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Journey to the heart of the Amazon basin: The diversity of life and learning in the rainforest

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The Amazon rainforest, which is nearly the size of the continental U.S., used to be an unfathomable place of beauty far beyond my reach. I grew up reading about this expansive forest in National Geographic and Junior Scholastic magazines and never imagined that I would start off my last semester of college on the Rio Negro in Brazil. For most of my education, I have learned about the Amazon rainforest in the context of preserving its future against deforestation, and now, having interacted with the people, places and wildlife that depend on its future, I feel connected to this cause.

When I heard about Salve’s short-term study abroad program to the Amazon, I was studying abroad in Cork, Ireland during the fall 2023 semester. Ireland is a country I always envisioned myself living in, and I realized that despite my living alone in a new country, I was still very much within my comfort zone. While I was

gaining valuable perspectives on cultural differences during my semester abroad, I knew that an experience in Brazil would provide a different set of perspectives to offer my global education – which is one of the first reasons I pursued this experience.

The motor yacht Tucano.

During my time at Salve, I have rediscovered my love for the natural sciences, but I knew close to nothing about the ecological systems of the Amazon before embarking on this trip. Luckily for me, a cultural and historic preservation major, my peers who journeyed to the Rio Negro alongside me included majors in biology, psychology, business, environmental studies and some still exploring. Our group was both interdisciplinary and consisted of upper and underclassmen ready to jump into the unknown world of the Rio Negro aboard the motor yacht Tucano.

Our journey to the Amazon was made possible by Nature Tours, a Rhode Island-based organization out of Jamestown, led by Mark Baker. Founded in the 1980s as Amazonex Lumber Company, Baker's organization began as a lumber business exporting tropical wood to the U.S. But over time, it transformed into Nature Tours, an organization dedicated to rainforest conservation.

"Our years in the forest convinced us that rainforest conservation was one of the most important goals of our time," Baker said. This dedication has shaped Nature Tours into a leader in sustainable travel, providing immersive educational experiences that inspire a greater appreciation for the Amazon's ecological and cultural significance.

Led by Dr. Jameson Chace, professor and chair of the Department of Cultural, Environmental and Global Studies, and accompanied by a very special guest participant, Sister Therese Antone, University chancellor and professor emerita in the Jean and David W. Wallace Department of Business and Economics, the week-long

study abroad program leaned into our diverse backgrounds and created a thought-provoking learning environment for each of us.

The group journeying down the Rio Negro.

Expecting the unexpected

While our days were structured around similar activities, each day held something new and exciting for each of us. We experienced the full 12 hours of sunlight, and then more, when our day kicked off with a morning kayak or launch boat ride at 6 a.m. A hearty and colorful breakfast full of tropical fruit and Brazilian tradition followed our morning excursions. Our late mornings were different each day depending on location, but the revolving activities included jungle hikes, a visit to a remote village or simply observing wildlife from the observation deck of the Tucano. Each afternoon we got back on the small launch boats to observe the wild activity at dusk. One special afternoon was spent fishing for piranhas for our lunch the next day.

Piranha fishing. Newton (right) holding the piranhas caught by the group.

The daylight held many special moments of awe, but what I was surprised by was the nocturnal activity we were able to witness. Each action-packed day finished with a third and final launch boat ride after dinner in the dark. A completely distinct set of animals are active at night, and I was taken aback by how alive the rainforest is, even in its complete darkness.

Trees of the Amazon rainforest at night and an Amazon tree boa in the roots.

“I was so impressed by so many species collaborating, even if unintentionally, as a community in one place,” said biology major Marguerite George.

The harmony of the rainforest was inspiring, and a dynamic vision of the Sisters of Mercy’s critical concern for the earth. Each day we saw increasingly more, and realized how valuable each system of life is on Earth. After witnessing the intricacies and coevolution of an unending list of plant and animal species, it became clear to me why this far-off place in my National Geographic magazine from childhood was important for me to be immersed in.

The Amazon holds one-third of the world’s species, and our group observed 130 bird species in seven days. “There was never a moment without something to observe – whether it was the vibrant plant species or the fleeting sight of peculiar birds overhead, we were undoubtedly surrounded by the world’s most biodiverse ecosystem,” said environmental studies major Josef Powers.

Green-tailed Jacamar (left). Female Amazon Kingfisher (right).

Study abroad opportunities allow for dialogue on critical issues, like the conservation of the Amazon. “In addition to enjoying this special time with Salve students, I became much more aware of the potential devastation and destruction of our global ecosystems that can be caused through commercialism of fishing and agriculture in the region,” Sister Therese said. “I feel empowered to ask the big questions: How am I called to respond? How can we all use our lives and voices to help awaken people to reflect on lifestyles that negatively impact creation? How can we best commit to transformation at the personal and system level?”

Most of our week was spent surrounded by forest and rivers, but we were given the special opportunity to visit a village in the Cuiridque Bacaba area of the Rio Negro. Meeting with people who coexist with this wildlife and depend on the dynamic river systems of the Rio Negro added more depth to our experience than any of us could have imagined.

Sister Therese and Maeve Newton visiting a market in Manaus.

Kayla Brundage, a psychology major, recalled her experience during our visit. “All last summer I was eating cassava root in various forms, and I did not know that the Rio Negro was one of the places it was grown,” she said. “It was cool to see how it was processed in indigenous tradition. I thought cassava was a new culinary health trend in the U.S., but seeing it grown in this village was an incredible full-circle moment.”

Kayla Brundage peeling a cassava root in the local village.

Bringing Brazil home

Now having lived a full week in the heart of the Amazon Basin, I feel connected to its livelihood and future. Here, mercy transcends all languages, as its mission lived in all the people we learned from during our week on the Tucano. Our guides, Alex and Osmar, communicated a knowledge of the rainforest that is deeper than any of us could read in a textbook. Their ability to communicate its beauty, intricacy and wonder between the native language – Portuguese – and English without loss of meaning has made an impression on me.

Group exploring the Amazon rainforest.

“The Salve mercy mission calls us to be ‘stewards of God’s creation,'” Sister Therese said. “The significance of this challenge to live life in harmony with people and the earth was revealed in greater clarity after my participation in the trip to the Amazon. I felt very privileged to be a part of such an enriching experience with a group of wonderful students. The immersion into the richness and variety of life in the Amazon region provided an opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the variety of living organisms and species as well as the interdependence and interrelatedness of creation.”

Learning outside of the classroom has been the heartbeat of my education at Salve, and in reflection of all my experiential learning, I can honestly say that it has changed my life. Whether it is the people, pink dolphins, caimans, snakes, birds, insects or trees, I will think about what I learned from the Rio Negro for the rest of my life.

Newton and students kayaking down the Rio Negro.

To learn more about study abroad opportunities at Salve, visit the Center for Global Education and Fellowships' webpage or Instagram for more information on programs and application deadlines.