

The Tibetan way of life: Karma and peace

Four St. Michael's students study abroad this summer in Tibet, taking classes and traveling

By Ashley Hedlund
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On July 3, four St. Michael's students arrived in Beijing prior to a 15 day visit in Tibet.

Seniors Teddy Ryan, Peter Knapp, Max MacDonald and junior Brian Downes went with a study abroad program called Wisdom Tours.

"People always talk about going abroad, but you never hear anyone mention anything about Tibet," MacDonald said. "Tibet was a place I never thought I'd go, so I thought to myself, better now than never."

The group was led by Jim Hagan, adjunct professor at Castleton State College.

"My husband has been to Tibet probably about 15 times," said Shelley Warren Hagan, co-owner of Wisdom Tours. Wisdom Tours was created by Jim and Shelley 25 years ago to share Asian cultural tours with others.

"We're both professors and we travel a lot," Shelley said. "We formed (Wisdom Tours) because we wanted to share the experience with students."

Though the company attracts many students, people of all ages are welcome.

"I really liked the diversity of the group," MacDonald said. "There were college students, college professors and couples coming all the way from Mexico to Nebraska. The group chemistry was great."

The Tibet trip consisted of two days in China and 15 days visiting around different parts of Tibet, including the towns Sakya and Tingri.

"We arrived in Beijing and



Photo by Max MacDonald

The students traveled to the Great Wall of China during their trip to Tibet. From the left: Brian Downes, Mary Blessing, Kate Ellias (Champlain College), Adam Wood, Teddy Ryan.

got to hike as far as we could go on The Great Wall of China," Downes said. "It was breathtaking and pretty amazing to see the only man-made object that can be seen from space."

The following day, the group flew from Beijing to Lhasa, Tibet, which was once the home of the Dalai Lama, according to Wisdom Tours' Web Site.

"We learned about Tibetan Buddhism philosophy and art," MacDonald said. "We traveled to monasteries and were taught through lectures all about Tibetan Buddhist culture."

The group also met monks

who spoke English and told the group about their beliefs, Downes said.

"Everyone there was really hospitable and didn't look like they held grudges," Knapp said. "I learned a lot about Buddhism and also how to meditate."

The people went out of their way to be nice because it's how they are, MacDonald said. They believe in Karma, he added.

Karma is the belief that a person's status in this life is a result of actions in a past life, according to the Columbia Encyclopedia.

"The better your Karma, the greater your chance is that after

death you will be reincarnated back into a human, instead of an animal," MacDonald said.

The 17-day trip to Tibet included an unforgettable trip to Mt. Everest, MacDonald said. The students could relax for a half-day, if shaken from the altitude, or climb to the Mt. Everest base camp, which is what most group members chose to do.

"We got to visit the world's highest Buddhist monastery, which was near our hotel and located at 16,700 feet," MacDonald said. "It was windy and probably about 45 degrees."

The view from the base camp

was what Downes remembered.

"When you looked up you could see half of the mountain, and then a large cloud line with about one-third of the mountain sticking out above the clouds," Downes said.

All three students agreed that it was their most memorable moment during the trip.

"It was an experience that I would never trade because it was so foreign and unique to me," MacDonald said. "I learned that life doesn't need to be full of all the flashy extras. We can all enjoy life with the little things we take for granted."

