Stetson University Executive MBA students’ perspectives broadened, careers enriched by engaging Asian cultures in boardrooms, streets and countryside

Descriptions of exciting exotic experiences steeped with lasting lessons of business and culture dominate the lively conversations of 18 graduate students who traveled half way around the world in June to engage Asian cultures in streets and boardrooms.

The quest to Vietnam and Hong Kong was an adventure and a success for 18 Executive MBA students of Cohort 7 who broadened and enriched their business careers and perspectives.

“Sitting in the United States in an air-conditioned classroom is totally different from being embedded in the culture and seeing how things work first-hand,” said Kelly Glassburn of Windermere. “The trip helped close the loop on many concepts that we’ve been learning over the past year.”

Economic perspectives changed, sometimes radically, when students entered plush conference rooms to meet with leaders of industries like Nike, Danone, Geely (China’s largest auto manufacturer), ACCION International (the microfinance giant) and Li & Fung Limited, a 104 year-old, $12 billion dollar trade group.

Economic perspectives also changed, sometimes even more radically, outside corporate offices where students bartered with street vendors for purses, watches, jewelry and souvenirs.

“Bartering in the markets was a great illustration of real-life economics,” said Darcy Clark, of Celebration, who like Glassburn is a Disney manager. Other students, too, said bartering offered special insight into local economies.

Such impromptu cultural engagements were a big part of the international experience. Students used them to learn about a country’s people, economy and how business is conducted. It’s impossible to separate business and culture, so ample time was focused on historic sites, food, nightlife and other cultural-related activities.
In Hong Kong, one of the most densely populated areas of the world and an international finance center, the group saw Victoria Peak’s panoramic views, its monastery, Hong Kong Disneyland and large markets as they traveled by train, sampan, cable car, boat, funicular and bus. Students often compared the city of 7 million to New York.

Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) is spread over a much larger area than compact Hong Kong, even though its population is comparable. Students met with numerous industry leaders in Ho Chi Minh City, but also made forays into the countryside to explore Viet Cong tunnels from the wars for independence, ride horse-drawn carts through rural villages, navigate narrow boats through the Mekong Delta and partake of uncommon foods such as whole elephant fish on a stick, colorful unusual fruits and coconut candy made by a family business as students watched.

Non business highlights were many, including an afternoon of community service in a Buddhist monastery and unusual 90-minute Vietnamese massages that included tea, reflexology, massaging with hot stones and the masseuse walking on students’ backs. Some students opted for the relaxing $15 experience every night.

The cohort visited nine businesses – four in Vietnam and five in Hong Kong – to gain a deeper appreciation of a common classroom phrase: “global business.”

“Seeing those businesses while immersed in the cultures helped me appreciate what they were doing,” said Walter Kurlin, a business program facilitator for Disney whose hometown is Ft. Lauderdale. “The cultural encounters were integral in wrapping that experience together as both an educational and cultural experience.”

The cultural context put “understanding and respect” into the vast differences from business and life in America, said Terrence Tasior, a Disney finance manager. Perhaps the most valuable insight he gained is the economic importance of China. “That was evident with all
the companies we visited,” he said. “No matter the question or topic, it almost always circled back to China.”

“Spending time with business leaders in a variety of industries was extremely valuable,” said Penny Miller of Clermont, a Human Resources partner for Disney. “The ability to ask questions about business opportunities and challenges and discover new points of view” is something she can apply to her daily work.

“In the U.S. we tend to be very ethnocentric – our way is the right way,” said Glassburn, “but that’s an opinion hard to stand behind when you are embedded in a country, seeing a successful operation being conducted, and hearing how business is done differently than how it is done back in the U.S.” Clark agreed: “It’s really different than reading about it in a textbook!”

“This trip made us all realize we have to think of things differently,” said Norbert Dean of Mobile, Ala. and director of strategic sourcing at Disney World. “The best leaders will have to break down borders, not keep them up.”

The 19-month EMBA program is based at Stetson’s Center at Celebration and contains an international trip. Past cohorts have visited Ireland, the Czech Republic and Dubai, but this is first cohort to travel to two countries.