WANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW FAST China is growing? Take a walk around Beijing.

It’s not easy to do. Seventeen million people live in the vast city, which is constantly changing as history makes way for the modern. Centuries-old neighborhoods, places built on a human scale with alleys and courtyards, have been demolished for new construction. “I have friends who say they get lost, even though they’ve visited for years,” says Kandice Hauf, associate professor of history.

The march of progress has been stunning to witness. Hauf first went to China in the 1980s. She was a graduate student, far from affluent herself, but Hauf realized how much more she had than the Chinese around her. “It’s still a shock to go back and have so many people incredibly wealthy,” says the History and Society Division chairperson. “It happened so quickly.”

Much has been said of China and other nations with emerging economies, of how they’re changing the world of business and altering the global landscape. Management Professor Allan Cohen doesn’t think America’s time as a leading power is waning, but as more countries’ economies grow, the U.S. is no longer the only major player on the world stage. “The sun doesn’t set and rise on the U.S.,” says the Edward A. Madden Distinguished Professor of Global Leadership.

That’s why Babson is offering a new overseas program called BRICs: The Cornerstone of the New Global Economy. A term coined by a Goldman Sachs economist, BRIC refers to the four biggest rising economies: Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Taken together, they represent tremendous amounts of people, potential, and power.

The four countries contain more than 25 percent of the world’s land and more than 40 percent of its population, while accounting for about 15 percent of the world’s economy and about 40 percent of global currency reserves.
“These are potential powerhouses of the future,” says Brian Seitz, associate professor of philosophy.

Babson’s BRIC program, which begins its inaugural session this fall, will take students to Russia and China and will be staffed entirely by Babson professors. Dennis Hanno, Undergraduate School dean and architect of the semester-long program, calls it “Babson on wheels.” Additionally, another College venture launching this fall is the yearlong Global Entrepreneurship Program, which will take master’s degree students to China, as well as France and the U.S.

Becoming familiar with the world’s rising nations is a smart idea for students. The BRICs will be a part of their futures. “Even if they work for a domestic company, there’s a good chance they’ll deal with one of these countries,” Cohen says.

A Snapshot of Growth

A number of Babson faculty have firsthand experience with BRIC countries. They’ve witnessed the beauty of these places and how entrepreneurship is valued there, and they’ve observed rapid development and what it has brought, both the good and the bad.

On trips to China, which included excursions to adopt her two daughters, Donna Kelley has taken in the early morning peacefulness, as groups gather to practice tai chi, and she has visited the cacophony of the factories. “There was a mile it seemed of sewing machines,” says the associate professor of entrepreneurship.

She’s seen ships going out to the world from Hong Kong’s port, and she’s marveled at Shanghai’s impressive skyline. “You see the construction crews, all the roads being built,” says Kelley, the David H. Park ’91 Term Chair. “It’s amazing to see.”

But that growth also has caused pollution and wealth inequality, says Hauf, who with Kelley will be teaching the BRIC program’s China portion. Not everyone is sharing in the booming financial times, which is true of Brazil as well. As part of offshore programs he leads to that thriving country, Professor Andrew Zacharakis takes students not only to successful companies, but also to a favela or shantytown.

In Rio de Janeiro, these slums sit on hills with panoramic views, and they are rough places marked by an informal economy and necessity-based entrepreneurship. To put food on the table, residents must hustle, so vendors are everywhere. They sell oranges and water. They run taxis. “It’s a hard living,” says Zacharakis, the John H. Muller Jr. Chair in Entrepreneurship.

Bala Iyer came to the U.S. from India in 1987, but he visits his former home often and takes students there for offshore programs. While he’s wary of making generalizations, given that India is so populous, Iyer has noticed a change in the country’s spirit and energy. “There is a can-do attitude,” says the associate professor of information technology management. “Everyone feels they can get an education and be successful and be an entrepreneur.”

While Indians have lofty aspirations, they also have patience. They don’t allow daily inconveniences to distract them. Recalling sitting in one of Bangalore’s infamous traffic jams, Iyer says, “It was a parking lot, but the average person is not worried about delays. That won’t stop them from high thinking.” When Iyer was frustrated with his Internet connection not working, his father told him, “So what if you don’t connect for a week or two? The last time I checked, the world is fine.”

Of the BRICs, Russia has suffered the worst in the current economic crisis. The country’s economy, built on natural resources, took a hit when oil prices dropped precipitously and a worldwide construction slowdown reduced timber use. “Russia needs to diversify its economy,” says William Coyle, associate professor of accounting and Lenta Term Chair in Russian Studies. “It needs to promote entrepreneurship.”

Coyle has taken more than 500 Babson students to Russia since the early 1990s. He and Seitz will teach the Russian portion of the College’s BRIC program, which will take place in St. Petersburg, where Babson has a long-standing relationship with St. Petersburg State University.

The city is a beautiful place to study with its canals, bridges, and palaces. “Some people call it the Venice of Russia,” Seitz says.

Cultural Understanding

Against this backdrop of growth and possibility, Babson is launching two initiatives. Participants in the Global Entrepreneurship Program earn a Master of Science in Management, with a concentration in global entrepreneurship, and they learn, live, and work with students from around the world at three entrepreneurial institutions.
Beginning their study in the fall at EM Lyon Business School in Lyon, France, students shift to Zhejiang University’s School of Management in Hangzhou, China, during the spring. They finish up at Babson in the summer.

As for the BRIC program, it begins in St. Petersburg before heading to China and the cities of Beijing, Yiwu, and Shanghai. In future years, Babson may add stops in other BRIC countries, Hanno says.

These programs are meant to immerse students in lands of entrepreneurial opportunity. “It’s not about sightseeing,” Iyer says. “It’s not what I call the Taj Mahal visit.” Before the trip, participants may have heard about the BRICs from lectures or the media, but by actually being in these countries, by seeing the way people live, students gain the clarity and confidence needed to be entrepreneurs in places far from their homes, Kelley says.

Beyond business, an important aspect of these programs is cultural understanding. A large part of that comes from interacting with local people. “I think there’s an incredible amount of learning done over coffee in a café,” Coyle says.

BRIC program students will be taught history, politics, art, and religion. All this will give them a context for better comprehending a country and how business operates there, Coyle says. In terms of China, for instance, students will explore Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, visit museums and the Forbidden City, and examine 5,000 years of history, from Yao to Mao. “To understand China today, they have to understand how great China was,” Hauf says.

By studying the upheaval of Russian history, from World War II’s devastation to the Soviet Union’s collapse, students gain an appreciation of Russians’ “we’ve-been-here-before” attitude toward the economic crisis. “[Russians] just pick themselves up and continue on,” Coyle says.

Ultimately, the goal is to create culturally savvy students who can navigate differences, cross borders, and adapt. “That’s what it means to be a global citizen,” Iyer says. “That’s what it takes to be successful.” In the business world, for example, that means knowing how fast or slow to rush into negotiations. “How many cups of tea does it take to do business?” Cohen asks. And it means understanding how directly cultures communicate. “I used to joke that my best friend in India has 17 ways of saying no, and each has the word yes in it,” Cohen says.

A Part of Learning

Angad Bawa ’11 strives to be a culturally knowledgeable person. One of 18 students participating in the BRIC program, he’s been a traveling man much of his life. He came to the U.S. when he was a 1-year-old from Kenya, and growing up, he ventured back to that country often to visit family.

Because Bawa plans to pursue an international career, he wants to understand how countries’ business environments differ. “I figure being 20, this is the time to travel and explore,” says Bawa, who’s spending much of the year doing just that. He participated in the spring break Honors Program in Milan, Italy, the summer Honors Program in London, and when the BRIC program is completed, he’s spending two months journeying to Hong Kong, India, Kenya, and Brazil.

From his travels, he hopes to strengthen his multicultural perspective, something he considers important for doing business today. “I want to bring it back, the full picture of it all,” Bawa says. “Students who miss these opportunities miss a big part of learning.”

Bawa is right. In an interconnected world full of rising economies, experiences such as the BRIC and global entrepreneurship programs are essential. “If you’re a business person, you’ve got to be a global person,” Coyle says. “The days of undergraduate education where you don’t have some exposure to global issues are gone.”