Personal Information

Name: Dylan
Major: Biological Engineering
Period/Time of Exchange: Spring 2013

Practical Information

NUS will provide step-by-step instructions on how to obtain a long-term Student Pass. You must apply online before traveling to Singapore, and there is a registration fee somewhere between $30-50 USD. Upon arrival in Singapore, customs will issue you a short-term (90 days) Social Visit Pass, which requires no advance registration. During registration at NUS, which includes obtaining a Student ID, etc., you will also complete registration for a Student Pass. A Student Pass allows you to easily travel in and out of Singapore.

Packing

Singapore is extremely hot and humid. That being said, every building has powerful air-conditioning. I would recommend bringing very light clothing with a few warmer layers. Surprisingly, Singapore is almost always overcast, and it rains heavily, unexpectedly, and for short intervals quite often. Pack toiletries that you cannot do without, as they will be difficult to find in Asia. Also, leave space in your bags, because you will be returning with lots of new stuff.

Getting There/Arrival

Coming from the USA, immigration was no hassle at all. NUS assigned me a ‘buddy’ freshman in my residence hall, who was waiting for me in the Arrivals area (it was about 4am Singapore time). Even after making sure I was settled in my room, he continued to invite me places with his friends until he was sure I was comfortable enough on my own. The NUS orientation program for exchange students was quite good; it has a very strong international community and I had no trouble quickly making lots of great friends from around the world. The orientation was very informative about Singapore culture, practical living details, and navigating the NUS campus and websites.

Academics

The University

NUS has several campuses around Singapore, but I lived and attended classes on the Kent Ridge campus, a short train ride from the city center. Kent Ridge is a large, centralized campus, home to the Science, Engineering, Computing, and Arts & Social Sciences Faculties, as well as University Town directly adjacent to it, which provides housing for thousands of students. Both UTown and the Kent Ridge campus provide plenty of educational resources, such as computer labs, study rooms, libraries, and WiFi mostly everywhere indoors and outdoors (besides probably your dorm room in UTown). The Spring semester was from mid-January to early May with 1 week off for Spring Recess and 1 week off for Reading Week.

Courses

Course enrollment is done online, and there is a ~2 day period that you submit requests for all the courses you would like. The registrar will approve or decline the request, and there is another period for you to submit another request. If you do not get the courses you want, directly contact the registrar or an administrative assistant for the exchange program, and they will place you in it. My understanding is they make exchange students a priority over their full-time students.

For most of my classes, the grade was based heavily on exams. The final exam was worth 40-60% for all 5 of my courses. Expect less frequent, but bigger assignments that are worth a greater percentage of the final grade. The only course with weekly assignments was my Tamil language class.

Life Abroad

Living Costs

Estimated monthly budget whilst on exchange
- Housing: $1800 USD
- Food: $1300
- Transportation: $400 (excluding airfare)
- Books: $300
- Miscellaneous: $1500
Language & Culture

English is one of Singapore’s official languages (along with Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil), and is the language of instruction at NUS. The majority of Singapore is of Chinese descent, so a local English dialect called Singlish has developed, which is basically English with a heavy Chinese accent. At first it may be difficult to understand, but it will gradually become easier.

Housing

NUS arranged housing for me in a new student residential area adjacent to campus (University Town). I was placed in Cinnamon College in a suite with 5 other male exchange students from around the world. My dorm room was terribly small, but I coped with this by spending more time elsewhere. There was a mandatory meal plan for the cafeteria attached to the College, although there are many food options elsewhere in University Town.

Banking

The most popular bank in Singapore is DBS, with which many other exchange students set up accounts. I did not, but I was sure to be aware of the extra costs that drawing money from ATMs, charging to my credit cards, etc. would incur. Additionally, not all ATMs in Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries were compatible with my ATM card.

Transportation

There is a public train system called the MRT that is quick and easy to learn which most people use. There is also a bus system that is more complicated but useful for traveling to more specific locations. Taxis are everywhere, and are often preferable to other modes of transport if you have a group of 3 or 4 to split the cost.

Overall Exchange Experience

The best thing about my semester abroad was: Meeting and befriending other exchange students from all over the world, mostly Europe. Traveling all over the Southeast Asian region whenever time permitted.

The most challenging things about my semester abroad was: Focusing on my studies considering all the temptations to have fun and the Pass/Fail grading in all my courses. Acclimating to the heat and humidity.

How did your semester abroad change your perspective? I was exposed to such a diversity of culture and wealth through Singapore and the other countries that I visited. Singapore is an anomaly within Southeast Asia in its safety, modernity, cleanliness, and prosperity, but these things cause it to lose many of the traditional cultures of the surrounding countries.

Tips for future students

Stay on top of your courses, explore what Singapore has to offer, but most importantly leave the country whenever you have a chance to travel around Asia. Singapore offers a fantastic springboard for trips around the region and it is always a relief to return back there, but the real attractions are found elsewhere.