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## International travel fosters a global perspective in the classroom

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(<https://www.njea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/GEEO-2017-Sahara-Desert-4-copy.jpg>)

### **Programs from GEEO inspire instruction and provide professional development**

**By Darcey Brooten, NJEA member**

As I sat home on my couch over Spring Break 2015, poring over grad school work and stacks of grading, I decided not to wait around for traveling companions and I made the bold decision to book a trip and travel someplace exotic that summer. I knew I had the time to do it, and I wanted to go somewhere that would broaden my horizons—someplace that would push me to step outside of my comfort zone. I wanted to travel somewhere I knew very little about.

Because I was a solo traveler who wanted to join with a group, I began my planning and exploration process with a simple Google Search: “Travel Programs for Teachers.” Up popped the nonprofit Global Exploration for Educators Organization (GEEO), which was created in 2007 to help and encourage educators to travel abroad.

I was blown away by their global travel programs, which span the world, and my heart skipped a beat when I discovered that the programs I found with GEEO were

within my budget. This was a perfect fit for me.

After hearing stories from my brother and his wife about their travels in Southeast Asia, I decided that was where I wanted to send myself. On the GEEO travel program page, I eyed two itineraries—one to Thailand/Laos, and the other to Vietnam/Cambodia. I thought about doing both trips back-to-back, but I did not have the time or funds for that, so I knew I had to choose one. It was then that I emailed GEEO's founder and executive director, Jesse Weisz, for advice.

Jesse promptly called me back, and from that moment on, I knew that GEEO's mission of being "dedicated to encouraging and assisting as many teachers as possible to travel abroad and then share their experiences with their students upon their return to the classroom" was the real deal. Jesse talked frankly with me, comparing the highlights of each adventure. I decided to travel to Vietnam and Cambodia. I was nervous to travel alone across the world for the first time, but I am glad that I did!



Darcey Brooten traveling by camel into the dunes of the Sahara Desert for an overnight under the stars at a Nomad Camp outside of Merzouga, Morocco.

### **Connecting with other participants before the trip**

Right after booking the trip, I knew that sending myself on this trip of a lifetime would challenge and strengthen me professionally and personally. GEEO has created Facebook participant pages to connect participants from across the country as a way to foster friendships and serve as a place to ask group-specific questions such as, "What time does everyone's flight arrive?" or "Is anyone extending their time abroad beyond our itinerary?"

As a solo traveler, making these connections prior to boarding a plane to the other side of the world made me feel comfortable and brave; I was not alone.

### **Life changing experiences in Southeast Asia**

When I touched down in Vietnam, I could not believe that I made this affordable adventure happen. I saw more and did more with my GEEO group than I ever could have alone.

I cruised on a junk boat while learning about the karst formations of Halong Bay. I toured the Imperial Citadel in Hue. I saw remnants and damage from the Vietnam War. I climbed down the Cu Chi Tunnels and gazed at the Reunification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City. I stepped foot on the hallowed Killing Fields of Choeung Ek and learned about the horrors that took place at the S-21 Prison during the Pol Pot Regime at the Tuol Sleng Museum. I tasted dragon fruit, and I sipped beverages infused with tarantulas. I tried not to wince as others in my group munched on silkworms and crickets. I visited the famed Angkor Wat and My Son ruins, and I imagined life more than a thousand years ago.

These moving, memorable experiences are ones I could not get from reading a book. Pictures can't do these places justice. They must be experienced. I felt the pulse of these countries, and I was changed.

#### **An eye-opening trip to Morocco**

International travel opened my eyes to the world and has enhanced my teaching through firsthand experience and learning. I loved my first adventure with GEEO so much that I decided to book a second trip this past summer to Morocco.

I immersed myself in Moroccan art, food, landscapes and sights. I rode a camel and slept out under the stars in the Sahara Desert. I drank mint tea while chatting with nomadic Berber villagers about rug weaving. I learned firsthand how mosaics are created. I smelled the putrid scents of the 1,000 year-old fez tannery and saw how their tanning process has not changed over all these years. I climbed the kasbahs of Ait Ben Haddou, and I shopped among the souks of Marrakech. I experienced and learned so much, and I could not wait to share it.



A GEEO travelers group picture at the Heri el Souani granary in Meknes, Morocco.

### **Built-in professional development**

Because GEEO is a travel program for educators, their mission ensures that teachers share their experiences abroad when they return home to their students. My travels abroad are not experiences that can be taught in single, isolated lessons. They are infused into my being, and they constantly come up. All of these experiences abroad have directly and indirectly affected my teaching and the learning of my students.

To aide in this process, all educators traveling with GEEO submit a brief pre-travel action plan describing how they anticipate utilizing their learning in their classrooms. Educators are then directed to a wealth of GEEO Pinterest pages and book clubs that feature lesson plans, books, travel tips, and interesting articles. These resources give teachers a basic understanding of customs, history, and culture in their travel destinations that puts everything into context and allows for a more meaningful experience while traveling.

Traveling with GEEO allowed me to surround myself with like-minded educators who share a love of learning. Not only did GEEO make travels to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Morocco accessible to me as a solo traveler, but I earned approximately 45-50 professional development hours per trip. On top of that, I traveled with many elementary, middle, and high school educators, which added to my experience because I could ask any questions that I wanted, and our discussions strengthened and enriched each other.

Many bus rides and evenings were spent with these engaging fellow educators who were happy to share ideas and provide background and context to all that we were experiencing and seeing. In Morocco, I traveled with a local Arabic teacher as well as the Program/Outreach Coordinator of the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies. She brought along numerous articles for us to read, pushed our thinking with guiding questions, and encouraged us to journal to reflect on our experiences.

GEEO trips are known for having the most knowledgeable, personable, and helpful guides, so all of my questions were answered, and we always had a sounding board and someone we could talk to about anything and everything. I am still in contact with my guides from Vietnam/Cambodia and Morocco, and they are always there as resources and friends whenever I need them.

### **Creating a global classroom**

Returning home to my classroom after my two GEEO trips, I felt invigorated and inspired to share what I had learned with my students. What really changed was my desire to consciously and purposefully create a global classroom. I learned about creating a “Culture Kit” from a fellow educator while traveling, and because of her, I collected many trinkets from my travels that allowed students to feel, smell, and hear about life in other countries. These small touches really brought my teaching to life.

I showed my students the 20-minute Google Earth presentation provided by GEEO that described the trips I had taken. This, coupled with my commentary, helped take my students on my journey. I also created “passports,” lesson plans, and presentations tailored to my students that fit right into our Global Geography studies and our daily conversations.

To say that my students were excited on our “international travel days” would be an understatement. We circle back to our learning and make global connections time and again. As an added bonus, I participated in GEEO’s optional three-credit graduate course through University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, so I even earned graduate credits for my travel, my action plan, and the creation of presentations and student projects based on my travels.

My ultimate professional goal of investing in travel abroad is to educate and grow my students to be global-thinkers through educating, growing, and teaching myself. The tweaks, additions, and enhancements I made to my teaching, my own global knowledge, and

my classroom are done in order to develop a generation of engaged 21st-century learners who think globally and cross-culturally.



**This is the New Hope School in Cambodia. It provides free English lessons to anyone wanting to learn. Darcey Brooten visited the school with other GEEO travelers.**

### **Students and parents respond**

As I reflected on my past two summers of international travel with GEEO, I checked in with former students and class parents to check on the impact of my lessons and stories.

“It was interesting to see what was going on outside of Bernardsville, things that were the same and different,” one student said. This student, Brigitte, happened to travel to Vietnam this past summer and her mother said my shared experiences made a difference.

“I think that your travels totally enhanced our trip,” Andrea McGee wrote. “Seeing you teach about other areas of the world helped Brigitte embrace other cultures and want to explore and learn about them!”

“I loved when [Miss Brooten] told us about her travels because it helped me learn about the world, another student, Morgan, chimed in. “Her stories and adventures have made me want to be a teacher like her and travel around the world when I get older.”

“Miss Brooten brought back stories and adventures from her summer travels and shared them with her class,” Morgan’s mother, Deb Infusino, echoed. “She fostered a global classroom by creating a travel theme and making passports for each child. The class took time to learn about different places around the world and travel there. This opened my child’s eyes to the world. Miss Brooten inspired [students] to want to learn about the world and travel one day. It is quite difficult for eight year olds to look beyond themselves and their



own worlds, but Miss Brooten made that happen. Miss Brooten’s global classroom was not only exciting for my daughter, but very educational.”



Darcey Brooten at the Bayon Temple, which is part of Angkor Wat, in what is now Siem Reap, Cambodia. It was constructed in the 1100s. Many people deem it the “World’s No. 1 Sight.”

Finally, another parent reflected on conversations at home after school with her son, Marco.

“The realization that the amount we easily spend for mundane items, such a Frappuccino and a muffin, equals essential educational staples in a different country shocked and inspired Marco,” Rachele Berria Friend reflected. “In a society that builds walls, [Miss Brooten] opens doors for these kids... to learn respect for people’s efforts, generosity and tolerance towards others, regardless of their skin tone, religion or social status. [These are] invaluable lessons at any age.”

As an educator, I believe that it is important for me to open students’ eyes to the world as they learn to celebrate and embrace global similarities and differences while learning where they fit into this bigger picture. I am glad that I took my leap of faith to travel with GEEQ, and my students are, too.

*Darcey Brooten is a third-grade teacher in her 13th year teaching at Bedwell Elementary School in Bernardsville.*

**Travel and learn with GEEQ**

Travel the world affordably, earn professional development credit, and bring global understanding into your classroom!

Founded in 2007, Global Exploration for Educators Organization (GEEO) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has sent over 1,600 teachers abroad on adventurous travel programs. With GEEO, educators can earn professional development credits and optional graduate credit while seeing the world. GEEO's trips last seven to 21 days and are designed and discounted to be interesting and affordable for teachers. In addition to tour leaders, many of the programs are accompanied by university faculty members who are experts on the destination.

GEEO also provides teachers with educational materials and the structure to help them bring their experiences into the classroom. The trips are open to all K-12 and university educators, administrators, retired educators, as well as educators' guests.

The deposit is \$250 for each program and the final payment is due 60 days before departure.

GEEO is offering the following travel programs for 2017: Bali/ Lombok; Bangkok to Hanoi; China; Costa Rica; Eastern Europe; the Galapagos islands; Greece; Iceland, India/Nepal; Bhutan; Ireland; Armenia/Georgia; Italy; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; Morocco; Myanmar (Burma); Peruvian Amazon; Peruvian Andes; Southern Africa; Vietnam/Cambodia; and the Balkans.

**Detailed information about each trip, including itineraries, costs, travel dates, and more can be found at [www.geeo.org](http://www.geeo.org) (<http://www.geeo.org>). GEEO can be reached seven days a week, toll-free at 1-877-600-0105 between 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. EST.**

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