Lee Nelson ’19, a sociology and anthropology major, attended Puget Sound to pursue an education that would push boundaries: “I wanted to shake things up from small-town Minnesota.” His classmate, Walter Fromm ’19, majoring in politics and government, was looking for the same thing: a place that challenged him academically, and took him out of his comfort zone. They both found what they were looking for at Puget Sound in an experience that took them to the other side of the world.

Both Lee and Walter participated in the Pacific Rim Study Abroad Program, a nine-month adventure affectionately referred to as PacRim. On PacRim, about 25 students travel to at least eight Asian countries over one academic year, engaging with numerous cultures, political systems, religions, and philosophies along the way. Participation qualifies students for an Asian Studies minor, but the program draws students from diverse interests and areas of study for a truly interdisciplinary experience. “When I was applying for colleges,” Walter recalls, “I remember seeing photos from PacRim in Jones Hall when I visited [Puget Sound] and instantly knowing that I would do anything to be on that program.”
“What really makes the PacRim program distinct,” says Nick Kontogeorgopolous, distinguished professor of international political economy and director of global development studies and Asian studies, “is the opportunity to study in eight or nine countries in the course of the year. Through the PacRim experience, students become familiar with all three regions of Asia—East, South, and Southeast. You’re usually in each country three weeks to a month. Occasionally you’ll go somewhere for a week, but generally you get to spend a bit of immersive time before you go to another country. The schedule provides a combination of depth and breadth.”

PacRim is offered every three years, and students are chosen to participate two years prior to their departure. Once selected, students prepare as a cohort for the year abroad, meeting together once every other week to discuss the program curriculum and plan, explore group dynamics, prepare for travel logistics, and understand the different dimensions of what it means to be away for a year. Common questions the cohort explores are: How do you get along with other people? What do you need to know about some of the places we’re going to visit? How will you communicate? Common concerns surround living arrangements. Puget Sound students live on university campuses, in student hostels, and with host families during the year, depending on the country they are visiting. Transportation with the group is arranged by the university.

While in Asia, students engage in various learning experiences, some of which occur in classrooms on Asian university campuses but are taught by Puget Sound faculty. “Puget Sound students are accustomed to professors really spending a lot of time and energy on teaching,” says Nick. “The advantage of PacRim being a Puget Sound–managed program [is that it] provides students with faculty members from campus being on site with them, but also a commitment to engaging local Asian faculty who share a similar passion for teaching students. What has worked really well is having local scholars or local community members connect with the group for a day, give a lecture, or accompany them to a site. PacRim students get a local connection that way, but the leadership of the course is someone who knows how to teach our students.”

While there is some classroom time, much of the year abroad is given to ethnographic exercises or taking field trips to integrate what students are doing in class with those immersive experiences. This hybrid of classroom and experiential learning is well-suited to meet Puget Sound’s emphasis on reflection. During PacRim, students are given time to consider questions such as What’s your place in the world? How do you relate to people different from you? What are you learning about places in Asia?

“The key is site utilization,” Nick explains. “In other words, we don’t want to include courses that could be taught anywhere. It’s not a Puget Sound class taught in a different country. It’s a new thing; we’re making local connections, and we’re integrating what you’re seeing into the class. “We want Puget Sound students to develop intercultural competence and build an awareness of other cultural viewpoints. So it’s an empathy, an understanding of others that we’re trying to learn together. We also want students to be able to develop connections to local people and to cultivate relationships with people in Asia.”

Puget Sound students also conduct independent research projects spanning the whole year. These center on a topic or theme that must be examined in at least five countries, and assignments might include mapping out geographical space in an Indian city or conducting ethnographic interviews in Indonesia. For example, Lee’s project explored the role of national museums in constructing national narratives in Mongolia, Japan, China, Thailand, and India.

“They might go talk to an activist or local politician, or they might visit an elephant camp, like we did in Thailand,” Nick explains. Students also conduct anthropological research with homestay families, doing participant observation in each new place.

PacRim is extraordinary in many ways, but it is also representative of the best of Puget Sound curriculum, which focuses on hands-on, real-world learning. “There are, of course, a lot of great memories, but academically, it’s really a key experiential learning example,” says Nick. “What students are doing is learning about something, going out into the real world, into the field, and to local communities, coming back and reflecting on what they accomplished. That’s experiential learning at its best.”
GABBY KOLB ‘19
ST. CLOUD, MINN.

Coming into PacRim, I knew very little about any country in East Asia with the exception of South Korea. We were privileged to visit the DMZ (the Korean Demilitarized Zone) while in South Korea, a strong reminder that in a country with so much beauty, there is also a lot of pain. While at the DMZ, I went into the room where diplomatic meetings are held between the North and South. I walked the perimeter of the room and am now officially able to say that I have stepped into North Korea.

I am able to visit over ten countries this year. For some people, they may never legally be able to leave the place they are born. To really think about the fact that it is against the law for some people to see the world is hard for me to comprehend. We have chopped it up and barricaded it and put up fences and bureaucratic channels. Sometimes good people have power, sometimes bad people have power, sometimes everyone has power and sometimes no one does. Regardless, I still don’t know the answer to who the world belongs to. The rich? The privileged? I’m still trying to figure it out and never forget just how lucky I am.

CLAIRE WALLACE ‘19
GLENDALE, CALIF.

Japan was the country I looked forward to visiting the most on this trip. Since then, many of my friends have asked me if it lived up to my expectations. Without a pause, I happily reply no. My expectations were a romanticized view of a country that I have only seen through media, and I knew it. I wanted my expectations to be crushed so I could actually see Japan as it was. Let’s begin with public transportation. I quickly learned that 15 minutes can make the difference between getting a seat on the bus and having to stand. Being five minutes late can easily turn into 30 minutes late. I learned that the best cafés for working are Starbucks, and everything else is more of a sit-down restaurant. Umbrellas are more convenient than raincoats. 7-Eleven and other convenience stores can provide a decent lunch without much time or money (and onigiri, a type of rice ball, can be a decent lunch). Cats are drawn toward the same shrines tourists flock to, and there is matcha and moss everywhere. I loved all of this, and maybe I silently complained in some moments, but I truly cannot remember an unmeaningful experience in Kyoto. Maybe I am still romanticizing Japan, or maybe I have created new expectations that I am happily waiting to crush once again.

To read more about Walter’s experience in India, Gabby’s in South Korea, Claire’s in Japan, and other student stories from PacRim, visit upspacrim.org.