally wouldn’t do in everyday life because no one will find out.

Along with risk taking and liminal activities is another study by David Bell (2008) about drinking tourism or as he calls it “alcotourism” and “party tourism”. Consumption of alcohol is a common activity that many people partake in while on vacation. Bell seeks to uncover the relationship between tourism and drinking. He discusses how alcohol along with consumption and intoxication comes a sense of “letting go” and the “idea of holidays as a time to relax ‘normal’ rules of conduct certainly frames many accounts of alcohol consumption on holiday” (Bell, 2008, p. 293). In addition, “various forms of ‘party tourism’ package this letting go” (Bell, 2008, p. 293). Often resorts, bars, cruises, and other locales promote this as a liminal activity because they believe the holiday is a much needed break that helps the tourist relax and recharge. Most generally the tourists partaking in drinking while on vacation, probably drink in their normal lives, the difference however is the setting and the amount of alcohol consumed that makes it a liminal activity. Going hand in hand with alcotourism, party tourism plays a significant role in liminality. Some examples of party tourism would be Mardi Gra or Carnival and most significant among American college students, Spring Break. Spring break students often participate in risky behavior such as binge drinking, drugs, and casual, risky sex. All of these activities are to an extreme where students save this behavior for that one week in late February, to March. While some of these activities may be experienced in their normal lives, it is not quite to the same extreme, nor is it in a liminal space.

Another example is going to raves, or other dance related events. Raves and these dance events are always held in a liminal space, often requiring its attendants to travel sometimes long distances to reach the event. In an article by Dewi Jaimangal-Jones, Annette Pritchard, and Nigel Morgan (2010) they discuss the liminality of dance music experiences. In this study, several of the participants mentioned how the journey to the rave was a liminal activity in itself because

they had to travel to places unknown and were awaiting the unknown. The attitude they had towards the rave or dance event was a liminal attitude, they weren't sure what was going to happen, allowing themselves to be open to what liminal activities they might encounter. The article states that "A further thrill of the dance scene is the extensive and varied opportunities, it presents for adherents to slip between their alternative selves and the events" (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard, Morgan, 2010, p. 257). This meaning that there are so many opportunities and activities to do at these dance events that participants can just let themselves go from their normal routine and do things they wouldn't normally do, which is directly related to the definition of liminality. They further go on to say that "Removed from their everyday lives, identities and locations, these individuals not only experiment with their sense of self but constantly seek out new experiences" (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010, p. 259).

Another form of risky or deviant behavior is sex tourism, which can be described as a liminal activity. While prostitution in any space, whether liminal or not, could be considered a liminal activity, because often people partake in it to escape their daily routine life, sex tourism is a liminal activity in a liminal space. Often sex tourists state their reasons for travelling for sex is because they don't want to be recognized by others in their own society, or, they want something *exotic* that they can't find at home. In Ryan and Hall's article on the *Paradigms of Sex Tourism* (2001), sex tourism is explained as involving interaction between liminal people in the sense that they are two very different people from different societies. Indeed in sex tourism, there is most always a power struggle in which one party is getting exploited by the other. This can be related back to liminality because tourists travel to these destinations in order to engage in sex tourism as they are lacking the feeling of power in their routine life (Ryan & Hall, 2001).

## Liminality in Tourism

As illustrated by the extant literature on liminality of space and liminal activities, the concept of liminality plays a very important and central role in tourism research. The art of travel is essentially an opportunity to travel to a liminal space and more often than not, partake in liminal activities while in those liminal spaces. One does this in order to escape their daily life. Victor Turner relates travel to liminality as the potential for “what may be” (Turner & Turner, 1978, p.3). Zachary Beckstead further discusses that with travel, “every step leads away from what is familiar towards unfamiliar settings and uncertain horizons which allows for novel and ambivalent experiences” (Beckstead, 2010, p. 387). Combining Beckstead and Turner’s viewpoints, travel is a journey into the unknown, allowing yourself to be open to whatever experiences may come your way. Beckstead goes on to develop the idea of how liminality relates to pilgrimages and the experiences of those on pilgrimages.

In a recent research article by Risto Jarv, he seeks to show the parallel of liminality between storytelling and tourist trips. Risto Jarv (2010) claims that “Both an act of storytelling that traditionally would take place in a liminal period and a journey away from one’s home convey the impression of being on the border of several different worlds” (p. 282). He goes on to describe how a hero in a fairy tale goes off into the unknown or “into a different world” to find his destiny. “A tourist who is traveling finds himself likewise in a liminal situation, belonging to more than one world” (Jarv, 2010 p. 282). Jarv (2010) also states:

What is important here is the fairy-tale hero’s and the tourist’s existence ‘in-between’ two worlds – the social structure of the tourist’s home society has lost its meaning for him or her (Selänniemi 1996, 197f.) and the tourist no



longer belongs at home, but despite his or her physical presence, does not belong to the country of destination either. Liminality makes the tourist belong to neither of the worlds, everything can happen to him or her as things in a liminal phase are not what they are in the ordinary world. Liminality is a threshold offering several possibilities. (p. 282-283)

This gives interesting insight into the tourist, especially if we look at it in conjunction with risk or deviant tourism. Risto Jarv (2010) states that: “everything can happen to him or her as things in a liminal phase are not what they are in the ordinary world. Liminality is a threshold offering several possibilities” (p. 283). Tourists can interpret such a statement as meaning that they can do things while on vacation that they wouldn’t normally do because they are tourists, they are untouchable, and they are in these liminal spaces that offer so many more unique opportunities. As Risto Jarva (2010) says “in the case of tourist trips, the tourists are protected from harm – they are safely taken through poverty and pain, through crime-ridden slums to their destination and back again, so these are only seemingly a source of danger that is meant to be passed through” (p. 283).

Liminality, therefore, is very important to tourism research. With the completion of this thesis I hope to add yet another component to tourism research using the concept of liminality. The main question I will be investigating in this thesis is whether one can have a liminal experience while on a short term study abroad program particularly as it relates to the notion of the development of identity.

## Liminality and Communitas

Another branch of liminality is described through Turner's notion of *communitas* which is essentially a structured community that experience liminality together. Shields (1990) states:

Turner points out that the experience of liminality is a socially unifying one. Underscoring the sense of the liminal is the perception of unmediated encounters with other individuals also momentarily stripped of their social status. This experience of equal individuals fosters a sense of *communitas*, 'society experienced or seen as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *communitatus*, community or even communion...' (Turner, 1979, p. 131) (as cited in Shields, 1990, p. 50).

From this, one can conclude that being in a liminal state with others helps to form strong bonds between people. Therefore, liminality as a socially unifying experience takes place during heightened emotional or spiritual experiences. Also according to Turner, *communitas* help to remove the daily masks people have, and assist them in developing interpersonal relations in which people desire to live in a permanent state of liminal *communitas*.

## Liminality and Identity

Liminality plays an important and central role in constructing identity. Often times when someone is *constructing* their identity they are in this state of in-between that has been discussed throughout the literature review on liminality. They are figuring out both what their identity

means to them and how they want to represent their identity. For example, in a study done by Brendan Sweeney on “*Producing liminal space: gender, age, and class in northern Ontario’s tree planting industry*” (2009) he discusses how women in particular experience liminality when working in a mainly male dominated industry. This has implications for both the male and female roles. As a male, Sweeney (2009) states that:

Tree planting provides young workers from Ontario’s urban and affluent middle-classes opportunities to live and work in the spaces of an iconic, masculine-gendered industry. In doing so, tree planters are temporarily withdrawn from the lifestyles of urban, middleclass youth and can reclaim identities characteristic of romanticized perceptions of forestry workers. This is particularly important for males reared in white-collar settings who, due to economic restructuring, are unable to practise the masculinities of their forefathers – which are seldom necessary or appropriate, yet remain valorized – and must seek new ways to perform gender (as cited in Brandth and Haugen 2005) (p. 581).

Because tree planting is known as a male dominated or masculine industry this means that the young males must try to live up to that image and “reclaim” their identity as a male in the tree planting industry.

For females on the other hand Sweeney (2009) says that “female tree planters are also afforded this opportunity, as well as spaces for empowerment where they can prove that they too

can thrive in a masculine-gendered industry” (p. 581). However in order to do so “they must adopt masculine traits. To do otherwise is to risk losing status within the community; this is similar for males who do not perform in a manner consistent with the gendered hegemonies of the occupational culture.” (Sweeny, 2009 p. 581) This means that women may have to hide or adapt their identity in order to not lose respect in this male dominated industry.

Also within the tree planting industry it is often seen as a first time job and is therefore looked to be a rite of passage which Van Gennep and Turner directly relate to liminality. This first time job for many young adults provides a “separation from familiar space, routine order and hegemonic social structures” (Sweeny, 2009 p. 579). These young adults are crossing the threshold into the working world and learning to create a new identity. Like Sweeny (2009) states, “tree planting provides spaces for personal growth, transformation and the development of traits characteristic of productive adult workers rather than dependent adolescents” (p. 579). While in this first job, they are in the stage of transitioning into adulthood and discovering a new identity.

Similar to the previous study done on how identity is created in the liminality of a new job, a study done on Chinese students participating in a UK-based MBA program also looks at how their identity was effected through participating in this program. The study perceives this UK-based MBA program as a rite of passage for Chinese students because they are seeking to become a manager and will be entering a new phase of their career. Therefore they are constructing their identities throughout the program, but when they return to their native China they are still experiencing a liminal state in their identity because their “new-western-based managerial identities collide with dominant discourses of Chinese organization” (Simpson, Sturges, Weight, 2009, p. 53). The article employs Turner’s concept of liminality as a transition

because these students are “in between” their MBA program and finding/starting employment and, therefore, due to the fact that they are in transition their identity, “rather than a fixed attribute of the individual, identity here is conceptualized as fragmented and ‘in process’” (Simpson et al., 2009, p. 55). These student’s identities are in process and they are trying to figure out how to construct them.

Along with this process of constructing their identity through the MBA program, upon returning to China the students experience differences in cultural practices from what they were taught in their MBA program. This form of liminality is often expressed when someone travels to new cultures and upon returning to their normal life, they are unsure, or question how they are to act. The Chinese students have their new, western style techniques that are not as applicable in China. Now these Chinese students must deal with their liminal identity as being a new employee, as well as how they handle the cultural differences (Simpson et al., 2009).

In yet another article on liminality and identity, Nic Beech (2010) defines liminality as a “reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community” (p.296-297). This is an intriguing concept which proposes that if one is in a liminal state and trying to construct their new identity the outcome or their ‘new’ identity must be of significant value to their everyday community. In the study Beech (2010) interviews two people about their employment situation and states that both “move through a series of experiences that result in them occupying a different identity in relation to their organizations at the point at which we suspend their stories, and it is fair to say that they associate meaning (albeit somewhat unwelcome) with this identity reconstruction” (p.297). Taking this into consideration, then one can argue that with different

situations we construct different identities, especially when we are in new situations where we are unsure of the outcome or how people are going to react.

Identity plays a significant role in how we form our daily life, activities, and our experiences. Taking into consideration the concept of liminality within discussions on identity can serve to change the structure of our daily life, activities, and experiences. It is necessary, therefore, to use this component of the concept of liminality to help us gain further insight into the experiences of short term study abroad participants. How students construct their identity will greatly aid in the construction of their experience, as well as in the development and delivery of future study abroad programs.

### Tourist Experience

The research on tourist experiences can easily be related to liminality in the fact that tourist experiences are often referred to as an escape from one's daily routine (Cohen, 1979). Cohen (1979) also argues that "tourism is essentially a temporary reversal of everyday activities- it is a no-work, no-care, no-thrift situation" (p. 181). In addition, according to Uriely (2005)

The differentiation between everyday life and tourist experience was also highlighted by Turner and Ash (1975) who suggested that the temporary distance of tourists from their regular environments allows them to suspend the power of norms and values that govern their daily lives and to think about their own lives and societies from a different perspective (p. 203).

What Uriely describes is that these liminal distances (i.e. tourist destinations) allow people to escape the standardness that they experience every day and therefore creates the tourist experience.

To date, there has been some controversy between some scholars on what tourists are seeking to experience and whether those experiences have and provide meaning. Boorstin (1964) argues in his article that tourists have lost the “Art of Travel”. He believes that the mass tourist no longer looks for authentic experiences. Boorstin feels that tourists have made a disgrace to what travel used to be known as. These mass tourists are seeking an easy and safe getaway where they don’t have to put any work into planning their trip. Boorstin further argues that these tourists graciously accept pseudo-event experiences that may be in-authentic and consider them authentic (Boorstin, 1964).

In contradiction to Boorstin’s ideas, MacCannell (1973) feels that tourists are actually seeking authentic experiences, but are not able to experience the authentic due to the different regions presented by the tourism organizations. MacCannell proposes that there are different regions that a tourist can go into and often most tourists are experiencing the front region, which is the region that is constructed for what the organization wants tourists to see and want experience. Moreover, while tourists often are allowed to go into the back region, or behind the scenes, this region too is often considered to be created or staged to show the tourist only certain parts of the back region. Throughout his research, MacCannell remains adamant that tourists are in fact seeking authentic experiences and that each region provides a level of authenticity for the tourist (1973).

In addition to the extant literature on tourist experiences provided by Boorstin and MacCannell, Cohen's work further develops on the concept of tourist experiences in his article *A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences* (2004). Cohen proposes five modes of touristic experiences: recreational mode, diversionary mode, experiential mode, experimental mode, and existential mode. Cohen believes that the tourist is seeking his 'centre' and that these modes speak to what level the tourist is actually achieving that goal. Recreational mode is where tourists seek a recreational experience, meaning "The tourist 'enjoys' his trip, because it restores his physical and mental powers and endows him with a general sense of well-being" (Cohen, 2004, p.183). The experience that tourists are looking to have is one of pure relaxation and recuperation. In Cohen's second mode of tourist experiences, the diversionary mode, tourists are seeking "a mere escape from the boredom and meaninglessness of routine, everyday existence, into the forgetfulness of a vacation, which may heal the body and soothe the spirit, but does not 'recreate'" (Cohen, 2004, p. 185-186). Diversionary mode, like the recreational mode, does not seek for one's 'centre', rather diversionary mode can be seen as a diversion from one's everyday life.

In Cohen's third mode, experiential, he suggests that tourists are on a quest to find meaning outside the confines of one's own society (2004, p. 186). These tourists are seeking authentic experiences but yet they are aware of the 'other'. The experiential tourist does not convert to this new way of life, nor do they accept this new practice into their regular lifestyle but is merely content to know that others live authentically (Cohen, 2004). The fourth mode is known as the experimental mode. With this mode, the tourist actually engages in authentic activities with the 'other'. The experimental tourist however does not adopt these activities. Cohen (2004) states that:



rather he samples and compares the different alternatives, hoping eventually to discover one which will suit his particular needs and desires. In a sense, the ‘experimental’ tourist is in ‘search of himself’, insofar as in a trial and error process, he seeks to discover that form of life which elicits a resonance in himself; he is often not really aware of what he seeks of his ‘real’ needs and desires (p. 189).

The fifth mode is the existential mode. Like the experimental mode, tourists in the existential mode experiment with the ‘other’, but take it one step farther than the experimental tourists. An existential tourist experiences is where one actually adapts to the new lifestyle that they have experienced. They incorporate it into their routine daily lives. These tourists are seeking to make a change and find their ‘centre’ and convert to it (Cohen, 2004).

In 2005 Uriely’s published article looks to change the modernist look on tourist experiences to a postmodernist view. For example, he takes the concept that many say the experience must take place away from home and out of people’s everyday life, and argues that “many tourist related experiences are currently reachable without the necessity for travel to separate destinations” (p. 203). He concurs with Cohen’s approach of pluralizing tourists experiences and with the notion of separating them into different groups who might be looking to experience different things. Uriely also goes on to discuss the need for subjectivity in tourist experiences as well as relative interpretations. This being because tourists’ experiences are subject to different situations. Uriely (2005) also states that “while the former [modernist] conceptualize the tourist experience in terms of absolute truths, the later [postmodernist] make

use of concepts of relative truths” (p. 207). This meaning that we can’t look solely at the absolute truth we must now consider that truth can be relative.

The current literature review on tourist experience, along with the previously discussed literature on liminality, and what follows with study abroad provides a solid foundation to explore the experiences of this study’s study abroad participants. Next is a review of literature on study abroad, followed by information about Thailand.

### Study Abroad

Studying abroad dates back as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth century to The Grand Tour. As D.J. Boorstin (1964) explains young, mainly European men, liked to round off their education by taking part in the Grand Tour. Largely, the Grand Tour was approximately a yearlong of travel where men would travel from country to country and become a “man of the world” (Boorstin, 1964). They would educate themselves in foreign languages as well as learning new cultures and traditions that they would then take home with them upon the completion of their tour. This concept and its associated goals are not so different from today’s American view of the Study Abroad program at the University level. The idea of American University study abroad programs is to educate their students on an international level so that when they return from the program those students will be more well rounded and worldly; therefore making them better human beings and better potential employees who will essentially contribute more to society and the world around them.

To date, there has been plentiful research done about study abroad. Such studies, however, mainly examine study abroad from an education and psychology perspective, whereas, hardly any research has sought to relate study abroad to tourism; particularly in consideration with liminality. More specifically, there is a lack of studies done on short-term study abroad programs. Short term study abroad programs are defined as programs that are fewer than 8 weeks and generally take place during the summer, winter, or spring breaks (Donnelly-Smith, 2009). Also, with these programs the students receive fewer credits than if they were abroad for a semester or year program. The short term study abroad programs focus on a particular course or subject matter for the duration of the program, whether it is a language course, biology course, or cultural course.

This lack of studies done on short-term study abroad programs is particularly puzzling given that these types of study abroad programs are increasing in popularity, and according to The Institute of International Education (2008) they are currently the most common type of undergraduate study abroad in the United States. With more than half of all American students who studied abroad in the 2006–07 academic year (55.4 percent) participating in short-term programs (Institute of International Education, 2008).

In an article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Karin Fischer (2008) explains that:

Shorter trips also continued to rise in popularity, with 9.8 percent of students who study abroad going for eight weeks or less, up from 9.5 percent. An additional 6.8 percent went overseas during a January term, up from 5.4 percent the

year before. By contrast, the share of study-abroad students who go for a full academic year dipped, from 5.3 percent to 4.3 percent. Nearly 39 percent of students chose a summer term abroad, and 36 percent left for a semester (p. 1).

Some explanations for the increase in participation in short term programs is perhaps due to the fact that these programs are often more affordable than longer programs. In addition, they may also appeal to students who might not be able or willing to commit to a semester or a year abroad. Finally, they may allow students in structured academic programs like engineering, nursing, and education to study abroad without falling behind in their programs (Donnelly-Smith, 2009).

Several extant studies have documented the benefits of study abroad programs. In general, these studies propose that study abroad programs contribute to an increase in cultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006), improve student confidence, and heighten an appreciation for other cultures (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). Study abroad programs are also proposed to increase international functional knowledge (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), deepen an understanding of global interdependence (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), and increase interest in working in a foreign country (Orahood, Kruze, & Easley Pearson, 2004). Furthermore, these programs are said to enhance interest in further study abroad, while sparking interest in interdisciplinary studies (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005). Specifically, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) argued that by studying abroad, students will naturally become more aware of the host country's culture and improve their language skills among other personal, career, and academic

advancements. However, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) also argued that study abroad programs can have more profound effects, such as “transforming their [the students’] worldviews” (p.102).

With the world becoming a more global society and America and its younger generation taking part in that global society, studying abroad seems to be the perfect solution to expose students to the world around them and the opportunities that lie within the future. Indeed, many employers look at study abroad experience as something useful and a great quality in future employees. Largely, it is assumed that such individuals (i.e. study abroad students) are willing to take on a challenge, be adaptable, and are great with diversity in the workplace (Lewis & Niesenbaum, 2005).

At the same time, year-long as well as semester-long study abroad programs can be very intimidating to students. The time that students will be away from home, family, and friends might persuade them to not travel. Also fears of anti-Americanism have been identified as factors contributing to students not wanting to study abroad for fear of lack of safety. However, Lewis and Niesenbaum (2005) state that this should not affect ones decision to study abroad and that indeed:

Although some students and parents have expressed fears about studying abroad since September 11, many scholars and policy makers have argued that it is even more important now for Americans to learn about other cultures. A recent report of the Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad, convened by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, has argued that after the terrorist attacks we are in a "Sputnik moment" in which "it is time to launch a

major national effort to ensure that every U.S. college student graduates with both an understanding of at least one foreign area and facility in at least one foreign language." If a semester long or yearlong experience seems too daunting, our research suggests that a shorter, well-planned program can help students to achieve those goals (p. 3).

While extant literature regarding study abroad is largely focused on the enormous and transformative benefits that students experience while on these programs, there is also other literature regarding study abroad that proposes a much more problematic perspective. Heather Willis Allen (2010) states that:

Drawback[s] to the short term study abroad is it's short duration and its traditional configuration as "sheltered" or "island" programs wherein the U.S. students are grouped together. As a result, participants may experience superficial cultural contact (p. 453).

This is often expressed of short term study abroad programs in which some believe the program is too structured, and far too much like a tour rather than an actual study abroad experience. Generally short term study abroad programs are led by a professor, and students must attend the class, seminars, and activities in order to receive credit for the course. This format may be a downside because the students don't have as much freedom as they would if they participated in a longer program.

In a study done by Rosane Gertner (2010), she examines whether college students have similar images of countries with regard to tourism and study abroad. In other words, does the image a country portrays positively or negatively impact the decision a student has to study in that country or to visit that country. Moreover, according to Bourke (2000), “undergraduate students are more likely to choose a country first, and then select an institution when considering study abroad” (p. 125). This assumption can serve to dissuade colleges from having programs in certain destinations, or parents preventing their children from studying in destinations that they may choose as a result of other reasons other than academics.

Based on the above mentioned, study abroad programs are a great example of liminality. Students visit and study in liminal spaces, partake in liminal activities, and as an apparent goal of study abroad, go through a stage of liminal identity where one returns more well rounded and better prepared for society at large. However through my personal experiences and observations, as well as upon interviewing the participants in this study, I have come to question whether a liminal experience actually takes place. Certainly, one can argue that perhaps it depends on the participant, or perhaps it depends on the length of the program, however I fear that such generalizations of a liminal experience in a study abroad context can yield serious assumptions. For example, if the university and the study abroad program have a goal for students to have a liminal experience through their program, and that is not what is happening, then it is possible that the program is not meeting the goals it is supposed to. On the other hand, if a student wants a liminal experience and does not get one through the program, they might be turned off from future study abroad programs or travel abroad. They may view it as a waste of time. In examining students’ study abroad experiences through the concept of liminality, findings will provide greater insight to a specific type of tourist experience (i.e. study abroad), as well as

generate valuable information for the management and organization of future study abroad programs.

## Thailand

Thailand, officially known as the Kingdom of Thailand is located in the center of Southeast Asia. It is the 50<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world and roughly the size of Spain. It borders Burma to the north and west, Laos to the north and east, Cambodia to the west, and Malaysia to the southwest. Thailand is located just north of the equator and has a tropical climate with May to July being the rainy monsoon period and November to January being colder and drier. The country is divided into 76 political provinces with Bangkok being the largest city and serving not only as the political capital, but also the city with the most industry and entertainment in all of Thailand. There are approximately 64 million people in Thailand with 75% of the population being Thai, 14% being Chinese decent, and the remaining 11% other (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2011). The official language is Thai, however in many top tourist destinations English is widely spoken. The predominant religion is Buddhism. Thailand is a parliamentary democracy along with a constitutional monarchy. They have a current Prime Minister as well as the world's longest serving king, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has reigned since 1946 (CIA, 2011). Below is a map of Southeast Asia to show you where Thailand is in relation to other Southeast Asian countries.





Figure 2.1- Map of Southeast Asia

Thailand's main economy is the exporting of goods such as jewelry, rice, and clothing. However tourism continues to rise and plays a significant role in Thailand's economy, especially in the south due to Thailand's luscious beaches and islands. Many tourists from all over the world travel to Thailand to enjoy their tropical climate, rich culture, and historical sites. Moreover, Thailand is also well known for its sex and drug tourism (Wikitravel, 2011). Indeed, a significant number of tourists visit Thailand to take part in these illegal activities.



Figure 2.2- Thailand's Full Moon Festival



Figure 2.3- Advertisement for tourists featuring Thailand's unique culture

Bangkok, largest city and capital of Thailand has approximately 9 million people and is located in the southern part of Thailand. It is a very popular tourist destination largely because it is the capital and largest city in Thailand and provides tourists with numerous activities such as cultural events, historical attractions, as well as shopping and other entertainment. Bangkok is also increasingly modern creating a cityscape much like one would find in the United States with its growing urban society. Something unique however is that Bangkok has been able to develop

into a modern city while maintaining the historical value of several Buddhist temples and other important aspects such as the Grand Palace (CIA, 2011).



Figure 2.4- Map of Thailand showing location of Bangkok.



Figure 2.5- The city of Bangkok

Phimai is a town in Thailand that is located about 168 miles northeast of Bangkok in the Nakhon Ratchasima Province. The current population of Phimai is about 13,000. Phimai was

founded by the Khmers and was a very important town during the Khmer Empire (Program Brochure, n.d.). Located in the center of town is the temple Prasat Hin Phimai. It was a major Khmer temple in ancient Thailand and is connected to the more famous Angkor temple in Cambodia by the ancient Khmer Highway. The temple is now part of the Phimai historical park and is protected. It is on the list to become a UNESCO world heritage site. Tourists often travel to Phimai because of this temple, but there are various other activities for tourists to partake in, for example, just outside the town of Phimai lies the world's largest banyan tree named Sai Ngam and the province Nakhon Ratchasima is known for their pottery and silk weaving (Holland, 2011). Phimai provides some great attractions and a different insight to the culture of Thailand than you might experience in the bustling city of Bangkok (Program Brochure, n.d.).



Figure 2.6- Map showing location of Phimai



Figure 2.7- Photo of the Temple of Phimai

In conclusion, to date the concept of liminality as well as study abroad lived experiences remain largely understudied by education, tourism and other social science scholars. This lack of attention is particularly interesting considering that exploring the concept of liminality within short term study abroad programs can yield new insights that can further contribute to the existing literature on liminality, study abroad, and tourist studies.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

In this chapter, I will discuss the technicalities of my study. This will include my research questions; my data collection methods, which comprise of personal reflection, in-depth interviewing, and photo and memento elicitation; and my methods for analyzing the data. In addition, I will introduce the participants of the study and how they were selected along with a description of their study abroad program.

### Research questions

Using a framework of phenomenology, this study explores the experiences of short term study abroad participants in a winter break program to Thailand offered at a large Midwestern university. It explores the concept of liminality as explained through short term study abroad experiences. Therefore, my research questions are:

- How do short term study abroad participants describe their experiences?
- How do their descriptions align with the main tenets of liminality?

## Exploring Short-term Study Abroad Participants' Experiences

### *Framework: Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is a common framework within qualitative research used by interpretive researchers. Phenomenology is often considered a philosophy of experience (Stoller, 2009). However it is also described as understanding a phenomenon through the meanings people bring to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As described by Patton (2002) phenomenology was introduced by German philosopher Edmund Husserl:

[Husserl's] most basic philosophical assumption was that *we can only know what we experience* by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness. Initially, all our understanding comes from sensory experience of phenomena, but that experience must be described, explicated, and interpreted. Yet, descriptions of experience and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one. Interpretation is essential to an understanding of experience and the experience includes the interpretation...There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means. The subjective experience incorporates the objective thing and becomes a person's reality, thus the focus on meaning making as the essence of human experience (p. 105-106).

As Husserl states, “experience must be described; explicated, and interpreted”, and therefore I feel that a framework of phenomenology is the most appropriate for my study as it deals directly with experiences. The study participants must describe their experiences to me, and I in turn interpret them. Also an important reason for utilizing this framework is found in, Masberg and Silverman (1996) argument that phenomenology is a great instrument in understanding tourists’ experiences.

Also, being a qualitative researcher, and having studied abroad before, phenomenology can help me understand how others experience study abroad programs, as well as provide better insight into my own meanings and experiences (Leedy, 1997).

### *Methods*

The methods of examination I used to explore my research questions include personal reflection, in-depth interviewing, and memento/photo elicitation. Below, they are discussed individually.

#### *Personal Reflection*

Throughout my career as a university student, I have participated in several study abroad programs of varying length. I have done short-term programs, which include a month during the summer in Mexico, as well as a two week program in Guatemala. I have also participated in longer programs such as a year spent in Barcelona, Spain. When I first chose this topic for my Master’s thesis, I immediately began reflecting back on my own experiences. Even though my thesis focuses on short term programs it was helpful to compare my short term experiences with my year abroad experiences. I was able to see some similarities between the experiences, but



there were a lot of differences based on the length of the program. This realization persuaded me to explore with more depth the experiences of short term study abroad participants. To begin to do so and to better assist me in focusing, I turned to several friends that have studied abroad on short term programs and I asked them to tell me about their experiences. I also teach a class preparing students for studying abroad. Several of my students have participated in short term programs, and through listening to their experiences, along with those of my friends, they helped me to reflect further on my own experiences as well as focus on my own study project. This also allowed me to gain further insight into how others conceptualized their experiences, as well as allowing me additional contemplation on my own experiences and what they mean to me.

#### *In-depth interviews*

The main way that I went about collecting my data was through in-depth interviews with my participants. I met individually with each participant varying from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The participants were asked to pick a time and a place to meet that was most convenient for them. We met at places like the library, coffee shops, the student union, and dormitory lounge areas. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and given a consent form that describes the study and its components in detail. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix A. After reading the consent form, and before the interviews took place, participants who were willing to partake in this study signed the consent form. With the participants' permission all interviews were audio recorded. While I had a series of questions that I wanted to ask the participants, I allowed them to tell me about their experience abroad and asked questions periodically throughout their narrative. Milena, Dainora, and Alin (2008) describe in-depth interviewing as:

[A] technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic. During in-depth interviews, the person being interviewed is considered the expert and the interviewer is considered the student. The researcher's interviewing techniques are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the research topic. In depth interview is an effective qualitative method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. It is also an opportunity to gain insight into how people interpret and order the world. We can accomplish this by being attentive to the causal explanations (p. 1279).

I have chosen in-depth interviewing as my main method, mainly because it puts the participant in power as the expert. I wanted to learn about the participants and their experiences, therefore I acted like the student, allowing them to take over and teach me about their time abroad. Beale, Cole, Hillege, McMaster, and Nagy (2004) state that "In qualitative research, in-depth interviewing is an egalitarian approach to interviewing which develops research relationships and rapport with participants by focusing on the participant's experiences from their own perspective" (p. 141). I wanted the participants to open up and share their personal experiences and paid close attention to everything they were saying.

Largely, I felt this was a better method than focus groups, albeit that all the participants traveled abroad together. Indeed, my approach was that perhaps they might not have been as willing to share their personal experiences amongst the group for fear of offending someone.

Milena, Dainora, and Alin (2008) go on to state that “as a general rule, in depth interviews, the participants are more confident, more relaxed, and they feel more encouraged to express the deepest thoughts about a certain subject” (p. 1279).

### *Photo/memento elicitation*

Photo elicitation is a growing approach to the current study particularly in social science research. It is a specific type of interview where photographs are assembled by the researcher and shown to individuals or groups with the purpose of triggering memories and eliciting values, beliefs, attitudes and meaning (Schwartz, 1989; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). Another approach is when the interviewee produces their own photographs for the interview purposes (Chalfen, 1987, 1998). Photo elicitation is a revitalized way of conducting interviews because it provides deeper interviews than word alone interviews (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation studies have been performed in numerous areas and are extremely useful when researching experiences because using photos in an interview help inspire subjects to define how they interpret the events depicted in the photos (Harper, 2002) and invoke memory to those events. Harper (2002) also suggests that there are four areas that photo elicitation concentrate on; social, organization/social class, community, identity and culture.

While there is not much research on memento elicitation, for the purpose of this study I use it in the same sense as photo elicitation. I asked the participants to bring any photos or other mementos such as maps, brochures, or souvenirs. Moreover, for their final project for their study abroad class the students were required to make a scrapbook of their experience, many of the students brought this scrapbook with them to help describe their experience. I felt this was very effective because it allowed the participants to express in more detail what they had experienced;

they recalled finer details, than had they just been recanting their memories alone. I believe that the participants were also more comfortable having something to show me and that consequently the interviews had good flow. I suspect this would have been quite different had I had a very structured interview guide, where the participants would answer one question and then pause and wait for the next question.

### *Interview guide*

As mentioned above, I did in-depth interviews combined with memento/photo elicitation. Moreover, I allowed the participants to tell me their story by following a semi-structured interview approach. Before I met with the participants I sought approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once my study and interview questions were approved I was able to begin meeting with the participants. When I met with each of the participants I had a guide of interview questions, some of the questions I necessarily asked of all participants (e.g., how did they chose their particular study abroad program?), however other questions, the participants automatically answered within their narrative. I have included my interview guide below:

- I would like to learn some background information about you and your decision to participate in the study abroad course to Thailand. What information did you have about Thailand? What did you learn during the process of planning for the study abroad trip? What other coursework have you taken that prepared you for this course and trip? Have you traveled outside of the United States previously, and if so, where?
- I would like to hear about some of the educational experiences you had on your trip and how those experiences are reflected in the pictures and other mementos you have selected to discuss with me today.
- What does the photo/memento represent?
- Does it tie into an entire educational experience or was it an isolated moment?

- Why did you choose this photo/memento?
- Outside of the photos and mementos, how well did your educational experience in Thailand measure up to your expectations before going?
- Did you come into direct contact with residents, and if so how would you generally describe those interactions?
- Did you purchase any goods (souvenirs, products) while in Thailand?
- Which places did you most enjoy visiting and why?
- Which places did you least enjoy visiting and why?
- Do you feel the course and this overall study abroad experience impacted your understanding of the world in any way? Explain.
- Is there anything else you would like to add that would help me to better understand your study abroad experience and what it meant to you?

### *Selection of participants*

Every year study abroad departments at universities throughout the United States offer a wide variety of programs to its students. These programs can vary in length from one year abroad, to a semester and, short term programs. Due to the fact that short term programs are increasing in popularity (Donnelly-Smith, 2009), I chose to focus only on those.

In this study I focus on a particular short term program. Students in the program were contacted via an email explaining that my advisor and I were conducting a research project on short term study abroad programs. The students were then advised to email me if they were interested in participating. There were seventeen students who went on the trip and of those seventeen seven volunteered their time to talk with me.

### *Study Participants*

In total there were seven individuals who officially took part in this study. I will provide a little information on those participants below:

Tom was a senior in college. He was very friendly and really wanted to talk about his experience. Tom had previously studied abroad his second semester of his junior year in Australia. When asked why he chose to attend a short term study abroad program he mentioned that he had always wanted to go to Thailand while in Australia but was unable to. He also mentioned that he was very interested in learning new things and would stay in college forever if he could. He wanted to experience Thailand because of the unique culture but he was also interested in learning more about heritage tourism. Tom mentioned that this short term program allowed him another opportunity to travel abroad before his college career ended, without taking time away from his commitments during the semester.

Ben was also a senior in college. He said that he always wanted to study abroad and this program gave him the opportunity to do it before he graduated. He mentioned that he initially wanted to study in Japan, but he came across this program and thought that it would be close enough. Once he was in class he really enjoyed the lectures and said that he knew he was going to have a good time abroad. Ben wasn't as open as Tom, he needed a little more prodding, but he provided great information.

Jeff was very sweet and enjoyed talking about his trip. He is a junior in college and felt that the course on Thailand would be opportunity to explore what field study course in his major had to offer. Jeff mentioned that he took this course mainly for the academic credit. He enjoys Thai food and has Thai neighbors where he learned about their culture and thought this program

would be a great experience. Jeff had previously studied abroad in Vienna, Austria with a different program. George was very passionate about his experience and I really enjoyed speaking with him.

Sarah was a junior and had never studied abroad before, however had recently been to Italy with her family. She says she would have loved to study abroad more, but she doesn't foresee that being possible. The reason she chose to attend this course was because her friend was also going on the program. The program was a course offered in her friend's major and her friend convinced Sarah to come along. Sarah was interested because she wanted to experience a place very different from anywhere she had been before and she thought that Thailand was a great fit.

Beth was very helpful during the interview. She was very interested in my research and willing to share her experience. Beth decided to go on this program because of the professor who was teaching the course. Beth also mentioned that she had never been on a field study, and that while she studies mostly biological issues she was interested in learning about cultural anthropology. Beth was a delight to interview and I was able to get some good data.

Alisha is a junior in college and she had never studied abroad before but had traveled internationally. She originally wanted to study abroad for a semester in India or Africa, however she was unable to do so. This course seemed a perfect fit because it was a short term program. She was also interested in this course because the program had a concentration in cultural tourism. Alisha said she hoped to work with culture, tourism, and anthropology upon completing her degree. She provided a different insight than the other participants, looking at the program from more of a tourism perspective.

Karen was a well traveled person, having traveled many places around the world with her family. She was very interested in going to Thailand and was interested in the course material. The short term study abroad program was a different structure from her other travels but overall she enjoyed it. Karen was very pleasant to talk to and interviewing her provided very helpful information.

### *About the Winter Course Abroad*

The particular course these study abroad participants engaged in was offered at a large Midwestern university. The goals of the program and course include providing knowledge of diverse cultures in particular as it relates to social, economic, and political interactions and impacts on the world; the development of skills for successful negotiation in contemporary societies; fostering respect for diverse ways of living and approaches to social growth. With these goals in mind, the program creates courses abroad that consist of a two part sequence. For this particular study abroad course, the first part started the second eight weeks of the fall 2010 semester. Students who enrolled in this program were required to attend a class that met once a week to prepare them for the time they were to spend abroad. Students were assigned readings and other assignments to learn more about what the in-field study abroad course would entail.

This particular short term study abroad program was described to students as “a course about cultural heritage tourism and its foreseen as well as unintended impacts on local communities. The course takes us to northeast Thailand where several beautiful ancient Khmer temples have the potential to become a new, major tourist attraction” (Program Brochure, n.d.). In addition to this description, the course also sought to examine the impacts of Phimai being



nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Below you will find a further description of what the class proposed to do while in Thailand:

Thailand has nominated its Khmer sites for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List (a list of sites deemed to have universal value for humankind). The magnificent Khmer temple of Phimai -- located in the middle of the charming town of the same name -- is the centerpiece of Thailand's nomination dossier and the focus of our study abroad project. This is an exciting project because there never has been an impact study of World Heritage listing on a town before (at the time of nomination) and during (at the time of implementation) the UNESCO process. Phimai offers a superb opportunity to assess the widely touted benefits (economic development through tourism) and rarely considered drawbacks of World Heritage Site status on the people living in immediate proximity to a site. Interestingly, most of the residents of Phimai are ethnically Thai, not ethnically Khmer -- so we need to pay attention to the incongruity of cultural tourism that will market a heritage actually pertaining to a different country! Through on-campus study and on-site fieldwork, we will investigate the regional, national, and international dimensions of Phimai's listing. Students will learn about Southeast Asian

history and culture, institutional decision-making, cultural heritage, and tourism. Students also will have gastronomic adventures (Thai food is one of the world's great cuisines), visit other important Khmer sites, tour historic Bangkok, interact with Thai students, and immerse themselves in a thriving local society (Program Brochure, n.d.).

For the second part of the course, students traveled to and arrived in Thailand on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010 and spent approximately two weeks in Thailand. The students spent their first three days in Bangkok visiting historical sites before heading to Phimai on the fourth day. The group then spent the next eight days in Phimai and surrounding area visiting historical sites and conducting their research on community impacts. For the last three days students returned to Bangkok and were able to visit more historical and cultural sites as well as have some free time.

### Data Analysis

To answer my research questions, I used both case analysis and pattern analysis. I created an outline of each participant's experiences for the case study by listening to the interviews repeatedly one at a time. I began transcribing the interviews, but it was more helpful for me to hear the interview over and over to hear how they expressed their experience. I continuously took notes each time I listened to the interviews. After approximately the fourth time through each interview, I began to compare those notes with the notes I had taken during the actual interviews. I combined all my notes on each interview into an outline to create my case study.

Once my outlines were created I began analyzing the content seeking to understand how each participant conceptualized their short term study abroad experience. I also looked for

themes on how participants describe their experience. Once I had analyzed the case studies individually, I began to compare the findings among all the participants. I compared and contrasted how the participants depicted their experiences, as well as similarities and differences within their experiences. Finally, I took those findings and put them into conversation with the literature on liminality, liminal spaces, and liminal experiences. The overall findings are presented in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

There are three major themes that occurred from my data analysis. At the onset, it should be noted that these themes are not mutually exclusive but rather at times they work together. The first theme suggests that in general these participants perceive the study abroad program as a chance to experience a liminal space; a space apart. In fact, participants' decision to take part in this particular study abroad program to Thailand was very much rooted in the perception that this was an opportunity to experience a space apart – albeit it within the comforts of a guided tour approach. The second theme reveals that these study abroad participants created a communita amongst themselves in their liminal space abroad. However, while this communita has liminal aspects and aligns with certain tenets of liminality, it is not entirely consistent or aligned with Turner's approach and view of liminality in communita (Turner, 1979). Finally, the third theme questions the goals and outcomes of study abroad programs in particular when examined through the lens of liminal identity. Meaning that the goals of study abroad is to change students to be better members of society and to advocate world issues, however the research shows that students were not seeking a new identity to better themselves for society, they were more interested in traveling for two weeks and seeing the exotic. Together these three themes serve to contextualize the experiences of these particular short term study abroad participants, as well as the explanatory power of the concept of liminality.

### Study abroad and the liminal space

The first theme that was evident from the beginning of every interview was how each participant conceptualized this short term program to Thailand as an opportunity to visit and tour

an exotic location that they would not be able to witness and experience in their daily life. For example, in the beginning of each interview I asked the participants to explain to me how they came across this particular short term study abroad program and why they chose to go to Thailand and not somewhere else. Tom explained to me:

While studying abroad in Australia, compared to other students who had studied abroad elsewhere, I didn't get as big of culture shock, just because Australia is an English speaking country and a lot of it is modeled off the UK and the United States... So I wanted to go somewhere where I would really get that shock, I really needed to see it because the world is so very big, and I wanted to get to see a part of the world that I would never get to see otherwise.

In Tom's statement it is very clear to see that his motivation for choosing to go to Thailand was based on wanting to experience a liminal zone/space. The motivation was in wanting to see something that he wouldn't see every day, as well as experience something different; as he terms it "I wanted to go somewhere where I would really get that shock". Similarly, Sarah states:

...and I wanted to go somewhere that was like *totally* different because like I had just been to Italy with my family two summers ago.

When asked what she meant by *totally* different, Sarah said she meant that she felt that Italy was more Westernized and she was looking for that same culture shock that Tom was looking for: an escape from her routine life. Ben too was looking for an escape as he mentioned that:

I had always wanted to study abroad and this was like my last chance. I knew I wanted to go far, as far as I could.

Moreover, during Alisha's interview, although she says that she chose the course mainly because she was interested in Cultural Tourism, she commented:

I had originally wanted to go to India or Africa, but mostly I just wanted to go somewhere that wasn't as westernized.

Therefore, for these study abroad participants, their motivation for going on a short term study abroad program was to escape what they know—the familiar and normative--and to experience something entirely different than what they are used to in their daily lives. Such a proposition is the very definition of how spaces or destinations are described and approached through the concept of liminality. Shields (1990) describes destinations, and the act of getting to exotic destinations as “The spatial movement concretized and made convincing the temporal shift from the routinized schedules of workdays unusual holidays...” (p. 48). These study participants are seeking a destination that in their minds will be the most non-routinized from their daily life, a place that is completely liminal from what they experience every day. These participants are seeking change or spontaneity, something they feel they can't get in their regular life but would be able to experience it in a two week study abroad program.

Liminality in space was also evident through the pictures that they would show me or the mementos that they brought to share. Beginning with the pictures, the ones they shared with me

contained mostly architecture such as the many temples they visited, or other historical sites such as the Grand Palace in Bangkok. When asked why they chose these particular pictures, the participants generally responded in the same manner, stating that the content in the photos were something that they wouldn't be able to experience in their life back in the United States. Several of the participants showed me a similar picture of a giant golden Buddha that they visited one day. How they described this photo to me was that seeing this enormous golden Buddha was "breathtaking" and something they had "never experienced" before or would not have the opportunity to see this again once they were out of this liminal space. In describing their photos the participants often used words such as exotic or different. This is an interesting concept because the participants are clearly relating the destination of their short term study abroad program, Thailand, as a liminal space. Indeed based on their social justifications provided for the pictures, what makes such space liminal is its juxtaposition to their American experiences and landscapes. The participants would often compare how different things were to America, or how the temples and architecture was so unique that there wasn't anything like this back in the United States. Yet they would also take the most common of places and make them exotic. Several of the participants talked about how different the gas stations were to ones back home, and how they will never forget the gas stations. I found this very intriguing because there are gas stations everywhere in the United States, something so common, yet in Thailand it was exotic, new, and different. The participants were also fascinated with the 7 eleven stores that they saw everywhere. They would describe how liminal the space was, and when they turned the corner, they ran into a 7 eleven, but they still exoticized the store, because products were different, and the store owners rarely spoke English. Jeff mentioned how he brought normal products such as packaged cookies home to show his family because the packaging was in Thai.

Similar themes appeared in the mementos that they brought to share. Their mementos consisted of things that were special to Thailand, and they described, with pride, that these items were like something they wouldn't be able to find in their home towns or around their routine life. Some examples included special chop sticks, and silk fabrics. When asked further as why these mementos were so important to their Thailand experience, the participants would describe how they had special meaning because they were items that they bought in a place where they wouldn't be able to go every day.

Another interesting aspect about how participants described their study abroad experience to me, was the different destinations they experienced throughout their trip. On the way to Thailand, the participants had a layover in Paris, then they traveled to Bangkok, and a few days later they made it to Phimai. While each space was described as a liminal space in relation to what they were used to back home, it was interesting to hear that the participants felt there were different levels of liminality among the destinations. Each destination appeared to increase in liminal or exotic state. Paris, was described as a destination that they had to see, because it was Paris, however the participants felt very comfortable and felt it was the most similar to the United States. Once the group reached Bangkok, the study participants described Bangkok as being different, however closer related to a city they might find within the United States. When the group traveled to Phimai, this destination is the destination most described as a liminal zone. Not only is Phimai a small town, which several of the participants are not used to in their normal life, but there were also hardly any tourists. In addition, participants all talked about how Phimai was "real" Thailand, or what they considered and deemed to be actually Thai.

The literature review has discussed how liminal spaces are seen as a space apart from ones' daily life where tourists often seek to experience the exotic and the different from their



routine. This is evident through Turner and Shields' ideas of liminality stating the space apart, as well as MacCannell and Cohen's literature on tourist experiences looking for something different from everyday life. My research shows that these participants in fact were seeking the same, to experience the exotic and the different from their routine, through their short term study abroad experience. They acknowledge that they chose the program because they were looking for a liminal zone. Through their pictures, mementos, and descriptions of their trip, the participants clearly experienced liminality in terms of space, while on their short term study abroad program; hence this tenet of liminality as it refers to liminality of space does align and serve to explain these participants experiences and study abroad. Study abroad offices market their programs/destinations as being able to travel and experience something unique and different. From how these participants described their experiences, it appears that this particular study abroad program has fulfilled its participants' expectations.

#### Study Abroad as a Communita

During short term study abroad programs there is normally between fifteen to twenty five participants. In this particular study abroad program to Thailand, there were seventeen students. In all of my interviews, when asked about how the group got along, they explained that everyone stayed together, that they had a really good group of students, and that they all ended up being very close. Relating this to Turner's notion of *communitas* (a tenet of liminality), this short term study abroad essentially created their own *communita*. They were all in this liminal space, Thailand, for a short time, and formed strong emotional bonds.

*Jeff:* We had a really good group, we all went out together, maybe one or two would go their own direction, but we all got along.

*Tom:* Our group was great, everyone got along with everyone else, we ate all our meals together, shared hotel rooms, we were with each other constantly, but it was good.

*Beth:* The group of students was really nice, we all got along and there were no problems, everyone treated each other with respect, maybe it was better because we had had class together before we left.

*Alisha:* The others were awesome, there were no attitudes or problems with each other, we all wanted to have a good time, we had parties in each other's hotel rooms at night and we went out together in Bangkok.

In the context of being in a liminal space, I do feel that the participants have taken advantage of the opportunity and formed a communita, however I question, how much the communita has to do with experiencing the liminalness around them, or whether it is actually a means – conscious or unconscious- of staying connected and rooted in the lives they have back home. If the latter is the case, then a liminal space may be what caused the communita but the communita as a whole does not have the desire to stay and consciously experience, process, and

contextualize the liminal zone; in fact its purpose is not to unmask participants from their daily routine, but instead to reinforce that very same normal routine.

Moreover, I suggest that the reason the communita was more of a way to stay connected and rooted to home has more to do with how the students say they spent their time when they were not required to go sightseeing or attend lectures. Several of the students mentioned that they would hold parties in their hotel rooms, much like how they would if they were in their everyday context. The participants even made invitations that they passed out to one another telling when in whose hotel room the parties would be held. Ben, as well as several others, brought an invitation as one of his mementos to show. They were very simple, made with crayon on notebook paper. When I asked other students about the parties they seemed very proud that they had these parties and they felt that it brought the group closer together. Alisha provided pictures of a few of the parties showing how everyone was having a good time drinking and bonding in one another's rooms. Hence, while these students expressed that they were wanting to experience a liminal space, they actually try to escape the liminalness around them by implementing routine activities that they are used to doing back home. Therefore, while these participants may have been in a liminal zone, they were still acting as if they were in their routine life: questioning the notion of liminal experiences and their tenet of identity shift (to be further discussed in the third theme).

Another approach to understanding this finding may be found in the actual format and structure of short term study abroad programs. In other words how the short term study abroad program is structured may serve to contradict or work against Turner's notion that communitas in liminal spaces are largely unstructured (Turner, 1979). These students spent the entire trip together, they were on a guided tour and everything was set up for them. This group experienced

everything together creating a shared experience and shared social and cultural scripts. Yes, these students were experiencing liminality by being in a liminal zone, and had formed their own community, but they were all from the same university and had attended class together for eight weeks prior to traveling to Thailand. They already knew each other before they were even in the liminal zone. Their social status (Turner, 1979) was not stripped when they formed this group, nor were they looking to live permanently in the liminal communita that they created in Thailand.

Alisha and Tom expressed to me that when they returned from Thailand they hadn't seen many of the members of the group, but yet they were planning a bar crawl to reunite everyone and they were creating t-shirts for everyone to wear saying "We survived Phimai" It is obvious that these participants formed a bond and strong relationships, but Turner (1979) states that individuals who form these communitas desire to live in a permanent state of the liminal communita. This is interesting for two reasons. First, these participants had not seen each other since their trip to Thailand; they did not stay in touch, or continue to maintain the liminal communita upon re-entry into their home society; and second, the participants did not maintain the liminalness of the communita. The activity that they chose when planning a reunion was an activity that is not liminal. A bar crawl is a very common activity that takes place on American university campuses, not something that these students experienced as unique to Thailand.

These findings are important in explaining short term study abroad participant experiences compared to the goals and objectives of the study abroad programs. Generally study abroad programs want their participants to embrace the culture around them and experience what life is like in other countries around the world. While I certainly cannot deny that these students learned from their study abroad experience, in fact they learned quite a bit about Thailand and its

history, the proposition of student growth is one that is harder to substantiate. Possibly because short term programs aren't long enough to allow the students to escape their daily lives and create a liminal community with the other students or people around them. Partly because these programs are very structured and similar to a guided tour, but also, because two weeks is not long enough for students to remove their daily masks, even if they wanted to do so.

### Study Abroad and Liminal Identity

This last theme deals with study abroad and how it seeks to provide a liminal identity. As previously discussed in the literature review on study abroad, the goals are to increase cultural sensitivity (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006), improve student confidence, and heighten an appreciation for other cultures (Pence & Macgillivray, 2008). Study abroad programs are also proposed to increase international functional knowledge (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004), deepen an understanding of global interdependence (Sutton & Rubin, 2004), and increase interest in working in a foreign country (Orahood, Kruze, & Easley Pearson, 2004). Essentially, they are proposing that study abroad programs help to form/change the identity of the participants.

The current study, however, cannot corroborate such tenet. I am leery of this claim, mainly because how the participants have described why they chose to go to Thailand. As revealed in the first theme, students were motivated, not because they wanted to work, develop, or improve their identity so that they may take that new identity and feel that they are a more central, global, and meaningful member of their normal community. In this particular short term program, these participants were looking for a spatial escape. This doesn't mean that they

weren't interested in learning about the culture. In reality, none of them stated that this short term program had changed them and they have now become advocates to help those affected by the negative impacts that accompany the development of cultural tourism in underdeveloped regions. These students were not looking to "reconstruct their identity" (Beech, 2010) and positively affect global approaches to tourism development.

Referring to the study that was previously mentioned regarding the identity of Chinese students in an MBA program (Simpson et al., 2009), liminal identity is where one is in between the identity they have at home, and the identity that they are searching for, or have discovered while traveling to and in a liminal zone. None of the participants of the present study expressed, their intention on discovering a new identity through participating in this short term study abroad program. Nor did the participants mention any inbetweenness of their identity due to the fact that they were in a liminal zone.

Moreover, during the in-depth interviews the participants never mentioned, and at times resisted the notion that the trip made them self-reflect on who they were in their own society. Through their photos and descriptions of their experiences the overall consensus was that this short term study abroad experience was amazing and they were able to experience things that they wouldn't be able to experience in their normal everyday life. But none of the participants appeared to be changed or moved to an extreme where they questioned who they were and sought to change themselves or their actions, behaviors, or beliefs based on this particular short term program. When interviewing Karen, she explained how in her experience the participants were there because they saw this program as an opportunity to travel to Thailand and to return home saying they spent their winter break in Thailand. Having observed the other participants,

Karen described them as being interested in a vacation and not for the social and cultural content of the actual study abroad course.

This finding in particular is very important for study abroad programs. If the goals and objectives of all study abroad programs are to educate students on world issues and make them more rounded human beings and global citizens, they might need to restructure some of their programs. As I mentioned previously, it isn't that these participants didn't learn anything. They were all eager to tell me about their experience and explain the things they saw and learned in Thailand. However, it appears that these short term programs are being seen as more of a vacation, a guided tour, and a way to get away and say you studied abroad. The participants were happy, so their expectations were met, but if study abroad programs are insisting that these programs change or improve upon how students will act in a global society, I am not sure that is the case.

Through my personal reflection while analyzing my data I considered how my personal study abroad experiences affected my identity through my personal experiences. I have participated in both a short term and long term program. I spent a month in Morelia, Mexico and a year in Barcelona, Spain. I feel that with both study abroad experiences I reflected on my identity upon returning from the program but I found immediate identity changes with the long term program. My short term experience was very structured and was over very quickly. Much like the short term program in this study, my program stayed in a hotel, our meals were prepared for us, we went on excursions, and we stayed with our group the entire time. However with the year abroad program, we were on our own finding our own housing, food, and we were able to experience everything in a non-structured setting. As time continues to pass I still reflect back on how my study abroad experience changed me or impacted my identity. Perhaps later in life, these

participants will do more self-reflecting about their time spent in Thailand, or possibly had they spent longer than two weeks in Thailand with less structure their self-reflection would have been different.

Another factor that might be worth considering would be the content of the program, meaning what is the study abroad program focusing on. This is where I see a difference between how my identity was changed and the lack of immediate reflection from this study's participants. In my situation, I chose my programs based on the content and not the destination of the program. Both study abroad programs I attended were directly related towards my undergraduate major. In this particular study however, the participants were from various backgrounds and only a couple participants were interested in the course material. As mentioned in the first theme of my findings, all of the participants expressed a desire to travel to an unknown and exotic destination and were not concerned with the actual course material. Factors such as these could greatly impact the reflection of their identity affected by study abroad programs.

Further research conducting longitudinal studies and focusing on factors such as length of the program and content of the program could provide more insight into the concept of identity and how it is affected by study abroad programs. Regardless, it is evident that this short term program did not have an effect on any of the participants' identities at the present time. Therefore the tenet of identity within the concept of liminality must be further investigated and understood.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Conclusion

The experiences expressed by the short term study abroad participants I interviewed, as well as my own experiences both support and challenge certain tenets within the concept of liminality. First, the participants I interviewed very much viewed Thailand and their short term study abroad program as a liminal space. Students expressed their desire to travel to Thailand as a means to experience something different from what they would normally experience. This directly correlates to the concept of liminal space as described in the literature review and its tenet that individuals seek to travel to places that are exotic or completely different from their everyday life as a form of escape. Second, participants did essentially form a community with several of the other students, stating that their group was very close and did everything together. However, closer examination of the mementos, photos, and interviews as well as the experiences as described by the participants do not support that notion that liminality played a role in the creation of this community. In fact, it suggests that it did just the opposite. In other words, it served to further reinforce the fact that these students all matriculated at the same university and, therefore, largely experienced their study abroad program as an extension of their daily lives and what connected them back home. Participants often stated that at the end of the day the group would get together and drink, or party, much like they would have done if they were back home in their normal role as university students. Finally, in terms of liminality and identity, at first look one might say that these participants experienced the tenet of liminal identity while on this study abroad program and are now more integrated members of society, more global and well-rounded. However, again, upon further examination of the mementos, photos, interviews and experiences, this does not appear to be the case. This short term program might have promoted the

participants to think about the world around them, but it did not serve to change the identities of the participants. At the time of the interviews the participants had re-entered their normal society unchanged and uninterested in pursuing the social and cultural issues of the course, or what they saw in regard to tourism development in underdeveloped regions any further. Perhaps with further research in a longitudinal study one might find that the identities of the participants were in fact altered and the participants needed time to reflect on their experience.

### Limitations

This study has provided insight into the experiences of short term study abroad participants as examined and investigated from the perspective of liminality. However, I certainly acknowledge that, like every other study there are limitations to this study. This particular study only included one short term study abroad program from one university and cannot generalize for every short term study abroad program offered throughout the United States. Also, while there were seventeen participants in the short term study abroad program only seven were interviewed and therefore the results of this study cannot explain the experiences of every student.

### Future Research

Acknowledging the above mentioned limitations further research should be done with a wider variety of short term study abroad programs, as well as with a variety of study topics, intercultural experiences and destinations. Continued research on the experiences of short term study abroad programs can lead to better programming and increased participation and satisfaction. Also, future qualitative research could be conducted comparing the short term study abroad experiences with longer study abroad experiences such as a semester or a year abroad

program. The comparison between the programs could provide great insight to the study abroad experience and how it differs based on length of the program.

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## APPENDIX A

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH STUDY UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN**

Dear Participant,

Our names are Dr. Carla Santos and Rebecca Van Tine. Dr. Carla Santos is an Associate Professor from the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois, and Rebecca Van Tine is a graduate student in the same department, working under the supervision of Dr. Santos. We would like to include you, along with the other study abroad participants from the GLBL 298 Cultural Tourism in Thailand course who traveled to Thailand in December 2010, in a research project. This research project seeks to understand your educational experiences in Thailand as they relate to field visits and the meaning of such visits to you, as well as to explore the relationship between study abroad and cultural tourism in Thailand.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and we anticipate that there are no risks to this study greater than what you experience in normal life. You may not benefit personally from your participation but you will contribute valuable knowledge to the study and understanding of study abroad and cultural tourism. By giving your consent to participate in this research, you acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age. You are free to stop participating at any time, or to decline to answer any specific questions. You are also free to withdraw your permission for participation at any time and for any reason by contacting one of us.

Your participation in this research project is two-fold. First, we are asking you to select photos and other mementos from your recent trip to Thailand and bring them to the interview for discussion. Second, we are asking you to participate in an in-depth interview, which will last approximately two hours where you will be asked to talk about your educational experiences traveling to Thailand. The interview will be driven by discussion of the photos and mementos you wish to share; these photos and mementos will remain in your possession, and you are not required to provide us with copies.





I, \_\_\_\_\_, give permission for my interview to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ (please check to grant permission)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to a follow-up meeting if needed.

\_\_\_\_\_ (please check to grant permission)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature

**If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (you may call collect) or via e-mail at [irb@uiuc.edu](mailto:irb@uiuc.edu)**

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca E. Van Tine is from Gladstone, Illinois and was born on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1986. She graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish. Upon graduating, Rebecca moved to Spain for six months to teach English and then returned to the United States to work as a Spanish translator/interpreter at a medical facility. In January 2010, Rebecca entered the Tourism Management Graduate program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Rebecca hopes to continue her career in the tourism field after completing her Master's degree.