



LIVE AND LEARN THROUGH EDUCATIONAL TRAVEL

by Narra Smith Cox

Imagine...

Being in an overnight camp deep in the White Desert of Egypt, breathing the dry nighttime air and standing in the light of a full moon on the sand that was once an ancient seabed. Such is the austere beauty and enduring memory of a trip to the Sahara.

Or waking to the roar of lions in a bush camp on the plains of the Serengeti National Park and drink your morning coffee as giraffes and zebras pass by. This is truly an extraordinary and awe-filled experience.

Or finally reaching the top of a long set of steep stone steps to take in the breathtaking views from Machu

Picchu, the "Lost City of the Incas." It's a moment of genuine wonder and the special feeling of being so very far away in an utterly spectacular place.

Such are the iconic places and experiences travelers enjoy as part of international educational travel programs sponsored by Continuing Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Doug Whittle,



Storyteller that he is, Doug recounts a trip down the Nile in a three-story open-deck steamer. The wait to pass through the locks was long, and locals in rowboats positioned themselves alongside the steamer, anxious to sell colorful handicrafts and other items. Vendors threw textiles and other handicrafts up to the deck, where potential buyers leaned over the railing to catch what came their way. The wares were tossed back and forth as vendors shouted prices to begin the lively exchange of haggling. Initially overwhelmed, the travelers soon pushed through their caution, having a wonderful time and creating lifelong memories of shopping on the Nile.

Doug attributes his curiosity, appreciation of different cultures, and love of travel to his parents. He describes his mother as a missionary kid from the Philippines, noting he is a first generation American on his mother's side and "a seventh generation redneck from Florida" on his father's side. Both parents instilled in him an appreciation of the world as a big and fascinating place to explore. He did a Peace Corps stint in Zaire, completed an MFA at the University of Florida, and taught fine art before directing the Continuing Studies educational travel program. His eclectic background serves him well in planning and hosting trips for fellow travelers to explore interesting places.

Doug's emphatic in pointing out that travel is not only interesting but inherently educational. "One

director of the travel program, explains, "The trips provide experiences to explore both the natural world and places that reflect milestones of human achievement—in short, places you've always wanted to go. Our travelers share the sentiment that this place, these people, this experience, matters."

In recent years, Continuing Studies has hosted trips to Egypt, Peru, Tanzania, Vietnam, Cambodia, Turkey, France, Morocco, and Italy,

as well as across the United States. "We provide an experience that is far more than driving from place to place and looking out bus windows," says Doug. "We take care of all the details so our travelers can go off the beaten path to slightly more adventurous places than they might be comfortable exploring on their own. We help you overcome any physical, logistical, or even emotional concerns you might have about international travel."

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learns about oneself in addition to learning about history, religion, art, politics, archeology, geography, and natural history. Travelers come back changed. There's a difference in who they are and how they understand the world. Travelers see themselves and the world differently."

In planning trips, Doug and his team intentionally incorporate opportunities for travelers to meet local people and see how their lives are similar and different than their own. Groups have visited schools, orphanages, and private homes, and travelers are often overwhelmed by the generosity and compassion extended to American visitors. He recounted visiting families living in mud and thatch homes who graciously invited the visitors to "sit here, drink this." One can't be unchanged by such experiences.

Local guides also help ensure that travelers have a high-quality and memorable experience with well-researched itineraries, nice accommodations, safe transportation, and some unexpected extras.

Doug's philosophy and approach is to be as flexible as possible when leading a group and to work off script on occasion. For example, on a trip to the Berber town of Zagora in Morocco, Doug noticed a hand-painted sign that read "Berber Museum". He conferred with the local guide, who was not familiar with the museum. Doug insisted they check it out. The group walked down a long alley and pounded on the door of the museum. Upon entering they discovered a fantastic treasure: three floors of artifacts ranging from farming implements to handmade locks, camel saddles,

clothing, religious and utilitarian items, historical photographs, and much more.

Continuing Studies' trips attract all types of travelers. A typical international trip involves fewer than 20 participants and is a mix of new and experienced travelers, many of whom are recently retired. Most program participants are from Wisconsin, but others have come from more than 20 states, as well as other countries. Some people have backpacked around the world and are concerned about traveling with a group. Others say they have lacked the confidence to travel by themselves but always wanted to visit a particular place. They all agree that Continuing Studies' trips are an excellent way to travel safely, comfortably, and efficiently.

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Prospective travelers frequently ask about the level of mobility required for the trips. Doug finds that most people know their limitations and make appropriate decisions based on a description of the destination and the planned activities. Individuals are encouraged to check with their doctor about whether they have the mobility and strength to participate fully.

What's planned for the future? In November, a group will adventure to Myanmar (formerly Burma) in Southeast Asia. A limited number of spaces are still available. Not yet a destination for mass tourism, travelers to Myanmar will explore local markets, gilded pagodas and other religious sites, learn about age-old traditions, and experience the wonder of this fascinating country.

International trips planned for 2017 include China, Iceland, and Botswana. Upcoming trips in North America focused on performing and visual

arts include the Santa Fe Opera, The Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario, and the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina.

Whether you are a seasoned traveler or wish to make your first international trip, University of Wisconsin–Madison Continuing Studies invites you to join them for transformative travel and enduring memories. For more information, visit uwtravel.org or contact Doug Whittle at doug.whittle@wisc.edu or (608) 263-7787, or Kim Seymour at kimberly.seymour@wisc.edu or (608) 262-3731.

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Photographs by Doug Whittle.

“Educational travel with Continuing Studies has opened a whole new world for me. I’ve visited places I never dreamed I would and never would have tried on my own.”



Photograph submitted by Narra Smith Cox