



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

ALAHNA KEIL

FROM

USA

TO

ASIA

DURATION

3 WEEKS



0123456789



Group Dynamics and Access in Asia

When Alahna Keil, who has cerebral palsy, enrolled in Luther College in Iowa, located an hour away from her home in Wisconsin, the idea of studying abroad seemed far from her mind. She was apprehensive about the possibility of study abroad both for academic and physical reasons.

Then something changed. She learned of 3-week programs for the January term break. The length seemed manageable, the four academic credits useful, and the faculty supportive – it ended up being a perfect opportunity. By her sophomore year, Alahna was on her way to China, Hong Kong, and Japan.

“One of my main concerns going abroad was whether or not I would need a personal assistant. I’m pretty independent and I didn’t want my mom traveling with us. My college is pretty great in providing equal opportunities for everyone and accommodating in areas that I need.”

Since Alahna would be bringing her wheelchair, she and the study abroad staff scoped out another potential student that could assist her as needed when abroad. The student was very willing to assist Alahna, and they ended up becoming not only roommates but friends. Other students in the group, who she didn’t know previously, also jumped in to assist when needed.

Accessing public transportation and Buddhist temples were a little difficult. While some had ramps, most had one or more stairs up. She would either walk up with the support of a hand to hold on to, or stronger students would lift her up in her 18 pound wheelchair.

“I taught them the safest, easiest, and most comfortable way for me to be lifted. It all went smoothly. It took time to find how we best operate as a group, but by the end of the trip we had it down pretty well.”

Once inside the public bus, the security of her wheelchair made it easier to stay balanced in a crowded space. Inside temple entrances, she found it was flat and well maintained. While Alahna preferred to push her own wheelchair, at times she accepted assistance because of the group’s pace or uneven gravel road, and even snow in Kyoto, Japan.

In the monastic life there is no indoor heat and Alahna felt the effects of cold on her muscles, so she used a lot of layers and heat packs that she planned for in advance. The group also spent time meditating on the floor but Alahna opted for a chair the professor arranged for her.

“As it turns out, there really wasn’t anything I felt I couldn’t participate in because of my physical challenges, so I was really pleased about that.”

Participating in everything meant being included in a visit to a mountain monastery in northeastern China. Because its many stairs can be a challenge for anyone, she was pleasantly surprised to find a palanquin, or a sedan chair, service available. She transferred on to this seat supported by poles that two men – one in front and the other behind – carry up the mountain. This earned her the nickname “Princess Alahna,” which she says was a good joke since she finds it the exact opposite of her personality.

These alternative ways of accomplishing a goal is what Alahna always has to think about. But, by traveling in a group, she found the professor and other students also gained a new level of awareness and perspective on how to include everyone.

“In my attitude I’m pretty flexible and can make things work that people think I can’t. I had a lot of support from my disability services, the professor, and the director of global learning at Luther to help prepare in this trip, and it made it a smooth and enjoyable experience.”

