Malaysia and Bangladesh, 2010 International Experience

The Malaysia/Bangladesh trip will be led by a development and environmental economist, Professor Mushfiq Mobarak, who grew up in Bangladesh, and continues to travel there frequently for his field research projects. Accordingly, it will be somewhat development focused. Our time will be split evenly between the two countries. Most business meetings will be held in the respective capitals, Kuala Lumpur and Dhaka, but we will take road trips to rural and agricultural areas in each country to get a more complete sense of life in south and south-east Asia. Malaysia and Bangladesh were chosen to represent two countries at quite different levels of development in Asia though they have shared colonial history and are heavily influenced by the predominant Muslim religion. They have differing levels of state involvement in the economy and are pursuing different levels of engagement with foreign investors. Although an oil, timber, palm oil, and other raw material exporter, Malaysia has managed to diversify its economic base, also exporting manufactured goods, technology, and attracting pharmaceutical investments as well. Malaysia has transitioned to the next phase of development and is considered a “middle income country,” while Bangladesh remains extremely poor (although it has been on a high growth trajectory in recent years). Two-thirds of all Bangladeshis work in the agricultural sector and much of the population lives on land prone to flood during the annual monsoons. Their exports include low value-added raw materials, but a dynamic ready-made garments sector now accounts for the majority of export earnings (just take a look at the label of any piece of clothing you may have purchased at Walmart), and has proved incredibly resistant to the world economic downturn.

Individuals considering participating on this trip should be aware that while we are making every effort to ensure everyone’s comfort throughout the trip, traveling in a developing nation will inevitably have its frustrations: electricity outages, delays, upset stomach, etc, especially because we will venture out to rural areas. Participants should be prepared to travel with flexibility, a positive attitude, and a sense of humor.

In Malaysia, we will visit with officials at Bank Negara, the national bank, to discuss lessons learned from the currency war with George Soros. In addition to meeting with investment firms and government officials, we will be visiting prominent NGOs such as the PT Foundation, an HIV/AIDS awareness organization founded in 1987 by a group of gay men after the first incidence of AIDS in Malaysia was diagnosed. We might also meet with the “Father of the Malaysian NGO.” In addition, we will tour a palm plantation and refinery to get a flavor of sustainable agricultural practices as Malaysia brings its resource sector into the twenty-first century.

In terms of recreation, we will visit the Petronas Towers, once the tallest twin towers in the world, as well as visiting Batu limestone caves and the Royal Selangor Pewter, the world's largest pewter manufacturer. No visit to Malaysia is complete without a diverse sampling of Malaysian foods, the only place in the world where Chinese, Indian, and Malay cuisine intermingle to create one of the most delicious gourmet experience in the world. During your free dinner time, you are highly encouraged to hawker stands where aisles and aisles of home made delights await to dazzle your taste buds.

In Bangladesh, we will have a unique opportunity to see Professor Mobarak’s home country and possibly see his research in action. We will meet with top government officials, investors and investment firms to gain insight into the macroeconomic and policy forces at play in Bangladesh. We are scheduling meetings with top officials at Grameen Bank (the Nobel Prize winning microcredit institution founded by Professor Muhammad Yunus) and BRAC (an NGO engaged in micro-finance, health, and empowerment of the ultra-poor). At these institutions, we will learn about the foundations, progress, and impact of micro-finance.
time permits, we will visit a BRAC project, a village where Professor Mobarak is researching how to encourage the adoption of safer, more efficient cooking stoves. Over the weekend, we will visit the evergreen tropical forest of Bhawal National Park, an agri-university, and cultural sites, such as the Liberation monument and a pottery village. During our stay, we will also enjoy dance performances, free time in the old town, and meeting Professor Mobarak’s family.