

From the High Plains to the High Seas: FHSU Students Embrace Global Citizenship

1/16/26

By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - For most college students, the start of a new semester means finding the right buildings on campus, scouting out the best parking spots, and settling into a familiar routine of library sessions and coffee runs. But for two Fort Hays State University students, and for one semester, campus isn't made of brick and mortar—it's made of steel, salt water, and 106 days of horizon-chasing.

Mallory Palmer, an online Business Education senior from Osawatomie, and Tayton Roberts, a sophomore Political Science major from Olathe, are part of an elite group of Tiger explorers participating in a Semester at Sea experience. It is a program that transforms a cruise ship into a floating university, circumnavigating the globe to turn the world itself into a classroom.

While they are at different stages of their journey—Mallory having returned in 2025 and Tayton preparing to embark this January—the two have formed a unique bond, proving that even in a global program, the FHSU community remains tight-knit.

For both Mallory and Tayton, the seeds of this adventure were sown long before they reached college. Both girls discovered Semester at Sea on social media, watching students waking up in new countries every week.

"I always had it in the back of my mind that I wanted to do it," Mallory recalled. After years of wondering 'what if,' she finally decided to stop dreaming and start doing. "I just decided to make it happen."

Tayton felt a similar pull. A pre-law student with a passion for international relations, she was drawn to the opportunity of a lifetime. "I think it was the aspect that you get to see so many different countries, not just one," Tayton said. "And you are with a group of American students, so it feels a little safer. You get to meet a lot of people from different places while sharing the same experience."

The itinerary is nothing short of breathtaking. The voyage begins in Bangkok, Thailand. From there, the ship—housing roughly 600 students, faculty, and staff—becomes a moving bridge between cultures. The route spans three continents, visiting Vietnam, Malaysia, India, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Morocco, and Spain, before finally disembarking in Bremerhaven, Germany.

While at sea, students take a full 12-credit course load, including a mandatory core course in global studies. The credits are issued by Colorado State University and transferred back to FHSU, ensuring that while the students are seeing the world, they aren't falling behind on their degrees.

For Mallory, the academic and social aspects blended seamlessly. "The ship's staff does a good job of preparing you," she explained. "They did a pre-port the night before arriving in a country and gave you the basics... a heads-up on what to watch out for to stay safe and places you should visit."

As Tayton prepares to leave, Mallory has stepped into a mentorship role, helping Tayton navigate the anxieties of packing four months of life into a tiny stateroom. Tayton's current challenge? Fitting all her toiletries, clothes, and schoolbooks into two rolling duffels and a backpack.

"It's surreal. I'm excited for Morocco and the African countries. I think Africa is so gorgeous. I really want to swim with sharks in South Africa and go on camel treks in Morocco."

She has already used social media to connect with her future roommate, a student from South Carolina. "She seems amazing. I feel a lot better knowing that I will know someone."

Stacey Lang, FHSU's Study Abroad Coordinator, emphasizes that Semester at Sea is far more than a sightseeing tour. It is a rigorous exercise in global citizenship, a core value of the FHSU mission.

"This experience directly supports FHSU's goal of developing engaged global citizen-leaders," Lang said. "Students return with a broadened worldview, cultural competence, and leadership skills—qualities central to FHSU's mission. They bring back global insights that enrich classroom discussion and campus culture."

Mallory's experience confirms this. When asked for her best advice, she didn't talk about landmarks or museums; she talked about the internal shift that happens when you're thousands of miles from home.

Her primary takeaway is that the most meaningful growth happens when you "expect the unexpected." She suggests that while preparation is vital, students should be brave enough to let the plan fall away. "Be flexible," she noted, "and don't plan everything to a 'T.'" For Mallory, being open to new foods and unplanned detours led to the highlight of her trip: the deep connections made with people around the world.

For Tayton, the upcoming voyage isn't just a personal milestone; it's a professional one. As a future lawyer, she believes understanding the world is non-negotiable. "I think that having a good worldview is so important. Seeing three different continents will give me a diversity of knowledge. It applies to anything—learning to work with people, adapt, and just being flexible."

As Tayton prepares to board the ship in Thailand, she carries with her the support of the FHSU Global Affairs and International Student Services as well as the wisdom of Mallory, her 'Tiger' predecessor.

For other FHSU students inspired by Mallory and Tayton's journey, the door is open. The university encourages anyone interested to schedule an advising session with our Global Affairs Coordinator, Stacey Lang.

As Mallory Palmer prepares to graduate this spring and Tayton Roberts prepares to set sail, their stories remind us that Tiger Nation isn't just a place in Western Kansas—it's a global community, one port at a time.