Overseas Internship

Summer Internship
@ International Enterprise Singapore, Ghana Overseas Centre

By Hector Tan Yew Hong, B SocSc Yr 4

My 2013 summer internship in West Africa was with International Enterprise (IE) Singapore’s Ghana Overseas Centre. IE Singapore is the government agency that drives our country’s external economy, and for the past 30 years, they have been spearheading the overseas growth of Singapore-based companies and promoting international trade.

I worked as a market analyst to cover the English-speaking countries in the region. Due to their varying colonial history, most countries in West Africa could be broadly classified as English or French speaking. My job scope involved preparing reports at various analytical depths to match the needs of the Ghana Overseas Centre. I wrote country overviews for Ghana, Nigeria, Gabon, Sierra Leone and Gambia, as well as developed deeper market-entry analyses for specific sectors in these countries.

Throughout the internship, I also had the privilege of sitting in and contributing to various high-level meetings such as with the World Bank, major international companies, and government delegates from other countries in the region. This was an immensely challenging experience that pushed the boundaries of my academic foundation.

During my time there, I also worked with my fellow intern to successfully establish a university club-level partnership between Ashesi University’s Business Club, and my SMU Emerging Markets club. This long-term collaboration exchanges market insights and opens up potential internships between...
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both countries. We seek to bring together the emerging economies of Asia and Africa, with the aim of nurturing future leaders in international trade and development. I sincerely hope that my SOSS juniors would seize this opportunity to carry the strong reputation of our school to another continent.

Contrary to popular media perception about Africa, I encountered relatively few issues during my time in Ghana (aside from the occasional power and Internet outage). But these were minor inconveniences, and my overall experience was overwhelmingly positive. Most of the locals we met were exceedingly friendly and helpful. As a former British colony, the education system in Ghana is English-based, and this legacy has benefited the ease of communication. Almost everyone speaks very fluent English, so discussions were never a problem. From my personal experience, initiating a conversation with “Eti-sen” (hello) and “Wo ho ti sen” (how are you?), etc strikes up a friendly conversation almost immediately.

This internship provided an extremely insightful look into the intricacies of working in an emerging market economy. Being there first hand gave a level of experience that no amount of reading or hearing about could ever achieve. I developed a deeper macro-environment understanding of several West African countries, as well as various major industries in the region such as agriculture and energy. It has truly been an eye-opening experience and a privilege to be able to intern with Singapore’s lead external trade agency. My academic foundation in SMU SOSS has provided me with a robust political economy and cultural understanding, and I will definitely be back to Africa soon!
Summer Internship @ Nakilat-Keppel Offshore and Marine Limited, Qatar

By Pang Zhi Yuan, BSocSc Yr 3

Like most sophomores in SOSS and in SMU, I was browsing through the OCS OnTRAC system to search for available internship vacancies in summer. In the midst of countless internship choices, I chanced upon this rare overseas internship placement. Without hesitation, I applied, an interview ensued, and, with a blink of an eye, I was being offered this ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ opportunity that I excitedly accepted! Think about it, how often do we get such an amazing overseas internship offer in our lives, right?

I was a Human Resource (HR) Intern in Nakilat-Keppel Offshore and Marine Limited (N-KOM). This company is a joint-venture between Nakilat (a Qatari shipping company) and Keppel Offshore and Marine, Singapore. It is based in Ras Laffan Industrial City, 90km away from the state’s capital, Doha. Throughout the 12 weeks, I was being rotated within the department, mainly between Training & Development, HR Operations, and the Recruitment section.

My accommodation in Ras Laffan Industrial City during my 12-week internship at N-KOM

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail”

As this was my first time venturing into the Middle East without any prior experience or exposure in the region, I decided to participate in a Business & Cultural Study Trip to Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai, organised by ICON-Al Khaleej before my internship began. During the 12-day trip, we made several company and site visits, including a dinner reception at the Singapore Embassy in Doha, where I got to meet several Singaporeans residing in Doha. This was the perfect moment for me to get acquainted with them! They shared with me the working culture in Qatar, their favourite hangouts, and other activities that gave me a sense of their daily lives and routines over there.

A couple of weeks before I flew to Qatar, I have also consulted my seniors who have previously completed their internship programmes in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and got them to give me a prelude of the living and working conditions in the Gulf countries. Such sharing sessions gave me a mental preparation on what to expect for my internship.

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“When the going gets tough, the tough gets going”

Indeed, I have met several challenges along the way. First and foremost, I faced communication problems. A large majority of N-KOM employees were blue-collar South-Asian migrant workers who could not converse in Basic English. As a HR intern whose job scopes include improving the welfare of these workers, it took me some time to understand their needs and concerns, and to accurately rectify these issues with the higher management. While the process seemed to be strenuous, the result could be fulfilling when the workers were appreciative of what has been done.

Secondly, the summer weather in Qatar can be pretty harsh on any living beings. Its ground temperature could go as high as 50°C during mid-day and even hover around 40°C at night. Air-conditioning, or better known as A/C among the locals, appears to be a human right in Qatar for every household, or even every dormitory unit has at least an air-conditioning unit attached to it. I must admit that the intense heat is a tremendous challenge for me and my body such that I fell ill in the midst of my internship.

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade”

I realised that I have taken many things for granted in Singapore – our efficiency, our robust civil services, and our incredible work ethic – after my internship stint. I began to appreciate such systems when I returned to Singapore. I have also learnt to value the little things and happenings around me, show more graciousness and gratitude towards my loved ones, and embrace adversaries in my life for “whatever doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger”. This internship has certainly altered my initial perceptions towards my life and the future.

Singaporean employees in N-KOM, including the CEO (red polo t-shirt, sitting in the middle), having a photo shoot after the National Day Celebrations organised by the Singapore Embassy in Sheraton Hotel Doha

N-KOM employees and interns having a candid moment, with Md Nazri Bin Sazali (standing, third from left), an SMU Alumni from the graduating class of 2012 and a current HR Exec in N-KOM
Apart from the challenges mentioned earlier, my transition from a SMU-SOSS student to an N-KOM HR intern was relatively smooth. Most of my colleagues and managers were from Singapore, or within the ASEAN region, and more importantly, they were very forthcoming with my queries, doubts, and requests. They have never failed to involve me in their social gatherings and activities such that it made me feel this was my ‘home away from home’.

Overall, I highly recommend every SOSS student to embark on an overseas internship, if possible. If I had not chosen to take up this internship, I would not have gained this invaluable experience. An overseas internship is not just merely working diligently for the company, but also acquiring new knowledge, culture, and experience from abroad that hone your skills and broaden your perspectives of the global market and the world.

Looking at how well-acculturated SMU alumnus and, in general, Singaporeans are in Qatar, I would strongly encourage future SOSS students who are serving an internship in the Middle East to drop their ‘Singapore-ness’ within them, be open with the local culture and embrace it, just like the saying – “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”. Go with an open mind and be prepared to learn whatever that comes to you along the way.
Going on exchange represents a number of things. The opportunity to see the world and gain new perspectives is a big draw. Hopes of maturing as an independent adult with a fresh outlook on life is another key reason why many of us choose to fly. I wanted to go beyond the comfort zone of my house and see beyond the shores of my home before facing the constraints of working life.

I chose to go to Germany because of my interest in war history, and so centred my travels within the country on visiting historically-significant sights. The biggest decision though was not about where to go, but about whether or not to go. Sure, visiting another country is fun, but to commit to living there for months does take a fair bit of consideration and budgeting. However, once all that is sorted out, all you need to do next is to board that plane.

I enrolled in WHU Otto Beisheim School of Management located in Koblenz, a quaint city by the Rhine River. Geographically, it seemed like a very convenient place to venture to other countries, and indeed it was. Koblenz is a 1.5 hour train ride from Frankfurt Airport, but this duration is short by European standards. My longest intercity train ride took 7 hours from Koblenz to Berlin, but it was extremely therapeutic. Gaze out the window to watch meadows and mountains pass you by, or just speak to passengers next to you and listen to their stories. As much as new cultures are novel to you, as a Singaporean, you are a novelty to them too. I watched the Berlin Philharmonic and sat next to a German couple. They sent me back to my hostel, bought me beer, and invited me to their home for tea the next day, showering me with parting gifts when I left.

The historic Cologne Cathedral, viewed from across the Rhine River at dusk.
Besides seeing the sights, don’t neglect things that happen in school. I befriended a number of exchange students, getting to know them with the intention of keeping them as friends even after parting ways. They are also a great source of cultural knowledge, and can be awesome travel buddies. If you can, leave a GE (Arts) module free to learn a new language. I picked up basic German and now know a few more words than just Brotzeit and Volkswagen.

In sum, go to where your heart takes you. If you’re unsure, you could throw a dart on the map to decide. Ultimately, it does not really matter where you go, but rather, what you take away from the places you’ve been. I brought home great friendships and unforgettable experiences. All I need is to look at my photographs or close my eyes to feel snow, see the Northern Lights, taste that kebab, feel confused in that classroom, hear my friends’ laughter, and be back at home away from home. So go forth and chart your own adventure!
The four months on exchange at a French Grande École has been a time of discovery and learning. From the moment I arrived, there were plenty of things to take in. The very first lesson was that “HEC School of Management (Paris)” actually meant a two hour journey before I could say I was actually in Paris. Not everything was half an hour’s ride away. There were also good surprises – I found myself in the best business school in France, alongside some of the brightest students and professors in the discipline.

From the onset, I had decided that I’d like to try to make these months a time of immersion, something more than just a touch-and-go travel experience. Taking a political science module in French was one of the ways I attempted this. It was a very humbling experience, to be learning about the society of others, with only half-functional language skills. Despite the fact that this caused every Monday to be a day of unwarranted mental and emotional stress, it was also one of the most rewarding things I did on exchange. Although I have a long way to go, I’ve come to better understand the language, some local public policy issues, as well as the people of France.

Travelling was definitely a privilege granted by being abroad. Rarely does one have the time, resources, and opportunities to make such trips. Walking along the avenues of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the alleys in and out of the Seine were cultural experiences in themselves. The beginning of winter saw countless Christmas markets being set up all over Europe. Further up north, one could stand breathless at the peak of a snowy mountain in Björkliden, Sweden, looking down at an inexplicably grand view.
Still, it wasn’t all beauty and splendor. There was one dishearteningly consistent characteristic on the streets of Paris, London, New York, and every other city I visited. This is one trait that is often absent in Singapore. It is the ability to observe the urban poverty and apparent socio-economic inequality in these big metropolitan cities. Each encounter was a healthy reminder that the same (or worse) exists back home and all over the world. The experience helped to trigger a lasting motivation to find a better way for individuals and institutions to ameliorate this situation.

National differences aside, my greatest takeaway at an individual level would be the friendships I cultivated on exchange. It was fascinating to meet people who were so different – in terms of culture, interests, values, language, and the likes. Forty percent of the students at HEC were international students, and they came from, quite literally, all over the globe. Despite the differences, we surprised ourselves as we formed unusual, but deep, friendships. It was a beautiful way of learning to accept and appreciate something so different from your own.

Overall, I tried my best to take a balanced approach: knowing myself but keeping an open mind, mentally challenging myself but also experiencing things outside of school, and adapting to a new culture but learning the importance of home. I’m infinitely grateful to those who made this experience possible. Finally, to anyone planning or going on their exchange– Bon Courage et Bon Voyage!
When I first told my family and friends that I applied and got my exchange placement in Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, many in fact were surprised and a little apprehensive about my decision. Initially, many were asking me quizzically and gave remarks such as “Wow, why Russia, don’t you think it’s dangerous?” or “You’re going to get yourself killed!” or the best of all was “Are you out of your mind?!” Somehow, apprehension turned into real interests as some requested me to document my travels and keep them updated as to what Moscow and other parts of Russia are like, because one day they would like to visit Russia.

To many of my friends, Moscow may not sound like the perfect exchange location because Russia is not central enough, language is difficult, Russian winter is tough, people are not friendly and you get robbed all the time and that there is really nothing to do there. Hence, before I embarked on my journey to Russia, I reminded myself why I chose Russia – to take the road less travelled and explore and challenge myself to adapt to extreme conditions while on exchange.

Honestly, when quizzed about why Russia, the most common answer that I gave was that International Enterprise Singapore gave us a grant to go on exchange in Moscow. So why not! But of course, there were other important factors and also, this is a chance of a lifetime!
Beautiful sunset in St. Petersburg

I love Moscow!

Ingushetia Strategic Towers

Moscow Metro - Every station has a story to tell

Peter the Great Ship

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Preparation

So how did I prepare myself? I was told that it will get very cold, at least about -20 degrees celsius during winter and I was reminded that winter is especially harsh. The most suggested items to be brought were thick winter jackets, leather gloves and heat tech from Uniqlo! Well, I can say that these did really come in handy despite the fact that the winter this year wasn’t as cold as they had expected it to be. But still, the winds were strong enough to make the weather very chilly.

I have a penchant for Asian food, so from Singapore I brought along 20 packets of Indomee (highly popular food brought out by most Singaporeans going abroad), 5kg of Rendang meat (vacuum packed and ready to eat whenever!), 2 large packets of 3-in-1 Milo sachets, a bottle of anchovies and roasted peanuts glazed with chili, 4 packets of ready to make asian sauces and lastly, the trump card – mini rice cooker! Phew, I was really well prepared for the trip.

I was so lucky to have brought along a spare phone. My spare Nokia phone screen (yes, NOKIA) cracked and broke into pieces when I accidentally dropped it in the McDonald’s near my dormitory. Somehow my decision to bring along two phones really paid off! Then again, having two phones will allow you to still use your Singapore number and the other is for your local Russian mobile number.

It took a really long time to sort out our visa issues because of the complicated bureaucracy that made the process even more difficult. We had to wait until early August before we could receive our visa despite us applying for it in May. Basically, the process involved the Russian university applying to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to apply on behalf of us. Then the Ministry will send an invitation for us to apply for the visa in Singapore. Somehow, there was a delay, unknown to all of us and that made us even more anxious.

I find learning the Russian language to be the most important part of the preparation because having a headstart before reaching Russia will just allow us to get around easier in the initial stages of adapting to the local life. Also, because the signs and metro stations are labelled in Russian, and since the metro will be your most commonly used mode of transportation, knowing the station names will go a long way.

Challenges faced in Russia

The first shock that we received was when we were shouted at while waiting for our baggage at the airport in Russia. We couldn’t understand anything and were a little bit shaken by the welcome experience. Next, we realised that no one actually smiled, not even the customs officer that we greeted upon our arrival. Everyone looked as if they were busy, serious or really don’t care about what’s happening around them. When we got to the metro, everyone was jostling and pushed to enter the train. Not only that, the door didn’t have any sensor at all, and so it just closes on you. That was one of the most memorable welcome experience we had.
Russia is seen as a Motherland, full of many natural environments, extreme cold temperatures, amalgamation of many different cultures and religion and most importantly, Russia is known for its bureaucracy and corruption. Hence, as a political science student, I am living my dream to experience first hand within the boundaries of one of the most powerful nations in the world and exploring the post-Soviet era that has brought a different dimension in terms of world politics. It is a totally different system compared to the small and comfortable Singapore. I am glad to have chosen Russia because I have learnt a great deal in terms of culture, knowledge, ideology and achieved my aim that I have set at the start of the journey. Truth be told, I felt quite safe walking on the streets of Moscow, I didn't experience anything that was adverse.

As an advice for those applying for the future exchange semesters abroad, this is your one chance to get out of your comfort zone and explore a different part of the world that you wouldn’t usually go to for a trip! я люблю москву! (I Love Moscow!)

Soon, when we had to start grocery shopping, the ladies at the counter were not very pleasant looking at all. They frowned and spoke everything in Russian (which was ok) but also, when we smiled, she stared and what they did next really perturbed us. She literally threw the change at us and moved on to the next customer. Similarly, in cafes or restaurants, the waiter or waitress doesn’t come to you to ask, they have very serious faces and are not very attentive or patient. So basically, the service industry is still wanting, lacking the warmth and professionalism that I experienced when I was in other countries.

A compulsory course we had to take was ‘Doing Business in Russia’ provided us with the answers that we were looking for to the questions “Why are service standards poor in general?” and “Why don’t people smile?”. Generally, Russians are warm on the inside, it is just that unlike the eastern Europeans, they don’t smile at strangers because it is considered weird. On top of that, smiling is somehow representative of the fact that you are happy which meant that you have a better life than others. Rule of the thumb is that one shouldn’t show it. Finally, with regard to the service standards, the explanation given was that the cashiers believe that the supermarket belongs to them and so they should be respected, hence it is the opposite, where customer is not the king, but they are. That is their way of showing power.

Well, we did face many administrative challenges – last minute cancellation of modules, timetable of classes only given during the first week of class (so there is a possible clash of modules), and we were only informed of the exam timetable 2 weeks before the exam itself. There was no proper system in place and everything was to be recorded on paper, no online portals like elearn, ontrac or oasis. The cancelled modules caused us a bit of a problem because we needed those modules to map back to SMU and luckily enough, we found suitable replacements just in time.

**A most unique experience**

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142 Days of Exchange @ Lund University, Sweden

By Claire Tay Wei Ying, B socSc Yr 4

After 142 days of exchange at Lund University in Sweden, I'm thoroughly convinced that exchange is indeed one of the most memorable and humbling experiences of my university life. It's a good time for rest and reflection, an opportunity to travel and make international friends, and the best time to learn more about others and yourself.

For me, real exchange began aboard the plane. This was when I realized that I was about to live alone in Europe for an entire semester, an uncommon experience for any typical Asian. While everyone told me about the fun I was going to have, nobody warned me about the woes of settling in. The first two weeks of exchange were overwhelming as I adapted to the drastic change in weather and the Swedish way of life.

You see, Lund is a small university town which is largely populated by students. Measuring 5km at its diameter, it is not surprising that the main form of transportation in Lund is the bicycle. Considering that most shops close by 6pm, my first few weeks in Lund felt empty and boring. I was too used to the city lifestyle in Singapore where there was always so much to do. It was also difficult to adapt to their environmentally-friendly culture. I still remember how I was stopped from throwing away a milk carton. Instead, I was shown how to wash, flatten and recycle it. Such environmental efforts seemed so troublesome at the start. Yet all it took was a few weeks of getting used to, and now looking back, I personally think that it is a worthy lifestyle that all Singaporeans should adopt.

A typical sight of quaint little Lund in Summer.
As expected, traveling formed a major part of my exchange experience. In total, I backpacked to 22 cities in 10 countries. Out of which, the most memorable was my trip to Lapland in Finland where I survived a 20 hour flight delay and extreme temperatures of -29 degrees. More importantly, I got to witness the Northern Lights which were spectacular beyond words. All in all, my travels have made me more aware of the different cultures and opened my eyes to the world.

Amidst all the fun on exchange, I never imagined myself to be homesick. But I did. I felt especially far from home when I fell ill. I did not realize that it was so difficult to seek medical help in Sweden. First, you have to make an appointment to see the doctor and a nurse must certify that you are ‘ill-enough’ to warrant a doctor’s visit. This is when I realized how I have always taken the Singaporean efficiency for granted and that one cannot expect the same services abroad.

Looking back, I’m glad that I made the effort to break out of my comfort zone. Many Singaporeans seek security and comfort by hanging out with each other but tradeoff the opportunity to build new and unique friendships. Instead, I planned short weekend getaways and hung out at cafes with my new-found international friends after school.

Meet Marita and Mirjam. They are two of my closest international friends. We travelled together, partied together and went for classes together. Honestly, I never thought that I would have such an impact in their lives but this was evident in their little farewell card for me.

Meet Karen, my Swiss housemate. Initially, I was very apprehensive that we would face cultural differences in staying together. Yet, this was probably one of my best memories of exchange. We made dinner for each other, exchanged family recipes, indulged in ‘heart-to-heart-talks’, and more importantly, respected each other. We shared groceries with each other and never allowed money to interfere with our friendship. You will be surprised how the issue of money can ruin many things on exchange.

Overall, I am extremely thankful for this opportunity to go on exchange. Through my interactions with others, I have learnt so much about the different cultures and more importantly, I discovered new things about myself that I never knew.
Homebound Exchange @ Universidad del Pacifico, Peru

By Michelle Lai Jingmin, BSoSc Yr 4

Three flights, numerous layovers, and almost a week later, I found myself in Shanghai waiting for my last flight, at midnight, on route to Singapore. It has been eight months since I have gone away, making my way halfway across the globe to New York City and then to Latin America, to work, study, and experience different cultures.

The plan was simple – to stretch myself beyond my comfort zone and learn to do things differently from what I would have normally done. I wanted to get serious about art, and after months of internship-seeking, I got the chance to become an artist assistant with the Laundromat Project in NYC. Two months later, having mass consumed copious amounts of art and hotdogs, I packed my bags for traffic-congested, salsa throbbing Lima in Peru.

In a country where the language was alien and lacking of modern comforts, I had to reconfigure my lifestyle. Bureaucratic sluggishness and petty crime were commonplace in Peru, and that cost me loads of time settling airplane woes. The bone-chilling Limenean winter was another stunner, and I found myself slipping into a state of homesickness (especially when I craved for Singaporean fare).
Distilling these experiences, I've come up with five lessons to survive eight months away from home – and I hope it’ll work the same for you as it did for me.

1. Leave home two hours earlier: Beyond slow crawling traffic (and being late for school), things still caught me by surprise – bureaucracy can be inefficient and slow, so sort out the crucial (visa!) details before, and make copies of documents.

2. Hike on – and don’t forget to pet the llamas: for many parts of Latin America especially, I was unaccustomed to altitude changes, supremely difficult terrains (the Andes). Having been robbed of my phone in Peru, everything took some time to get used to. But exemplified in my solo trek in Colca Canyon, fatigue could not rob me from going on, and meeting docile llamas along the way. Oh, may I add – that being prepared includes getting fit for whatever strenuous activities one embarks on.

3. Travel slow..: Initially deciding on this option to save money, the time spent exploring nook and crannies was rewarding – talking to people – whom I had previously only read about in school for example, understanding a place, a community. These experiences helped me to understand the country I was living in, and integrate into the community.

4. And keep an open mind: Turns out one could not leave Singapore without leaving the inner Singaporean. In this case, I tried to make things work fast, according to my schedule. But it wouldn’t work – even in frenetic New York. But adjusting to the pace of the people, I found myself enjoying life – heading down to the neighborhood jazz gig with my colleagues, enjoying my morning jogs past the Brooklyn Bridge, and evening walks along the waterfront, overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Lima. I would never have imagined fishing for piranhas in the Amazon – imagine that!

5. Do as the locals do – Salsa! Okay, maybe not everything – but it doesn’t hurt making friends with locals – I’ve met many people along the way, who were not afraid to lend me a hand whenever my Spanish couldn’t see me through. I visited the highlands and stayed with a local family, where I sat under the Andean skies, around a warm fire with a mug of coca tea to fend off the altitudes.

So, many conversations later, it seems almost abrupt to head home. I’ve finally gotten used to sub zero temperatures (be it in New York, or in the Bolivian altiplanos), and can now claim to read the poems of Pablo Neruda (!). By now, it’s already 12 midnight, and it has been a long day since my flight at 10 in the morning. I start prepping myself for the flight from Shanghai, after which I will be home.