Preparation for Exchange

My passion to live in Singapore began with watching a lot of very hilarious Singapore YouTube videos in Fall 2014. Their mix of languages in sentences and interesting accents were the main reasons why I wanted to live there, so exchange became my top option to make this dream come true. Despite the fact that Singaporeans speak so fast in a totally different accent and use of vocabularies from many languages and dialects, I understood the way they speak as I watched more and more videos. I did not want to miss this opportunity to live there, so I started researching into exchange requirements. After watching those Study Abroad 101 videos and decided to apply for exchange, I contacted a Communication and a Linguistics professor who taught me, asking them for exchange references. Research was never an easy task. I went to International Students Office countless times at drop-in advising hours, trying my best to ensure my documents were handed-in and well received. I also joined SFU's Malaysian and Singapore Student’s Club for the sake of better understanding Singapore’s culture and making friends.

After ten full months of application processing, wait and anxiety, I finally received the confirmation and admission letter from the exchange institution. Woah! Phew! Words could not describe how excited and delightful I was. I then proceeded to purchase flight ticket, applied for accommodation at the university, and checked the requirements and steps of how to apply for a Student’s Pass in Singapore, an official identity card issued by Singapore’s immigration department to legally study in the country. I also spent time reading Singapore and National
University of Singapore campus maps to familiarize myself for better transition after arrival. I also learnt that living expenses in Singapore would be roughly 30% cheaper than living in Vancouver. Since Singapore is small and taxi rides are not very expensive, there was no point for me to take public transit together with all bulky luggages on the first day of arrival while knowing so little about an entirely new place. Therefore, I planned to take a taxi straight to my campus hostel. Exchange consists of a large part of studying, so I packed some stationery, daily necessities, necessary immigration documents and exchange guidelines from both SFU and NUS. I did not pack any course notes from previous courses though because my Communication major is not a very technical subject that I had to have solid previous knowledge from past courses, in contrast with Engineering or other majors.

**During Exchange**

After arriving at Singapore Changi Airport, I bought a package with cell phone number and electronic transit card, the EZ-Link Card, outside the arrival hall, which both were necessary and very useful to live in the country. I then took a taxi to my NUS hostel and soon completed the accommodation check-in procedures. Bedding materials other than mattress were not provided, so I took a bus to IKEA and purchased other necessities. Prices were comparable to IKEA Canada.

I attended the official orientation hosted by NUS the next day. They introduced the procedures and important dates of applying for the Student’s Pass, which could be done on campus later on. The orientation also briefed students where to ask for general and medical help, as well as channels to contact different university organizations that specifically help incoming exchange students. There was another orientation, or more like a welcoming party, hosted by the school’s another international students branch the next week — a time when I made a lot of friends whom we helped each other to better transit the life in Singapore.
Lecture formats at NUS are pretty much similar SFU. They have less than two hours of lecture and an hour of tutorial for my Level 2000 and 3000 courses there. Students have to successfully enrol in a minimum of three courses when they go through the NUS exchange application. Since I wanted to take courses other than some of the securely enrolled ones, I consulted my corresponding department at NUS to apply to drop the unwanted classes and enrol in the ones that I liked. Approval was given on Week 3, the week when tutorials started at NUS, so I had a relatively chill weekly schedule. One thing to mention is that some NUS courses do not have tutorials every week but every other week, so students had better carefully check their schedules. In terms of grading and workload, I would say it is slightly harder and is more demanding than SFU.

Singapore is a multi-racial country where people of various races live peacefully and respect each other. More than 70% of Singaporeans are ethnic Chinese, and the rest are mainly Malays and Indians. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are the country’s official languages, but English is the most common language and the remaining official language in Singapore. Many people know that Singapore is a very hot city. Better yet, most indoor places are air-conditioned, except food centres and government recreational buildings. It is recommended that one should always bring an umbrella because Singapore often rains, and it rains cats and dogs most of the time, which is very different from Vancouver’s drizzles.

Instead of suggesting other touristy places where one can find easily online, I personally recommend Lower Pierce Reservoir and MacRitchie Reservoir Park. These places are quiet, peaceful yet not remote. It is also a great place to see sunset, reflect on yourself and take a break from the bustling city life.

Since I entered NUS in Semester 2, there were no official clubs day recruiting members because all happened in Semester 1. However, there were a few outdoor activity clubs recruiting new members during the exchangers welcoming event. Nonetheless, if you happen to
live in halls, there are often a lot of activities to participate, many of them are sports. For me, I joined an acapella choir group as it was too late to join any sports games because they were already preparing for the InterHall Games. It was fun and an amazing opportunity to get closer to other hall mates.

**Reflection After Exchange**

I had a lot of people who told me different things about Singapore and the university before I left Canada. Indeed, this exchange allowed me to realize that one can never thoroughly understand a culture by listening to what people say or learn from what you see on the Internet. Rather, dwelling into the culture is the way to get a more complete and relatively unbiased view with the help of your own judgement. For example, I was told that Singaporean students are unlikely to help other people on academics because they are afraid of losing. In fact, I did not find this to be true as many of my local classmates are helpful and willing to answer my questions. On the other hand, this exchange opportunity helped me with deciding my career path. After taking an introductory public relations course, it has reaffirmed myself that I do not like this aspect of communication as much as advertising.

I realized from the exchange that if I want to make friends, I cannot be shy. I used to stay a lot in my comfort zone, but I had more motivation than before to open up and talk to people I did not know. These are soft skill that we can hardly learn from books, but through experiences on your own. I also think that this exchange has helped me develop more patience. As mentioned earlier, I had to wait ten months before I was officially accepted by the host institution. This period was at times nerve-wracking, but I knew I had to be calm because being agitated does not help or speed up the application process.

Exchange is not just about the academics. It is about knowing life-long friends, opening up your horizons, and seeing the world in a different and unexpected perspective. Do apply to
go on exchange. Whether it is one semester or two, it is going to be a rewarding, memorable, and remarkable period of your university life.
My favourite place in Singapore — Lower Pierce Reservoir Park.
The main campus was packed with visitors on NUS Open Day 2016.
My favourite Singapore food — Bak Kut Teh, which translates to Meat Bone Tea.
Despite the campus being very quiet at night, it is perfectly safe.
Singapore’s most renowned tourist attractions — Marina Bay Sands and Merlion Park.