

Q&A With Sara Milles Gupta (UCSB EAP '01 Denmark)

Sara and Roshan Gupta established the Gupta Family StartWise Scholarship to support first-generation UCSB students studying abroad in India, Africa or Latin America.



What motivated/interested you as a student to study abroad? Why did you choose Denmark?

I always had an interest in traveling, but at this point in my life had only done a little bit, mostly domestically. I did get a chance to visit Italy the year before I learned about EAP and was hooked. So when I learned studying abroad was an option at UCSB, I definitely wanted to learn more so I made a visit to the EAP office. They were all so helpful and encouraging. I was blown away by the number of options. In terms of choosing Denmark, part of that was because I was a science major. Denmark allowed me to continue to get credits towards my degree while learning in English. I think it is important for those studying disciplines like science and engineering to know there are options for them that will not set them back in the degree. Additionally, I loved that UCSB only sent a small number of students to Denmark as compared to other countries. This meant I was able to have a very local experience as well as meet students from all over Europe who had come to Denmark to study as well. This really enhanced my experience and was also a motivator for some of the qualifications in our scholarship.

What challenges did you need to overcome in order to be able to study abroad? How did financial support factor into your ability to participate?

I was on financial aid while at UCSB, so it was really important that EAP allowed me to pay for my abroad program using my aid, just like I was at UCSB. As for the rest, I basically sold everything I owned and worked as much as I could to save money for all the fun stuff ;-). In all seriousness, students around the world are all on a budget, so it is easy to make friends with others who wanted to enjoy the simple things and travel cheaply while abroad. That said, this was another motivator for the creation of our scholarship. My husband and I wanted to help bridge the gap financially for students interested in going abroad, so that cost was not a major part of their decision making.

As a first-gen student, were you also the first in your family to study abroad?

Yes, I was the first in my family to study abroad. I remember it being a bit of a tough conversation to try to get my parents to understand the value of the experience. They of course thought is sounded a bit “frivolous” at first, but now they see it just as I do – as one of the most impactful and important experiences of my life that set me up to exceed our shared expectations for myself personally and professionally.

How would you describe your experience in a new culture and environment? What did you learn about yourself and/or the world around you?

For me the experience was invigorating. I was not intimidated by it and I settled in pretty easily. I loved the sites and new way of life from the start. But each person there was having their own experience and there was a good support system for those who were struggling to settle in. I learned so much about myself during this time. I learned a deep love and respect for people of other cultures, not just the Danish, but the great mix of people I was able to get to know from all over the world. I also learned that for me, travel is a key way for me to continually learn and challenge myself. I still travel internationally many times a year and this now includes my husband and young kids. We will actually be going to Denmark this year, which will be such a special experience. Lastly, and most importantly, I learned how to manage through my own culture being questioned and challenged. I lived in Denmark during 9/11. It was a massively challenging experience to be away from the US during that time, but more importantly to be surrounded with people from other cultures who had various points of view about the US culture and policies. This taught me diplomacy – how to listen to and challenge the ideas of others while being respectful to their ideas and cultural norms.

Why do you think that studying abroad is important? What impact has the experience had for you personally and professionally?

I think studying abroad is incredibly important and can accelerate your career, regardless of the field you are in. For me, I entered into a tech start-up early in my career. Due to my familiarity and experience abroad, I was given the opportunity to build out our European client base and ultimately played a large part in opening our office in Berlin, Germany. Since then, I have an international component to most of the jobs I have had. The fact is, the most industries are global in nature now, and studying abroad will give you a leg up in the work force.

What inspired you to give back by establishing the Gupta Family StartWise Scholarship? What does this mean to your family?

My husband and I look back and see the impact certain decisions we made in our education and early careers had on our ability to reach our personal and professional goals. For me, one of my best decisions was my choice to study abroad. Interestingly, my husband did not study abroad and he sees it as one of his biggest regrets.

In addition, as a multi-cultural family we see first-hand how important and personally enriching building awareness and acceptance for other cultures can be. This is why we

wanted to focus our scholarship on emerging regions like India, Africa and Latin America. Since my early travels, I have spent time in these areas and the experience is so profound and valuable.

In summary, we want to play a role in facilitating the personal growth of individuals with the desire to stretch themselves personally through travel and cultural enrichment. We can speak first hand to the impact it will have on them, as well as to those they meet for the rest of their lives.