



INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE

NAME

JAKE ROBINSON

FROM

USA

TO

GHANA

DURATION

15 WEEKS



0123456789



Why Wouldn't You Go Abroad?

After a five hour ride in a clunky van over dirt roads, Jake Robinson and his fellow study abroad students arrived in the remote, densely forested interior of Ghana to visit a medical clinic.

After lunch, the local host led the group along a dirt path – at first surrounded by children excited by Jake's red wheelchair, then past a goat in someone's living room, and deeper into the jungle for a good distance. Just when Jake was thinking they must be getting close, he learned his adventure was not soon to end.

To understand where he was headed, one must start nine months earlier. For Jake, like other American students with mobility disabilities, the default message he had received during college was: "Go to class, pass your courses, get your degree, and then move on. It's easier to just not study abroad."

But Jake is different. He is not the kind of person to follow the standard path – he is adventurous and, as an undergraduate, he wanted to go places.

In his junior year, a friend told Jake about the Semester at Sea program's website page encouraging students with disabilities to participate. "I really think that as much as you like to travel, you should look into this," he told Jake over lunch.

After initial hesitation, Jake's curiosity lingered on, so he went to the Semester at Sea website, gave them a call, and put in an application.

"I'm one of those students who procrastinates and doesn't do anything on time, so thankfully Semester at Sea was wonderful at contacting me on a regular basis—What do you need? What can we do for you? How can we help you prepare? They were really receptive."

He also appreciated how the program staff checked in to ask "What are you concerned about?" and offered to connect him with past students with disabilities who had traveled the world.

Before Jake knew it, he was on a flight from the University of California at San Diego to Nova Scotia, Canada, to board the Semester at Sea ship. Over the next 107 days, the vessel would circumnavigate the Atlantic Ocean, traveling to 4 continents, 16 ports, and 14 countries. Jake had packed his flexibility to figure out whatever came his way.

After initial stops in Europe, the ship docked in Accra, Ghana, and everyone scrambled off to do different excursions. This led Jake deep into the jungle along that dirt path that didn't seem to end. His local host turned to him and pointed to his wheelchair, "From here, I don't think you're going to be able to use that. We are going to have to carry you."

Jake found himself draped on someone's back, while another picked up his wheelchair, and they began hiking along a wet, rocky path down into a green canyon. He found himself getting nervous, but just kept going, even





when he realized halfway down, “We’re going to have to get back up this!” After an hour, he started feeling angry, “What are you trying to prove? We shouldn’t do this!” but the local host reassured him, “This is worth it. Trust me.”

The trek and trepidation finally ended after two hours. Jake took one look at an “absolutely remote, gorgeous waterfall” and was overcome with emotion. “I had so many of these kinds of experiences with Semester at Sea that I just jumped into – scared, no doubt – but I got to places where I was astounded.”

I could easily just have gone the route of thinking that I don’t want these people to have to carry me, I don’t want to have to get my chair dirty, or I don’t want to take a chance of something bad happening, but it’s a real world experience that is priceless. It’s so incredibly important to go abroad.

Students with disabilities should have the same global experiences that every other student has access to, and Jake believes, “Administrators need to reinforce this or it is never going to change.” His home institution is doing just that; it’s the simple things, such as a study abroad poster in the disability office, which set the expectation, “Why wouldn’t you go abroad?”

The road less traveled may become more well-worn in the future, but the experiences will still continue to astound those who journey along it.

