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Say Aloha to Sunshine and Studying!

As a lover of travel, education, and the sun, making the decision to study in Hawaii for a semester was an easy choice for this student.

Gigi Otten is in her second year of school at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities where she is studying anthropology – the study of humanity – as well as fisheries, wildlife, and conservation biology. This semester, she found a way to combine her love of learning with her love of travel by spending her time at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa, in O’ahu, Hawaii.

Otten is no stranger to exploring the world. Her infatuation with traveling began at a young age. As a child, her family spent a lengthy trip driving around Europe and visiting countries including France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. She also visited a family friend in South America for a few months, and even attended an elementary school for a week in Chile!

In high school, Otten jumped at the opportunity to travel back to Europe, where she visited Italy, France, Monaco, and Spain. One year later, she jetted off to a warm week in California. Now in college, Otten wanted the chance to study outside of her university.

Panama was Otten’s first choice of location, but unfortunately, due to COVID-19 safety precautions, the international study abroad program was postponed at the University of Minnesota. However, the National Student Exchange program, or NSE, was still up and running,

which allowed students in the United States to study elsewhere in the U.S. Otten was torn between Puerto Rico and Hawaii, and ultimately chose the Aloha State.

As both an anthropology and conservation major, Hawaii seemed to be a fitting choice for Otten. “The University of Hawaii is really focused on Hawaiian studies, they’re the only place that has that,” said Otten. “It’s a really impactful place to study anthropology because there is such a big discussion around decolonizing.”

Throughout the semester, Otten has been studying aboriginal and indigenous people, as well as Kuleana anthropology, a Hawaiian term that means “responsibility,” or “duty.” For one of her projects, Otten and her classmates spoke with local islanders about their Hawaiian culture and heritage as a way to preserve their memories and history. She even took a surfing course, where she learned about the technicalities of surfing and put those lessons into practice!

Otten has made many new friends along the way. She met one of her close friends, Tan Ngo, through the NSE program. Ngo is in his 4th year of school, majoring in psychology and sociology while minoring in gender, women, and sexuality studies. He also has a lot of experience with travel, having studied in South Korea, Japan, France, the Virgin Islands, and now Hawaii.

Like Otten, Ngo believes that Hawaii is a beautiful and educational place to learn history. “I’m here to learn a lot more about the native Hawaiian culture,” said Ngo. “For me, land and education goes hand-in-hand, so I really wanted to be where the native people come from. Learning is one thing, but learning through experience is another.”

When they’re not studying, Otten and Ngo, along with other friends they’ve made, spend a lot of their time traversing the island, hiking, and meeting locals. “On the weekends, we’ll rent

a car and drive around to other parts of the island,” said Otten. “It’s really cool to get out of the city and explore.”

Otten plans to fly home on May 13. From there, she intends to continue her studies at the University of Minnesota. She hopes to study elsewhere through the NSE program next spring, possibly in the southwest region of the U.S. She looks forward to learning more about anthropology and conservation through real-world experiences.