Preparing For My Journey

I received my official acceptance letter from NUS on November 15, which meant I had roughly a month and a half to organize my affairs and prepare to be shipped out to the other side of the world. After receiving your acceptance, be sure to immediately start your housing application as you’ll want to try to get your first choice in accommodation. Complete your student visa application next, then print out all confirmation and payment receipt pages as you’ll need to bring these with you to Singapore.

In case you weren’t aware, Singapore is located just 1° above the equator, so preparing for the heat is a must. Pack at least one pair of long pants and a long-sleeved shirt (especially if you’re female, as you will not be permitted entry to many temples in surrounding countries if you have too much exposed skin). Lecture halls are aggressively air conditioned and are quite cold. Don’t forget any of your toiletries, Singapore is an expensive country and toiletries such as shampoo/conditioner, floss, etc. are 2-4x the price of Vancouver. Pack at least one pair of long pants and a long-sleeved shirt (especially if you’re female, as you will not be permitted entry to many temples in surrounding countries if you have too much exposed skin). Lecture halls are aggressively air conditioned and are quite cold. Don’t forget any of your toiletries, Singapore is an expensive country and toiletries such as shampoo/conditioner, floss, etc. are 2-4x the price of Vancouver. Bring a universal power adapter for travelling to all the different countries in SE Asia, additional adapters for Singapore can be found for reasonable prices (< $2) in most markets. Singapore uses the same outlets as England (Type G). Finally, make sure you bring a medium sized backpack/carry-on bag, as all the cheap flights you’ll be taking in SE Asia will not provide free checked-baggage and you will be expected to have an appropriate sized carry-on.

I chose to convert CAD$1200 to SGD (Singaporean Dollars) before leaving as well as bringing around CAD$300. The SGD lasted me until about March, but I did not do much shopping as many of you likely will. Almost everywhere takes both credit and cash (though only cash will be accepted in markets), but be sure to check with your bank on any fees charged for making purchases. ATM’s in Singapore do not charge foreign debit card fees and allow a max withdrawal of SGD$1000, so getting additional money is no hassle.

Before booking my flight, I reached out to 2 other exchange students from SFU heading to NUS as well to try to coordinate our travel plans. We were all able to book the same flights here through China Eastern Airlines, which helped reduce a lot of the stress of travel since we were not alone upon arrival. Obviously, book your flights as early as possible (check skyscanner and Google flights to find competitive prices). Our travel time was 25 hours (after a 1 hour delay in Shanghai), but my return flight was “only” 20 hours. China Eastern was surprisingly pleasant to fly with and a cost-effective option.
During Exchange

When you first arrive at Changi Airport, if you have SGD with you, buy an MRT card if you plan on taking public transit to NUS. Trips are discounted if you use the card instead of single-use passes, and Singapore’s public transit is quite good; it can get you anywhere you want to go in the city in a reasonable amount of time. Transit doesn’t run 24 hours a day, however, so if you need to get around late at night, consider Uber or Grab as they are both available there.

When you arrive at NUS you’ll notice that it is a huge campus. To get around, NUS offers free shuttle buses that you can hop on at designated stops. They have an app called “NUS NextBus” that tells you the time of arrival for the buses, but do not trust it to be accurate (at all). On-campus dining is varied, by both options and price. The canteens at UTown and PGP are more expensive than those found elsewhere on campus, but they offer a greater convenience as they are right near your dorm. My favourite places to eat are the Muslim stall at The Deck, the Indian stall at Techno Edge, and the Taiwanese stall at PGP. All places offer dishes that will easily fill you up for ≤ S$5. If you are looking to do grocery shopping, I suggest going to the Giant Supermarket located at the Harbourfront MRT station in VivoCity Mall. While groceries are generally quite expensive in Singapore, you can sometimes find reasonably priced fruit as well as cheap eggs and bread there.

Being the top school in Asia, NUS is very competitive and all the local students are hard working. Exams are heavily weighted and all classes are curved. Classes are typically two hours, once a week, with a one hour tutorial. There are two 1 week breaks during the semester to allow for studying for midterms and finals (a perfect time to travel!).

As far as travelling goes, it should be one of the big motivating factors in choosing NUS. Singapore can act as an excellent hub, giving you access to cheap flights to many places such as Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. There is at least a half dozen discount airlines flying in South-East Asia (Scoot, TigerAir, JetStar, AirAsia, to name a few), so you can pretty much get anywhere for a reasonable price. I recommend seeing Vietnam, I had an amazing time there and it’s such a beautiful country. Yogyakarta, Indonesia is another destination I recommend. While there, I climbed Mt. Merapi (Indonesia’s most active volcano!). It was a unique experience that pushed me to my limits and gave me some of the most spectacular views I have ever seen.

Of course, there is also plenty to do in Singapore as well. Be sure to check out Gardens by the Bay, Chinatown, Little India, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Chinese/Japanese Garden, Palau Ubin, and of course the famous Merlion Statue.
Reflection After Exchange

Travelling was a huge part of my exchange. Unfortunately, my class schedule wasn’t great so I was not able to utilize all my time here as best as possible. If you can, try to get a good weekly schedule with 3 or 4 day weekends (even if that means taking a less interesting class). While you’re going to make some great friends there, don’t be overly concerned with trying to find people to travel with. The best time I had was when I was off on my own seeing the world how I wanted to. While having a companion during your travels can make it more enjoyable, waiting for others to join you can lead to missed opportunities. Seek out others to travel with you by posting on various Facebook groups formed for Exchangers, but don’t hold off on a trip if you can’t find anyone – my greatest regret is being too concerned with finding others to travel with.

There are a lot of group projects at NUS, do your best not to form a group with all exchange students. While it may seem like a good idea in theory, in practice it does not work. Everyone is concerned with travelling and not about their grades. This can lead to issues in completing the projects in a timely manner.

I chose to stay in PGP Residencies, type C (the cheapest option). I had heard about it being dull before coming, but opted to save a few hundred dollars to put towards travelling instead. While I do not know if I made the right choice or not, I can certainly confirm there is very little going on there. No events take place like at UTown, there are fewer dining options (and for the most part, worse food), and it is much more antisocial (I met only a few people that lived there, even though there are hundreds of people spread out across the residencies).

I would strongly suggest avoiding any residency that requires a dining hall pass or meal plan. PGPR does not require it, and neither do the UTown Tower residencies, but most other places do. The issue with it is that you will likely not use all of your passes since you are going to be travelling a lot or going to dinner elsewhere with friends. The meal plans are a good value if you are always going to be in the dining hall for meals, but if that’s the case you’re probably missing out on some other great travel opportunities.

The key takeaway of your exchange (whether you choose NUS or not) should be: Try new things, push yourself to new limits, and immerse yourself in a culture much different than Canada’s. With that said, I am confident you will have few regrets in choosing NUS as it is a great school and offers you so much to do.
Photos

Singapore sunset from Marina Bay

Prince George’s Park Residences

Mt. Merapi, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Vietnam countryside (taken on the train from Da Nang to Hue)