

Exchange Report

Spring 2017



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Monthly Activity Log

December – January 2017

I arrived in Singapore right before Christmas. Because the orientation camp for exchange students is usually arranged right after Christmas (it was on 26th for this year) and it is mandatory for all exchange students to attend the camp, you'd better purchase your flight tickets early since they can get quite pricey during holiday season. After I arrived in Singapore, I settled my accommodation in Yo:ha hostel at Pearl's Hill Terrace, which is a hostel connected with SMU. (I will later talk about this place, but I strongly recommend you NOT to live here.)

Right before the classes start, there were some mingling events you could attend such as a welcome party for exchange students and a city tour you can choose to attend. It really is up to you to join or not, but I personally found such events to be useful to get to know other students from other parts of the world better before classes start.

February 2017

After classes started in the beginning of January, I got much busier with a lot of presentations, assignments, and midterms to go. SMU is notorious for keeping the class size small with intensive group work. You should expect to be involved in at least one group assignment per course. Once I was done with all the assignments and quizzes, I went on a trip to Bangkok, Thailand and Cebu, Philippines during the recess week. I personally think traveling nearby regions is one of the best parts of coming to an exchange in Singapore as most of the Southeast Asian countries are all less than 3-hour flights. (It takes 50 minutes from Singapore to Malaysia or you can even take a bus to get there.)

March 2017

School work got less intense and I spent more time on exploring around Singapore. I went to Jurong Bird Park at the east-end of Singapore, Gardens by the Bay, Sentosa Island, and Universal Studio. I also enjoyed going up on a rooftop bar occasionally to enjoy watching the nightview of the city with a glass of cocktail. The whole month was pretty much all about going on foodie trips for me. I simply loved hopping in nice brunch cafes or coffee shops.

April 2017

April got pretty hectic and intense as group presentations for each class were held at the end of the semester. After lectures and group presentations are done, we had one recess week right before the exam weeks started. I pulled on all-nighter most of the days before each exam because all final exams were cumulative except one course and there were lots of things to revise if you have not reviewed carefully in advance. After my last final exam was done on 23rd of April, I came back to Hong Kong right away but some of the exchange students seemed to stay in Singapore and travel around nearby regions. You can choose to extend your visa by one month with extra charge if you want to do so.

General Exchange Information

1) Visa Procedures

Procedures to get student visa in Singapore will be elaborated on the emails you receive from SMU to be honest. You will have to apply for your student pass and visa through SOLAR system once you receive the acceptance letter.

Best advice I can give you would be to bring all the required documents to a designated place (e.g. SMU admin building) when the school requests you to do so.

2) Orientation Activities

There are a variety of orientation activities hosted by SMU. One or two weeks before the school officially starts, SMU will arrange quite a number of events like Orientation presentation and City-Tour by bus. Most of the important information regarding visa extension, course registration, curriculum, and so forth are covered in the orientation day. For my batch, we went on a city tour on the day of the orientation and travelled to some touristy places like ChinaTown, Haji Lane, and Arab Street.

3) International Services & Activities

There are many activities that SMU host. They have buddy programs and host programs too. It really depends on who you meet up with, but I generally had great times meeting these new people. I was invited over to the host's house on Chinese New Year and had nice food + hongbao shared. Also, because they are local people who have lived there for a long time, they will be able to tell you in much detail about the culture, history, and lots of good places to visit or things to try. I strongly recommend you to take whatever the school can provide you with. You may actually end up getting one of the most valuable experiences out of the program.

4) Accommodations

There are a number of housing options you can make but it's not so easy to determine and pay housing fees in advance to your arrival. I just chose to live at Yo:Ha hostel @ Pearl's Hill Terrace and that was the worst nightmare I could ever dream of. While I was reading through other students' activity logs, I realized no one from UST has really lived there before so I wondered why and found out the reasons why only after I lived there.

Rooms are smelly and extremely small. There are around 1,000 people living in that hostel and these people share 3 lifts, except 2 lifts are out of order so you end up sharing a single lift with 900+ people. Oh, by the way, the lift only stops on 1st, 6th, and 10th floor so you will have to walk up or down if you get to live somewhere else. That means, you will have to carry up or down your 30kg luggage on the day of your arrival and departure too.

All SMU exchange students ended up living on 12th floor for this semester so we all had to walk up and down to use the lift. Again, 900+ people share this lift and the lift is amazingly slow so sometimes it's better off walking down the stairs instead of actually taking the lift.

I once got stuck in the lift for 1.5 hours and no one responded even after I rang the emergency bell for like 200+ times. After I complained this to the office, they responded as if that was something that could happen any time. They literally

said, "The lift did not have any problem before this." Wow. What a nice comment to a student who had been stuck in the lift for 1.5 hours without ANY assistance in the meantime.

But I heard that other housing options provided at SMU are pretty much similar. So you might want to get yourself a condo with other exchange students. Housing seems quite expensive but Yo:Ha definitely was not appreciably cheap considering its size, location, service, and the most importantly hygiene.

5) Course Registration

How you enroll to courses is quite interesting at SMU. You will get e-dollar amounting to \$100 and you literally make a bet by bidding courses with different amounts of money. Students who made higher bids will be enrolled, but at the same time you have to allocate your money wisely in order to get into courses you want to enroll to. The minimum bid you can make for a course is \$10 and you will not be getting extra money even if you choose to take 5 modules instead of 4.

Also, there were multiple windows (meaning you can try adding or dropping courses multiple times). Instead of having 2 weeks of add/drop period like HKUST, SMU had several periods open for students to change their minds even after the classes started. I recommend you not to make extreme bets at the last minute but I managed to register for a course on my final window session, while I could not register for that course in the previous biddings. You might be lucky to get what you wanted but there are higher possibilities that you might not, so try to plan your course schedule wisely in advance.

6) Teaching & Assessment Methods

SMU takes a bell-shaped curve when it takes to 'grade' students. So about the top 10% gets A's, top 40%ish will get B's and so on. I heard some professors do make generous grading for exchange students but usually you will have to work hard to even pass courses. Students in Singapore tend to be very competitive and hard-working.

7) Sports & Recreational Facilities

There is a gym and you can enter the gym through the concourse (you will acknowledge this place once you get to SMU). I heard it's a newly-renovated one and I personally think the gym is way better than the one in HKUST. It is smaller than the one at UST, yet the facilities and view you get when you are running on a treadmill is better here.

Also, there is a swimming pool next to SMU administrative building. There is a SMU swim team too and they have regular practices (around 3 times a week in the afternoon) so you may check that out if you are a swimmer.

There is also a variety of sports teams you can join: some of them tend to hold one-off events and others tend to have regular practices. You can try yoga, swim, scuba-diving (except it tends to be quite pricey at around S\$800 if I remember it right), cycling, running, and so on. I cannot remember all sports teams, but I am pretty sure SMU has any sports you might be interested in.

8) Finance & Banking (All in HKD)

- Air Ticket: 4,000
 - Accommodation: 20,000
 - Transportation: 2,000
 - Food: 20,000
 - Other administrative fees: 1,000
 - Travelling: 10,000
- Total: 57,000

Food was important to me and I did not like food at hawker center much. I went out dining to nice places often but you can save up a lot even down to 10,000 if you choose to eat at cheaper places near school or hawker centers. For travelling, I went to Bangkok, Thailand for 3 days and Cebu, Philippines for 2 days.

9) Social Clubs & Networking Opportunities

There are many clubs or activities you could join, depending on your interests and you will be able to get a lot of information through your student email that SMU provides you with. Professors or specialists at a certain field may come over to give speeches or you could try mingling with new people over wine and cheese. There are also gourmet foodie trips held at least once a month.

10) Health & Safety

Singapore is a very safe country with a very low criminal rate. I never worried about walking along the streets alone at 3a.m. For health issues, there are health clinics at school and they are all covered for free.

11) Food

There are lots and lots of places you could go for good food. You may find that Singapore has even a better diversity of food compared to Hong Kong. Diversity does not necessarily mean that they have better tastes, but you will be able to find some good places if you keep on trying different restaurants. Some of the local Singaporean cuisine you could try are Laksa, Hainanese chicken rice, Bak Kut Teh, Kaya Toast with soft-boiled eggs, and Satay. You will also be able to find some sugarcane juice or fresh coconut at hawker center which is not something quite common to be seen in Hong Kong. Prices vary but it's worth hopping for different restaurants too.

12) Transportation

SMU is located at right center of the city so the transportation was convenient in general. Some nearest MRT stations at SMU were Bras Basah (it's the closest one), City Hall, and Dhoby Ghaut. Both City Hall and Dhoby Ghaut are underneath huge shopping malls so I occasionally ate near here before or after classes. For cabs, calling Uber was much cheaper than taking on a cab at all times.

13) Climate

It's 24/7 summer in Singapore. It rained a lot on December and March, yet the climate itself was drier compared to Hong Kong. You should expect the hot weather and I got tanned a lot during the four months of my stay there. Sunblock

may prevent you from getting sunburn but it could not prevent me from getting tanned.

14) Communication

People all speak in English but they also use Singlish quite often which is quite difficult to be understood. I did not understand Cantonese when I was in Hong Kong but people in Hong Kong were always very nice to translate or explain things to me when I needed help. It was the same in Singapore. If you do not know something but you really want to find out what that is, people will be kind enough to tell you what each term means.

Items to bring

- Passport / Personal ID
- Acceptance Letter and related documents for entry to Singapore and issuance of Student Pass & Matriculation Card at SMU
- Formal wear (You will have to throw lots of presentations especially at the end of the courses)
- Umbrella
- Sunblock
- Swimsuit (There's a pool at SMU too!)
- Gym stuff
- Credit card