



World Traveler

At 21 years old, Maren Peterson embodies the 'International Experience.'
In her four years at Augustana, she's studied in India, Mexico,
Norway, Thailand and Egypt.

It's hard to believe Maren Peterson is 21 years old.

Only 21.

In her four years at Augustana, the senior from Cannon Falls, Minn., has participated in five different study abroad initiatives. She has spent time in India, Mexico, Norway, Thailand and, most recently, Egypt.

And, while she's already a certified globe trotter in every sense of the phrase, Peterson is quick to say that her global adventures are only just beginning.

India

As an economics and international studies major and a Trustees Scholar, Peterson got the opportunity to travel in India with Dr. Sandra Looney during her freshman year.

The trip, she says, was life-changing.

"I had visited Italy in high school, but India was my first real experience with true culture shock. Before going there, I didn't know what the term meant. In reality, it means being confronted with such an entirely different way of life. It really opened my eyes to so many issues. Poverty is rampant in India. It was hard to have children come up to you to ask for food or money."

"The crowds of people also took some getting-used-to. Coming from a small town in Minnesota, I was used to having lots of space. In India, there are just people everywhere."

"I got to study Hinduism and Buddhism. I was able to visit places of worship that were pilgrimage sites for Hindus and Buddhists – sites that people work their whole lives to get to. I really saw [the country] from a holy and sacred perspective. This experience encouraged me to explore more of the world."

Mexico

During her sophomore year, Peterson spent a J-Term with Dr. Stephen Minister in the Mexican province of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala.

"We were there for two weeks and studied issues of development and poverty. We met with local government leaders and nonprofits to learn about economic issues and we talked with fair-trade coffee farmers and feminist groups to see the different angles of development issues."

Norway

After her sophomore year, Peterson spent six weeks at the University of Oslo in Norway.

"I met people from all over the world. It was like summer camp with camp mates from around the globe. I studied Norwegian history and international politics. It was so interesting to get the perspective of so many people."

Thailand

During her junior year, Peterson spent five months studying at Payap University in Chiang



Maren Peterson poses with a member of her host family in Thailand.

Mai, Thailand, through the Education Abroad Network.

"That amount of time [away] leads to a great deal of personal change. You become a lot more independent; you learn to figure things out on your own. I lived in a dorm with a Thai roommate who helped me learn some Thai language and I helped her learn some English. She was a great cultural host."

While in Thailand, Peterson also spent time in two rural villages and volunteered at an elementary school teaching English.

"I loved that experience – it allowed me to interact with children and be in the community."

Egypt

As a trombonist in the Augustana Band, Peterson recently returned home from a nearly four-week-long tour of Egypt. She was in Cairo during the anti-government protests that eventually led to the end of Hosni Mubarak's 30-year-long presidency.

"Here in the U.S., we are so removed from government oppression and corruption. To hear about it, and to witness the Egyptian people coming together to drive change made me really appreciate what we have here."

Looking Ahead

After graduation, Peterson hopes to return to Asia. She has been invited to interview for the Japan English and Teaching (JET) Program to teach English in Japan.

Eventually, Peterson plans to attend graduate school for an economic development program. She would like to work on development initiatives in a country like Thailand.

Going Abroad, Again

Peterson says she can't wait to travel abroad again, especially to Thailand.

"The Thai people were so welcoming and hospitable. I made so many wonderful connections with people. From an academic standpoint, I'm really interested in the country from an economic development perspective. It's developed significantly. But, it's not the stage of development we have here. The question is: how can it continue to develop and how can that development be sustainable?"

Traveling internationally has also taught her a great deal about perspective, Peterson says.

"In the U.S., we are so lucky. We've already figured out how to deal with so many issues. [Traveling has made me more] grateful for all the opportunities I've had. And, it has opened my eyes to see places where people aren't so fortunate. When I think about my future, if there's a way to help others, that's a good thing."

"People think that others are so different from us. There are huge cultural differences. But traveling makes you realize there are a lot of similarities. We're all human. One of my favorite parts of traveling is seeing people's pride in their own culture. Hearing them share their own cultures and traditions."

Peterson can also see how her international experience will increase her marketability as a professional.

"I do think it's really important for everyone to have an international experience, especially in the business world where everything is so globalized. The cultural sensitivity you gain – the skills you learn by interacting with people from other lands – is really valuable to have when you're looking for a job."