Introduction

My name is Siobhan. I'm a 3rd year Health Science student at Simon Fraser University. I went on exchange to the National University of Singapore in the Fall 2015 semester. The semester is about 4 months long, but I was in Singapore for a total of 6 months since I arrived 1 month before the semester and stayed 1 month after exams concluded. I chose Singapore mostly because of a personal attachment to the country, but also because of its great reputation and as a way to explore Asian culture through immersion.
Preparing for Exchange

Visas & Travel Documents

As a Canadian student, studying in Singapore will require that you acquire a Student Pass, which is basically a visa that allows you to live and study in Singapore for the duration of the exchange. Thankfully, NUS helps you out with the online application for that as soon as you have been accepted. If you wish to stay in Singapore before/after the semester officially begins/concludes, you will need to get a short term social visit pass, which you can apply for upon arrival to the country. Make sure to bring a printed copy of your NUS acceptance letter as well as your ICA (Immigration & Checkpoint Authority) Student Pass application to the airport. I had a little bit of explaining to do at the airport regarding my unusually long stay, but my NUS acceptance letter satisfied their questions.

Also, make sure your passport is valid for at least a year! I know most places require 6 months validity prior to travel, but by the end of the semester you will only have 2 of those 6 months left and that might restrict how much travelling you do during exchange. Also make scans of all your important documents and store them safely.

Packing

Singapore is HOT - about 30 degrees celsius day and night. It is humid and muggy and any extra fabric will cling unpleasantly to your skin. However, lecture theatres (and practically anywhere indoors) will have very strong air conditioning, and it gets COLD. It takes a while to acclimatize, but it does happen. By the end of the semester I was comfortably wearing jeans and scarves outdoors in the tropical weather due to the cold AC I had to face indoors. Although it is eternally summer in Singapore, I strongly recommend packing some cardigans, hoodies, or scarves to bring to class. You should consider bringing something even warmer if you intend to travel around Asia (which I also highly recommend). Do not over-pack. Pack the basics of your wardrobe because you can always buy cheap clothes there. Don't pack things like shampoo or household items because you can buy those. Basically, there's nothing you can't buy cheaply when you arrive.

Financial Details

Singapore is a very modern society. Most stores will offer NETS/credit/cash options, but small shops (and hawker centres) will only take cash. The most popular methods of payment are cash or NETS. NETS is a Singaporean cash card system that most people use hooked up to their bank accounts. You can buy prepaid/reloadable NETS cards or open a bank account and that uses NETS as its debit card option. For those staying in Singapore for more than 1 semester, opening an account is advisable. Otherwise, it may be too much of a hassle. ATMs are available everywhere. While at home I pay almost exclusively
with my debit/credit cards, but while in Singapore I found it much more convenient to carry cash. I paid 95% of purchases in cash.

**During Exchange**

**Arrival & Orientation**

I arrived in Singapore 1 month before the semester began, so I basically oriented myself. One of the first things you should do is buy an EZ-Link card to pay for public transportation. Singapore has an excellent public transportation system. You have to tap in/out similar to the Compass card, but you are charged based on distance travelled. Also, buy a SIM card for your phone from any of the three major companies. I recommend joining the NUS exchange students Facebook group and meet as many new people as possible. Sign up for orientation activities as soon as you get the email - spots fill up quickly. Don't be afraid to explore on your own, either. Hop on a bus and see where it takes you! Singapore is quite safe and Google maps is a lifesaver.

**Accommodation & Living**

I stayed with extended family while in Singapore, so my accommodation experiences were quite different than the typical exchange student. It is very hot and is often 30 degrees at night. If you don't think you can sleep comfortably in this, get a room with air conditioning.

This beach was a 5 minute walk from my apartment. East Coast Park was my favourite place to go running at night—breezy, beautiful, and well lit.
As mentioned before, the public transportation system is great. I lived in an inconvenient area and took 1.5h to bus/train to school every day, but I only payed about $100/month total for my fare. I payed full adult fare each time, since foreigners aren't eligible for concession passes. Use Google Maps to get around. If you’re stuck for time, use Uber. Taxis are convenient, but will typically cost more than Uber. Don’t be afraid to walk! Singapore is actually quite small, and you can get around on foot if you can brave the heat.

**Academics**

My expectations for Singaporean academics were something out of dystopian novel: where students were robots who studied 24/7 and spat out memorized facts during rigorous examinations that evaluate computational memory rather than comprehension or the ability to apply knowledge. While this may have been true 10 years ago, my experience in Singapore was vastly different. Yes, there is a huge stress on studying and doing well in school, but the academic system has shifted to evaluate students on a much more comprehensive level. Students are expected to think and apply during exams and projects, not simply regurgitate facts. I took 4 modules (classes) at NUS. LSM2103 - Cell Biology, LSM2251 - Ecology and the Environment, PR1301 - Complementary and Alternative Medicine, and LAC1201 - Chinese 1.

One of my class projects involved studying tree climbing crabs in a local mangrove swamp. At 7 am.

In general, students in Singapore are extremely competitive and hardworking. Since the courses transfer as ungraded credits, the competition didn't affect me much. Studying is a social activity - you will often see large groups of students studying at MacDonald's or cafes for hours on end. The quality of education is comparable to SFU. I found more
weightage to be placed on exams than at SFU - more than 60% for a final exam is standard. Scaling is used at the discretion of the professor.

**Country Information**

Singapore is a bustling island city-state located in Southeast Asia, at the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia, north of Indonesia, and nowhere near China. The country is less than a third the size of Greater Vancouver with over double the population. It's just north of the equator and experiences tropical rainforest weather. It was a British colony, was occupied by the Japanese during WW2, had a brief union with Malaysia, but has been forging on its own since being expelled from Malaysia. Most of its development has happened within the last 50 years since independence. Its demographic is about 75% Chinese ethnicity, 15% Malaysian ethnicity, and 10% Indian & other. Most people speak English and one of the other three national languages: Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. Singlish is an interesting concoction of English mixed with Chinese syntax and Malay expressions. It might be hard to understand at first, but I soon found myself adopting Singlish into my daily life. Singaporeans’ favourite pastimes are eating, shopping and complaining. Eating is incredibly popular and incredibly cheap thanks to Singapore's hawker centres - a regulated, centralised way of preserving street food culture without compromising public health or limiting the city's development.

Social & Extracurricular Activities

At the beginning of every Fall semester, there is a Student Life Fair where you can join all sorts of Co Curricular Activities (CCAs), which I highly recommend doing. Make friends, try something new, and have fun! I tried fencing, scuba diving, dragon boating, archery, rock climbing, and all sorts of other things. Most exchange students use Singapore as their base from which to travel elsewhere in Southeast Asia. During recess week and reading
beak, exchangers take off to backpack through new countries. This is the most affordable way to travel. There are plenty of budget airlines that fly out of Singapore. You can often find special deals and fly to a tropical island or ancient ruin for less than $100. If you have the time and a little bit of spare cash, don’t pass up the opportunity to travel. Meet some likeminded individuals and travel with them. You can also go solo. Studying abroad is liberating, and you will often find yourself doing things far beyond your comfort zone!

You don’t need to leave Singapore to experience different cultures! Little India is bursting with delicious food, bright colours, and curious shops
Deepavali is an Indian festival of lights. We tried Indian sweets and set off confetti cannons in the brightly lit streets

**Post Exchange**

**Challenges**

My biggest challenge in Singapore was stepping out of my comfort zone and making friends spontaneously. I'm a pretty reserved person. I like to have my alone time to read a novel and unwind. I tend to not make friends very easily. Thankfully, I knew one other person from SFU who was also going to Singapore. Although we didn't hang out all the time, it was nice to have someone to touch base with. I forced myself to join clubs and activities, talk to random people in my classes, and make the most of my time in Singapore. As painful as it was to step out of my comfort zone and meet new people, I'm glad I did so. I travelled to Cambodia with a girl who I met during a diving trip to Malaysia. I went to Vietnam with my project mate from Chinese class. I'm planning a road trip to meet up with some of my American friends.
Get travel insurance when you’re going to other countries and be street smart. Not all police are as helpful as this Cambodian officer was. Passports are expensive to replace, but lives even more so.

**What Did I Learn?**

I learned a lot about myself, my family, and the world during this trip. I had to learn how to deal with various struggles of daily life without my close circle of friends beside me. I learned how to stand up to pushy scammers. I learned where my family came from and what traditions and cultures they celebrate. I learned how to order my favourite dishes without sounding like an imbecile. I learned I don't actually need to study for 2 weeks before an exam, and that it's not really a terrible thing to take off to Thailand for a weekend instead. I learned all-you-can-eat roti prata is not a good idea. I learned that my comfort levels are expandable and my limits are far beyond what imagined. I learned travelling alone is only scary for a bit. I learned that even when you can't speak the local language, a smile is universal. I learned that there are ugly parts of the world mixed right in with the beautiful parts and the juxtaposition has a beauty of its own. And finally, I learned it costs $600 to miss your plane home, so you should read your itinerary very, very carefully.
Advice

Just do it. Want to surf in Bali but aren’t sure how? A little concerned about the price tag for that SCUBA diving lesson? Want to explore Borneo but you’re worried that exams are approaching? My best advice is to just go for it. I’m not saying be irresponsible, but get some perspective. Let loose a little, try something new. Be safe. Be smart. Have fun.

Another thing: your friends and family back home are far away. That doesn’t mean that you can ignore them while you’re away, and it doesn’t mean you should be skyping with them all the time. Find a good balance that lets you maintain your relationships back home while forging new ones abroad.

Where will the path take you?