Personal information

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Name of host university: National University of Singapore
Period/Time of Exchange: Spring 2016
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Practical Advice

Visa: As an exchange student, you need to apply for a Student Pass. NUS is pretty clear about the timeline for this, and the instructions will be in your application. While you must fill out the documents for your Student Pass before coming to Singapore, you receive your pass in the first few weeks of classes. That means when you go through immigration for the first time, you have to show an IPA (In-Principle Approval) letter that NUS sends you in your acceptance letter before you arrive. This just shows ICA (Immigration and Checkpoints Authority) that you are an exchange student and are allowed to study in Singapore for the semester. Remember to bring your official acceptance letter from NUS! I forgot mine and it took me a bit to get through immigration.

Packing (What did you not bring that you wish you had? What items do you recommend not bringing?): Singapore is one degree north of the equator and has 80% humidity...so it’s very hot!! Definitely bring clothes suitable for warm weather. I would recommend bringing one nice/professional outfit, in case you have Skype interviews or are giving a final presentation (students and professors take final presentations quite seriously). You may have a semi-formal event during the semester, so I would bring a few nicer clothes (these can also be used for nice bars and clubbing). While Singapore itself is very hot, pretty much every building is over air-conditioned to the point of being uncomfortable, so I would invest in some light cardigans (and if you’re taking a lab course, remember to bring long pants and closed toe shoes). I also would recommend bringing a jacket/warmer clothes if you are planning on traveling to other countries. Especially if you’re planning on hiking up mountains or doing some trekking, it can get cold, and it’s way cheaper to bring stuff you already have than buy it when you get there (which is what I had to do). On a less exciting level, I think it’s a good idea to bring some toiletries from home. Obviously there are stores that sell shampoo, etc. in Singapore, but I was so bombarded with activities and orientation that I was glad I brought them from home because I didn’t have to buy them. It can also be comforting to use familiar brands when you’re so far away from home. Remember to leave some space in your suitcase though! I guarantee you will buy souvenirs during your travels, and you don’t want to have a bursting suitcase even before your exchange semester starts.

Arrival (Immigration, was there an Orientation program, Buddy program?): There was a buddy program, but to be honest I didn’t think it was that helpful. I made a lot of my friends in my dorm and by going to the exchange student orientation activities. I shared a cab with another exchange student by chance and we happened to become really close friends over the semester. You can easily tell who the exchange students are, so it was pretty easy to make friends.

Academics

The University (Campus, International Office, Facilities, Social activities) The International Office was really helpful to exchange students. They had an email hotline you could contact if you had any questions during the application process or were having trouble with something (...which I may have overused...). They planned some cool events for exchangers during the semester as well (dragon boating, cycling around Pulau Ubin, a farewell party). NUS has a lot of clubs and organizations you could join if you want to meet local students, or you could even get involved in your dorm’s social activities. There is a whole social atmosphere surrounding NUS dorms, meant mostly for the local students. For full-time students, living in the dorms is pretty competitive – they get “points” based on how many dorm activities they are involved in, and students who have the most “points” get first pick in choosing rooms for the coming year. But exchange students don’t have to worry about this, so we can just enjoy all of the dorm social activities without feeling any competition. Overall, the facilities on campus were pretty nice. Every tutorial room and lecture hall had air conditioning, and the campus had outdoor roof coverings to protect you from the rain when you were walking outside. Also, NUS had free air-conditioned shuttle buses that ran all over campus and to the MRT stop!

Courses (How did you enroll in classes, could you pre-enroll, what was the level. What types of exams were given) Exchange students have a different system of enrolling in classes than full-time students. I enrolled in all of my classes
when I submitted my application, but in January there was an add-drop period in which you could change your schedule, similar to Cornell. I took mostly two thousand level classes. Three out of four of my modules had midterms, but they were only worth 10% of my grade. I had finals in all of my classes and they were worth around 50-70% of my final grade. All of my finals were essay-based, even though I took a mix of humanities and science classes. Exams at NUS are not to be taken lightly! But as a Cornell student, you should be fine.

Life Abroad

Language (Was a pre-course offered at the university? Did you need the foreign language to manage your daily life or could you communicate in English?) There are four official languages in Singapore: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English. Luckily all business and school activities are conducted in English; however a lot of locals speak Singlish (a mix of the four official languages). At the beginning of the semester, I had a hard time understanding the Singaporean accent, but it got easier over time.

Banking: I didn’t open a bank account while in Singapore, but I wish I did. Singapore (like many other Southeast Asian countries) prefers cash over card. I was always withdrawing money from ATMs, and the exchange rate fee/non-bank ATM fee definitely started to add up. The only American bank in Singapore that I know of is Citibank, but I know other exchange students who opened accounts at DBS and OCBC. There were plenty of ATMs all over Singapore, so finding a place to take out money wasn’t a problem.

Housing (Did you host university arrange housing? If not, how did you find it? How much did you pay for housing?) NUS arranged for my housing when I sent in my abroad application. I lived in a Hall of Residence, which was relatively cheap compared to Cornell. My dorm had a mandatory meal plan that covered breakfast and dinner, but there were other dorms that didn’t have one.

Transportation: Basically everyone takes the MRT (metro) to get anywhere. Singapore’s public transportation system is incredibly clean, efficient, and inexpensive that it doesn’t really make sense to walk places. Plus, it’s so hot all the time that even a 5 minute walk will have you drenched. The only downside was that the MRT stops running around 11pm, so if we wanted to travel later, we had to take Ubers or taxis, which got to be pretty expensive. But another benefit of the MRT is that it goes to Changi airport – this was a cheap way for exchange students to travel to the airport (fare was around 2 SGD, compared to a taxi which was around 30 SGD). Keep in mind that if you book early flights, the MRT might not be running, and it may be stressful to use public transportation when you’re trying to make your plane.

Health and Safety (What advice do you have for future students regarding their health and safety? What resources were available for you?) Singapore is such a safe city, and not once did I feel uncomfortable walking around during the day or at night. That being said, using basic street smarts is a good idea, and low crime doesn’t mean no crime. I didn’t get sick when I was abroad, but NUS has a free healthcare center that international students can use. Also, there is a university hospital right on campus.

Overall exchange experience

The best thing about my semester abroad was: The ability to be in a new environment and really challenge myself.

The most challenging things about my semester abroad was: Trying not to use the word “weird” when describing something that was different than what I was used to.

How did your semester abroad change your perspective? My exchange experience made me realize that even people across the world aren’t as different as you may think. 😊

Tips for future students: Say yes to everything!! Even if it’s not something you would normally do, don’t be afraid to stretch your limits. I found the best way to combat apprehension or nervousness from being in a new environment is to just do stuff! Literally, sign up for dance classes, play ultimate Frisbee on the green, go out to dinner with a friend.