

## **Onsite Review of Living Routes Auroville Program**

April, 2010

### **A brief summary**

Through the Living Routes India program, students witness for themselves the joys and difficulties involved in maintaining sustainable communities. This spring, under the leadership of Daniel Greenberg, Director of Living Routes, students have come to learn the true definition of sustainability and the feasibility of establishing an ecovillage. Students spend a concentrated amount of time in the field. Throughout the semester their fieldwork is supported by academic readings, group discussions, seminars, and journal practice.

The students participated in a truly remarkable journey that inspired and transformed them into serious and dedicated advocates for the preservation of our Earth. A thorough overview over the semester and the academic expectations (the full curriculum) are provided in PDF format on the webpage at [www.livingroutes.org/programs/p\\_auroville.htm#04](http://www.livingroutes.org/programs/p_auroville.htm#04).

### **Introduction**

The Living Routes program in India is based in Auroville, home to one of the world's most successful eco-reforestation efforts, the Center for Scientific Research (CSR), and an extremely productive tropical habitat restored from the brink of ecological disaster. Auroville is located in the state of Tamil Nadu (some parts are in the State of Puducherry), a few kilometres inland from the Coromandel Coast, approx 160 kms south of Chennai (previously Madras) and 10 kms north of the town of Pondicherry. The community is comprised of people from some 45 nations, from all social classes, backgrounds and cultures, representing humanity as a whole. The population of the township is constantly growing, but currently stands at around 2,170 people, of whom approximately two-fifths are Indian.

The semester coursework has been designed so students can bring together practical and theoretical frameworks to explore the feasibility of a sustainable community. The outcome is for students to have an understanding and appreciation of the joys and difficulties of creating this environment.

### **Semester Coursework**

#### **Group Dynamics (Comm.352). 4 credits**

Learn to recognize and analyze the physical, social, economic, political, ethical, and spiritual elements that make up sustainable communities. Students build strong conceptual frameworks and have opportunities for real-world experience by developing a learning community and engaging with established host communities.

#### **Global and Local Sustainable Living (Env. Design 592A) 4 credits**

Study the role of human history, language, education, physical landscape, society, and world view on shaping human-place relations. Explore ways of strengthening these connections through use of ecological footprint analysis, ecological literacy, mindful awareness, community/societal action, and systems thinking.

#### **Applications and Practices of Sustainable Living (Service Learning 397i) 4 credits**

This field-based experience, combined with readings, dialogue, reflection and a project paper, introduces you to the history, methods, and meanings of sustainable development. Students select, implement, record, and evaluate an internship project in sustainable development.

### Body, Mind, and Spirit: Cultivating Personal Sustainability (Int'l Ed 292C)4 credits

Study the importance of world views and how they affect human behavior and the earth, and gain an appreciation for the historical role of religions and spirituality in creating culture. In addition to seminars, readings, reflective journaling, and discussion on philosophical and spiritual movements that link inner transformation with political and environmental action, this course explores how practices such as yoga and meditation, holistic health, and rituals expand perceptions about who we are and how we live.

The Auroville semester is advertised as an ‘...academic program that fosters collaborative inquiry, critical thinking, and dialogue while exploring daily awareness practices such as yoga, non-violent communication, and meditation. Through engagement with a holistic approach to world issues that encompasses inner, cultural, and outer processes, you broaden and deepen your understanding of sustainability issues. Opportunities to learn about and have hands on experience with habitat restoration, local organic food production, teaching in local schools, working with village action groups, etc. help students build a growing theoretical and practical understanding of issues relating to local and global sustainability.’

Through a series of learning modalities, Living Routes students are exposed to the joys and trials of creating and supporting a sustainable community. These modalities include:

- Seminars and Workshops
- Bioregional/Cross-Cultural Explorations
- Academic Readings and Assignments
- Base Groups (for small-group academic support and sharing)
- Collaborative Learning Sessions
- Learning Journals
- Self-directed Learning and Research
- Learning Community Participation
- Facilitation and Leadership

### Faculty in Auroville Spring 2010

- Larkspur Morton
- Daniel Greenberg
- Monique Gauthier
- Ethan Hirsch-Tauber

Faculty are supported by Abbey Schoenfeld, a full time administrator and member of Auroville community. There is also a small core of Indian members of the Auroville community who support the program as well.

While I am not an academic in the field of sustainability, I can reflect on the level of learning, care and attention the students received from their faculty. My observation of two seminars and the base group presentations during my last week clearly indicated that the qualifications and training of the faculty supported the curriculum and the learning environment; both inside and outside the classroom.

All students reported they were well supported by their respective base group leaders. Students also reported they could communicate easily with all four members of the faculty. Each faculty member was individually committed to and living a life style that supported the ‘Aurovillian’ ideal. One could not

avoid noticing the commitment and passion for creating a sustainable community in each of them. Faculty practiced what they preached in their daily lives and served as role models for the students.

Faculty meetings (and all daily meetings with students) began by a health and wellbeing check-in and advice to handle different issues or concerns was delivered with true feeling and compassion. Quite remarkable to see how symbiotically they worked together!

### Student Housing

This spring, half the group lived in a sub-community of Auroville called Aspiration and the other half in Youth Camp. Aspiration (where I stayed in one of the guest houses) is a small community of families and a number of guest houses for visitors to Auroville. Daniel and Monique had rooms in a home owned by an Aspiration member. Youth camp is comprised of two houses, one occupied by Larkspur and Ethan, and the other house completely occupied by the students as a residence with two classrooms attached.

Both communities provided good accommodations for the students though they are a good 20 minute walk/10 minute bicycle ride from each other. Each location had clean, sanitary facilities, and a kitchen with staff who prepared breakfast and dinner. Meals were taken at each community with the respective group leaders with breakfast being the primary time for check-ins and updates for the day.

Students and faculty agreed that it would be better for the entire group to be housed in one community to encourage a more cohesive bond with each other. This spring, it didn't appear the distance negatively affected the bonding of students. They seemed to move back and forth with ease and frequency, despite the heat of the latter months.

While both communities are not near the central hub of the Matrimandir, the Visitors Center or the town hall, with the aid of bicycles, students still moved around Auroville with relative ease. It was clear the program had made good use of the entire community and purposefully had the students moving around to meet different communities and engaging with permanent members and visitors to Auroville.

### Standards of Good Practice

To determine whether the Living Routes Auroville program is in compliance with the Forum's Standard of Good Practice in Education Abroad, I reviewed the program based on the nine standards of good practice defined by the Forum.

#### **1) Mission:**

- a) The mission of this program is clearly stated in the handbook provided to all students. It is also available on the website as a public document.

#### **2) Student Learning and Development:**

- a) Inter-Cultural Understanding: This is not an easy thing to establish in Auroville. Auroville is a unique community within Southern India. While the program creates many opportunities for the students to become involved with the community in Auroville – both expats and locals – engaging with the Tamil villages around Auroville is a more difficult matter as the students are not versed in Tamil and therefore limited in their abilities to get to know these communities. These communities also tend to be more conservative and not necessarily open to having western visitors.

- b) Language and Communication: English is the spoken language in Auroville and most Indians speak English as well. There were a few formal Tamil classes, but given that the students spend most of their time in Auroville, the need for such classes is small.
- c) Academic Growth: The program goals are clearly outlined and the students clearly gained a significant understanding and appreciation for sustainable living by being a part of this program.
- d) Student Development: I was very impressed at the willingness of students to participate in all activities. All of them approached their learning with enthusiasm (though like students everywhere, energy levels ebbed and flowed depending on the time of day). There wasn't one student who wasn't sad to leave this community. They were inspired by their faculty and the community to make positive environmental changes for themselves and for the better of the planet.

### 3) Academic Framework:

- a) Academic credit: Policies are clearly stated.
- b) Academic coursework: The academic challenge of this program involves not only learning about the theories of sustainable community development through seminars, research projects and discussions with Aurovillians, but also putting these theories into practice through service learning and day-to-day engagement within multiple layers of community. The coursework and plan is clearly outlined in the student handbook and through hands on engagement students are learning how our practices can impact environmental change.
- c) Internships and Field Research: All fieldwork is supervised and followed up with written papers that are evaluated by rubrics designed in conjunction with UMass Amherst faculty.
- d) On-site Advising: Students are presented with clearly defined objectives and goals in each course. Students are responsible for ensuring that his/her home institution accepts the coursework for credit. Students also have one-on-one sessions with their primary faculty advisor approximately once per week.
- e) Academic Integration: Students are encouraged to continue with their practices and learning upon return to the U.S. In the final week, students attended a session, 'Walking Our Talk: Energy and Carbon.' In this session, students were introduced to different ways to continue their learning in environmental and energy conservation upon return to the U.S.
- f) Academic Planning: While there were no specific program resources related to academic or career planning, students' future goals and academic plans were frequent topics of conversation and faculty were very supportive in helping students articulate their passions and think through their various options.
- g) Career Planning: (see "Academic Planning" above)

### 4) Student Preparation for the Learning Environment Abroad:

- a) Pre-and Post Departure Advising and Orientation: Students were given an extensive (and appropriate) amount of information to prepare for their semester. Students were also expected to journal and blog before, during and after this program. During the last week, students attended seminars on, 'Reverse Culture Shock', 'Creative Expressions of Significant Learning' and a 'Final Sharing' – all designed to help students prepare for their journey back home.
- b) Returning Student Support: Students selected 'class presidents' who would help keep the group connected upon return to the U.S. Living Routes faculty and staff will be

part of this chain as well and are keen to support group reunions on a regular basis. Program listservs and Facebook groups will continue as forums for student engagement and support. Living Routes is also developing a more active alumni network for peer mentorship and support.

**5) Student Selection and Code of Conduct:**

- a) Student Selection: Students in this group were all well suited for and adjusted well to this program. All had a clear understanding of the program expectations. But, as with any study abroad program, one can never prepare fully for the experience. The actual experience and adjustments that take place are always surprising!
- b) Code of Conduct: The student handbook has a section on expected behavior and disciplinary process.

**6) Policies and Procedures:**

- a) Policies: The organization presented adequate and published policies to govern this education abroad program.
- b) Personnel: Policies with respect to personnel was not reviewed as part of this evaluation.
- c) Advising: Students received a great deal of attention and guidance from faculty which in turn supported students' curricular, intellectual and personal development.
- d) Communications: My review of the documents, evaluations and surveys suggest that Living Routes is committed to and practices good communication with students, parents, and home institutions.
- e) Marketing: I found nothing to indicate practices are unethical. On the contrary, Living Routes is committed to marketing in environmentally and socially responsible ways. For example, their promotional materials are "resource-light", they pioneered the practice of "virtual tabling" at study abroad fairs, and they offer donations to an Aurovillian unit called Upassana to receive and give-away "Tsunamika dolls", which are made out of scrap fabric by village women near Auroville.
- f) Affordability and Financial Assistance: The program is committed to keeping costs at a minimum so that it remains a viable program for all students. Financial aid is limited, but available.
- g) Program Assessment: My review is one in a sequence of reviews that is done regularly. I was also provided with both internal and external reviews of other Living Routes sites.

**7) Organizational and Program Resources:**

- a) Academic Personnel: It is my assessment, having reviewed the curriculum and following discussions with the faculty and administrators that faculty members were qualified in running the program. All four faculty members were a great source of support to the students and were engaged with the students both inside and outside the classroom. There was no lack of support (or escape) from the faculty. Students grew academically and personally as a result of this support.
- b) Administrative and Support Personnel: The students were well aware and very appreciative of the many tasks performed quietly by the administrative staff to provide a safe and solid study abroad program for the students. The support provided by administrative staff (all Aurovillians) was valued and appreciated.

- c) Financial Resources: Living Routes, in line with its mission, provided the necessary resources to faculty, staff and students. A final slide show of pictures from students and staff reflected well-organized travel to other regions in Tamil Nadu and the opportunity to engage with other communities such as a school for Tibetan refugees. Nearly all events were organized through Living Routes.
- d) Learning and Academic Support Facilities: The nature of the program requires much of the instruction to occur in the field. However, classroom space was available in Youth camp and in Aspiration at the 'white house.' The 'white house' also served as a place of quiet study for students. These classrooms were utilized most days by the groups for seminars and group meetings.
- e) Student housing: Please see my section on student housing above. My only recommendation would be to try and keep the group together in one location in the future (size permitting).

#### 8) **Health, Safety and Security:**

- a) Safety and Security: Auroville is a community built on trust and goodwill. I did not feel unsafe during my time in Auroville. That said, it doesn't hurt to be careful and mindful of your surroundings at all time. A detailed section on safety policies is provided in the student handbook. Students are required to sign a 'Conditions of Participation Document' prior to enrolling on the program that covers many non-negotiable commitments including a health and safety policy. Students reported no serious concerns and were very comfortable in their surroundings within the community.
- b) Health: Every morning began with a health check-in and faculty were vigilant about this matter. A health clinic is close by and any health changes are reported daily.
- c) Liability: Living Routes maintains a \$2 million liability policy and has never been sued or submitted a claim in its 10+ years of existence.
- d) Emergency Communications: Living Routes' extensive Health and Safety Manual outlines procedures and protocols in case of emergencies. There is also an emergency number that rings multiple Directors simultaneously.

#### 9) **Ethics and Integrity:**

- a) Operations: Ethical responsibility to the community, nature and self are essential to the success of this program. The program is run in accordance with ethical principles.
- b) Student Life: I did not observe any unethical practices towards students and there were none reported to me by students either.
- c) Intercultural Relations: Under the leadership of Daniel Greenberg and his faculty, I can unequivocally report that this organization is considerate and respectful towards the culture within Auroville and the Indian culture.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to commend the Living Routes faculty, staff and students for sustaining a study abroad program that challenges everyone to reevaluate and change patterns of behavior that are often destructive towards our Earth and harmful to one another. Rarely does a program embrace learning so holistically. I don't believe the students will easily shelve away the learning and skills acquired on this semester abroad program. This study abroad experience, unlike more traditional programs, will have a

substantive impact on how students engage with the world almost immediately. Students will leave the program with a heightened sensitivity to various imbalances in this world. More importantly, the students also leave with the sense of hope that communities can effect change positively and the skills and tools to improve their own communities in small or large ways.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to spend time in Auroville and with all its members. Thanks to Daniel, Monique, Lackspur, Ethan and Abbey for so graciously inviting me into to your lives for a week.

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