

# Treasures Found by Seafaring Librarians

by Mary Johnston

**A**hoy! To manage an undergraduate library while sailing around the world, you will need your well-honed library skills and a bit of an adventurous spirit. In this article, the University of Virginia librarians who have belayed their traditional landlubbing librarian jobs and successfully navigated a semester at sea present their ideas on the value of embarking upon such an adventure.

Studying on a ship while sailing the globe—that's Semester at Sea.

Answering reference questions while standing on steady sea legs—that's a Semester at Sea librarian.

## What Is Semester at Sea?

Semester at Sea (SAS) is an educational voyage of discovery administered by the Institute for Shipboard Education (ISE) and academically sponsored by the University of Virginia (U.Va.). Differing from traditional study abroad immersion programs, SAS emphasizes a global comparative education "to build the insight and background necessary for perceiving and understanding international issues and differences."<sup>1</sup>

In his welcome to visitors to the SAS webpage, ISE President Dr. Les McCabe elaborates, "It is within this shipboard community that individuals not only receive the highest quality of international education available through a cur-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SEMESTER AT SEA COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

*Semester at Sea's floating campus, the MV Explorer.*

riculum sponsored by the University of Virginia, they also receive an education in adaptability and versatility within a setting that includes individuals who share the desire to see the world and to understand its complex issues."<sup>2</sup>

The SAS library supports a study-abroad program that circumnavigates the globe on one of the world's fastest passenger ships. This floating campus, the *MV Explorer*, serves as dormitory, student union, athletic facility, classroom, and library for 600–700 undergraduate students representing more

than 200 universities from across the United States. These students are guided by 65 faculty and staff on a 110-day voyage around the world each fall and spring semester. The summer voyage is slightly shorter at 70 days and focuses on a region such as Europe or Central and South America. To earn U.Va.

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credit, students attend classes held while the ship is at sea and participate in field programs during days spent in port.

U.Va.'s academic sponsorship of the SAS program started in 2006 and comes at a time when, according to the report of the Commission on the Future of the University, U.Va. is moving forward in its effort to raise its international profile and "will be looking at ways to mainstream a global perspective into the classroom and the broader student experience."<sup>3</sup> Further, Thomas Jefferson's academical village provides the model for shipboard life: "Daily life aboard the [MV] *Explorer* has been compared to a residential college experience, a place where students and faculty live and learn together—in the same way that Jefferson envisioned the Academical Village."<sup>4</sup>

### SAS Library Challenges and Treasures

Far from the comforts of home and all the amenities available there, e.g. interlibrary loan services, knowledge from subject experts, support from colleagues, and rock-solid, high-speed Internet access, challenges ensue. Shiver me timbers! Why in the world would you, a sane librarian, choose to spend a semester at sea when plenty of challenges await right there in your home library?

A semester at sea can be a transformative experience not only for the undergraduates but also for the librarians. Here are some reasons why a semester at sea can be the library job of a lifetime:

**See the world (and the world's libraries).** Classes are held and the library is open for business while the ship is at sea—roughly half the voyage. While the ship is docked in each port, the library is closed, giving the entire shipboard community the opportunity to explore. Using the ship as home

base and security blanket, each SAS participant can experience vastly different cultures. And some of the world's great libraries—the Great Library of Alexandria, the Hong Kong Central Library, the Royal Library in Copenhagen (The Black Diamond), the Museum Plantin-Moretus Library in Antwerp, or the ruins of Hadrian's Library in Athens—are often only footsteps away from the dock.

**Mentor a student or two.** Many faculty and staff choose to adopt one or two, or even eight, students for the duration of the voyage.

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## Shiver me timbers! Why in the world would you, a sane librarian, choose to spend a semester at sea...?

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Because so many students express an interest in being adopted in order to simulate a little bit of home life, some faculty members adopt larger-than-usual shipboard families. The opportunity to share the voyage with students in a personal way adds much to the experience. It is an opportunity to connect, to have fun, and to mentor. And when your library work-study assistants return to their home campus, complete their undergraduate degrees, and then enter graduate school for library degrees, your heart will swell with pride.

**Connect with the shipboard community.** Your motivation for spending a semester at sea is undoubtedly shared by other faculty and staff, creating a strong bond from the beginning that often lasts long after the voyage ends. In addition to regular library responsibilities, librarians are expected to be an integral part of

the shipboard community participating in onboard educational and social activities and attending the interdisciplinary Global Studies course.

**Witness learning.** The opportunity to witness learning in a more intimate scale gives the librarian an easily observable reward. Right in front of your eyes, the students gain knowledge in their course topics and an understanding of the role of the library.

**Learn how to be flexible.** Blimey! Things can happen quickly on the MV *Explorer*. Itineraries can change quickly based on weather and world events.

And it's not only the outside world that dictates flexibility. Living in close proximity with a shipboard population of about 1,000 students, faculty, staff, lifelong learners, and crew can require a great deal of flexibility. Adapting to close living quarters, dining with colleagues and students at every meal, and the inability to go for a solitary walk can challenge the introvert among us.

**Revitalize your land-based library position.** Aptly expressed by Michael Pearson, an SAS faculty alum: "The word *travel* has its roots set complexly in the ancient meaning of the word *travail*. It is associated with pain and anguish and hard work—even with the labor of childbirth. And this makes sense to me, for travel should be about bringing new things to life, and that's never easy."<sup>5</sup>

Yet despite the travails, each returning U.Va. librarian has asked the question, "When can I go again?" And students, too, are eager to return: "There are such strong connections established that a good number of students take more than one journey and some return to work either full-time on staff or to become lifelong volunteers."<sup>6</sup>

The SAS experience is great for shaking things up and bringing new things to life. In addition to being

far away from home, the librarian faces the challenges and benefits of a new living arrangement, a new highly specialized collection, a new support mechanism, a new library catalog, and new faculty colleagues. And it might be that once shaken, you'll want to keep things stirred when you return home again, as revealed by a former SAS librarian: "You've changed—you've seen the world, literally, but everything else has basically stayed the same.... Some librarians return to their jobs newly reinvigorated, while others, in time, move on to different careers. SAS makes people unafraid to pick up and do something different."<sup>7</sup>

### Getting It Done

Despite the unique circumstances of running a shipboard library while sailing the world, much regular library work remains—circulation, reference, reserves, cataloging, shelf-reading, scheduling, and staffing the library from 0800 to 2300 each day at sea. To manage that workload, the library is staffed with a librarian

(always from U.Va.), an assistant librarian (selected from a national pool of candidates), and library work-study students.

The shipboard library collection is "specifically tailored to international study, travel, world cultures, religion, art, history, and to the curriculum and itinerary of each voyage."<sup>8</sup> Expertly assembled and managed through the years, it has grown according to the teaching needs of hundreds of previous faculty.

Since 2006, SAS librarians have overseen the SAS library transition to U.Va. In addition to the semester-specific responsibilities of each

voyage, the librarians have also accomplished the transitional tasks required to integrate the SAS library with the U.Va. library system:

- Relabeled the collection to meet U.Va. library standards
- Inventoried a library collection open to all, 24-7
- Migrated the records to a new integrated library system
- Imported all catalog records from the ship into the U.Va. library home catalog

The first U.Va. librarian to provide library services at sea was Barbie Selby, then manager of Reference and Information Services in Alderman Library. Prior to sail-

ing, Selby laid the groundwork for future voyages by setting up systems to deliver access to U.Va. library electronic resources at sea. According to Selby, "Semester at Sea was an amazing opportunity. I was the first U.Va. SAS librarian basically because I could pick up and go more easily than my colleagues. Everything and everyone was new to me—and a bit overwhelming at first. This seems to be the experience of all SAS faculty and staff. The ship is new and strange, the people are unknown, the experience is new, the future is unknown. You start off in awe. But I also realized that 'This is a library,



*Above, view of the library from the computer lab.*



*Left, view of the library from the stairs.*



Waterfront at the Royal Library in Copenhagen (*The Black Diamond*)

and I'm a librarian—I *can* do this! Then, you just buckle down and do the job, and, oh yeah, travel around Asia in my case. A truly amazing opportunity.”

For a more in-depth look at the SAS librarian experience, Selby and her colleagues have each blogged their adventures:

- Barbie Selby, Summer 2006, <http://librarianatsea.blogspot.com/>
- Erika Day, Fall 2006, <http://librarianadventurepants.blogspot.com/>
- Mary Johnston, Fall 2006, <http://johnston9494.blogspot.com>
- Erin Stalberg, Spring 2007, <http://www.sea-ville.blogspot.com/>
- Jean Cooper, Summer 2007, <http://www.summer-at-sea.blogspot.com/>
- Kathryn Soule, Fall 2007, <http://soulesearching.blogspot.com/>
- Melinda Baumann, Spring 2008, <http://seaspan.wordpress.com/>
- Mary Johnston, Summer 2008, <http://johnston9494.blogspot.com>
- Cathy Palombi, Fall 2008, <http://seecathyatsea.blogspot.com/>

### Your Opportunity

To find the treasure of an SAS experience, [www.semesteratsea.org](http://www.semesteratsea.org) marks the spot. If the benefits of a semester at sea pique your interest and you have a bit of that adventurous spirit, you might consider a semester at sea.

Assistant librarian duties include reference work, faculty assistance, supervision of work-study students, maintaining a fifteen-hour-per-day library operation, collection review, cataloging (LC), reserve processing, and shelf-reading. Requirements are MLS or equivalent, five years of experience as an academic librarian, and supervisory experience. The application process for assistant librarian begins on the SAS webpage at <http://www.semesteratsea.org/faculty-and-staff/employment-opportunities/about-staff-positions.php>.

Sailing as an SAS librarian is a challenging and rewarding library experience, perhaps the assignment of a lifetime, for those committed to the concept of academic enrichment through travel and education.

### Notes

1. Institute for Shipboard Education, *Voyager's Handbook* (Charlottesville, VA: Institute for Shipboard Education, 2008), 13, <https://www.ise.virginia.edu/asp/mydocuments/VoyagersHandbook.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2009).

2. Les McCabe, “Semester at Sea President’s Welcome,” *Semester at Sea*, <http://www.semesteratsea.org/about-us/overview/presidents-welcome.php> (accessed November 25, 2008).

3. Carol Wood, “Board of Visitors Funds Initiatives That Will Set U.Va.’s Direction for Next Decade and Raise Its International Profile,” *U.Va. Today: Top News from the University of Virginia*, October 4, 2008, <http://www.virginia.edu/uva-today/newsRelease.php?id=6619> (accessed November 25, 2008).

4. Carol Wood, “Charting a New Course for Semester at Sea: Asia/Pacific Voyage Marks U.Va.’s Debut as Academic Sponsor,” *Inside U.Va. Online* 36, no. 12 (June 30, 2006), [http://www.virginia.edu/insideuva/course\\_sas.html](http://www.virginia.edu/insideuva/course_sas.html) (accessed November 25, 2008).

5. Michael Pearson, *Innocents Abroad Too: Journeys Around the World on Semester at Sea* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 2008).

6. Wood, “Charting a New Course.”

7. Dianne Mizzy, “Job of a Lifetime: Around the World in 100 Days,” *College & Research Libraries News* 63, no. 10 (November 2002), <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/crlnews/2002/nov/aroundworld100.cfm> (accessed November 25, 2008).

8. Institute for Shipboard Education, “Quick Facts,” *Semester at Sea*, <http://www.semesteratsea.org/about-us/history-and-timeline/quick-facts.php> (accessed November 25, 2008). **vi**