

The Low-Down on Exchanges ("What the pamphlets don't tell you...")

Name: Matthew Lee
Major: Systems Design Engineering ('05)
Options: Management Science and International Studies in Engineering
Exchanges: 3B – National University of Singapore, Singapore (Winter 2004)
4A – University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia (Fall 2004)
Contact: mrlee@uwaterloo.ca (will probably have a different email upon graduation)

Preamble

There were many of things that I learned during my exchanges that I think would have helped *me* a great deal if I had known beforehand. So, I hope this document will help *you* on making your decision on whether to go on an exchange, and also provide you with some preliminary knowledge during your first little while on your exchange.

Having been on two academic exchanges in two different countries, I am in a unique position to be able to compare and the contrast my experiences, not only to my experiences in Canada, but also to each other.

One of the biggest costs for me: plane ticket. I bought an "around the world" plane ticket from Adventure Travel (affiliated with Travel Cuts), taking me from Toronto-London-Singapore-Sydney-Fiji-LA-Toronto. The only stipulation is that you must use it entirely within one year. That ticket was in the \$2450 CAD range, which was a great deal considering the destinations and also that it was perfect for my situation. The dates are flexible: I would recommend leaving as many dates open as possible, because you never know the exact dates that you want to fly until those dates approach quickly on you!! (or else you have to pay an administrative fee of \$50-\$100 to change the dates, etc). Normally, a typical exchange student would just buy a round-trip ticket to the destination and back; again, however, I would recommending leaving the dates open if possible.

Singapore

I spent my 3B academic term at the National University of Singapore in Singapore from January 2004 - April 2004. Courses were selected beforehand, which was somewhat helpful in the sense that it got me looking at courses, but NOT because I didn't have to worry about them when I arrived in Singapore. Conversely, several of the courses that I had intended on taking either ended up not being good enough equivalents (the IE3001 Design course for our SYDE 361), or having timetable conflicts (IE 5301 Human Factors in Engineering & Design for SYDE 348). You'll need to be prepared for these types of things. As good as the course syllabus sounds on the website, when you actually get there, it can potentially be much different (or not offered at all!). But that was ok, because I ended up finding a course eventually.

This was my course list:

| National University of Singapore Course | University of Waterloo Equivalent Course |
|--|---|
| CS3244 Machine Learning & Neural Networks | SYDE 422 Machine Intelligence |
| LAC1201 Chinese 1 | CHINA 101R Basic Chinese 1 |
| ME2142 Feedback Control Systems | SYDE 352 Introduction to Control Systems |
| ME3103 Mechanical Systems Design | SYDE 362 Systems Design Workshop 1 |
| ME3291 Numerical Methods in Engineering | SYDE 312 Numerical Methods |

I had requested a room in Prince George Park (PGP) Residence, which I had heard from previous exchange students was where all the exchange students stayed... and they were right. You'll most likely want to stay at PGP. Several hundred (maybe even almost a thousand) exchange students from all over the world were in PGP. I had initially wanted a Type-A room with my own washroom and air conditioning, but even though I was rejected and placed into a Type-B (with only a sink), the extra money to be spent on a Type-A proved unnecessary. It would be convenient to have a washroom, yes... and yes, Singapore can get really hot, but I hardly spent any time in my own room anyway. You're usually out chilling with friends in a block (residence) lounge or in the canteen (cafeteria) eating. You can even get by with a Type-C room if you'd like (without a sink). Save your money for traveling!!

Leaving Canada on Dec 28, 2003, I spent 9 days in London before heading over to Singapore. I arrived in Singapore on Jan 7, 2004, which was relatively late - after the international student orientation on Jan 5, 2004. I thought that it would be no big deal, since I'd probably learn everything they would tell me anyway, and that it was just going to be a "hello, welcome to Singapore"-type of session. I regret it, however: that was the time that many exchange students got to meet each other. It ended up working out, and I ended up meeting a fantastic group of friends. But if I had to do it all over again, I would have attended the session.

Going on exchange in Singapore was VERY easy, in the sense that you didn't have to worry about where you were going to stay the first night, etc. From the airport, a taxi is only about \$15 SGD (with the exchange being around \$1 CAD = \$1.2 SGD), or you can take the MRT (subway/train), and a bus. My room in PGP was already assigned to me, and I stayed there during my first night in Singapore.

Almost ALL of the other exchange students were business students, or law students, or students of some other faculty. Very few were engineers. So while that meant that a lot of the other exchange students had things due at periodic intervals throughout the semester, much emphasis was placed on our final exams; as a result, we were able to travel a lot during the semester.

In fact, in the 5 months that I was "in" Singapore, I was only actually in Singapore for 2.5 of the 5 months. Exactly half of the time (to the day) I had spent travelling outside Singapore. Some trips included (in chronological order):

- Bin Tan – Indonesia (4 days)
- Kuala Lumpur / Malacca – Malaysia (5 days)
- Bali / Jakarta / Yogyakarta – Indonesia (12 days)
- Phuket / Ko Samui / Ko Phangan / Ko Phi Phi – Thailand (12 days)
- Sarawak / Kuching –Malaysia (4 days)
- Central Thailand, Cambodia, Southern Vietnam, Northern Vietnam, Laos, Northern Thailand (1 month after exams)

How did I get around South-East Asia? It's easy. The routes are so much well-travelled than you can ever imagine. It takes some getting used to, and a "Lonely Planet: South-East Asia on a shoestring" might help out for the first little bit, but you'll be fine.

I was lucky: a new budget airline called AirAsia opened up in January 2004, at the same time that I arrived for my exchange. Flights were dirt cheap, and when you can find a special, it's even more ridiculous. For example, I got a return ticket from Singapore to Bangkok for \$50 SGD. AirAsia is one of the main reasons I was able to do so much traveling while in Singapore.

Regarding the "Student Pass" (the student visa that you need to get for your duration in Singapore)... As a Canadian, you get a 30-day temporary visa if you arrive by plane, or a 14-day temporary visa if you arrive across the border from Malaysia. Although you are *supposed* to get the Student Pass, you can save yourself \$40 SGD if you think you'll be doing enough traveling such that you won't need a 4-month student visa. Since I got a new stamp every time I re-entered Singapore, the Student Pass proved unnecessary for me, and they never check it.

The school work there was definitely easier than Waterloo, but still not ridiculously easy. I was definitely stressing during exam time, as some of our exams were worth up to 80% of our final mark. But still, I wouldn't have given up any of my traveling time just because of school work. Professors are pretty lenient with exchange students as well: I received four extensions (equivalent to almost six weeks) on an assignment once!!

Tips:

- Head over to the full moon on Ko Phangan. In fact, plan your entire trip to the Thai islands AROUND the full moon party. It takes place once a month, and once you're in the area, it's easy to find information about it.
- Get a suit made in Thailand. I got mine made in Phuket, but you can also get them made on Kao Sahn road in Bangkok. Mine came to about \$110 CAD... custom fitted, shirt, tie, the works.
- Apparently you can get really nice shoes and dresses, etc. made in Vietnam. I never did, however, but that's something you might want to check out.
- NUS has an AMAZING laptop deal for students... including exchange students. I bought a Fujitsu T3010 Tablet PC there. Careful though... they take cash, cheque or debit only.
- Vietnam is beautiful, Laos is chill, Thailand is so diverse, Malaysia is definitely an experience, Cambodia is an eye-opener, and Indonesia is amazing. Try to do as much traveling as you can around the area.
- In northern Thailand in a city called Chiang Mai, you can do so many different things there. I went on an overnight jungle trek, took a massage course, and took a cooking course!
- I didn't get a chance to go, but climbing Kota Kinabalu on the island on Borneo in Malaysia is supposed to be breathtaking (literally). I heard nothing but rave reviews from people who did it.

Sydney, Australia

After backpacking South-East Asia, I then went on exchange at the University of Technology Sydney in Sydney, Australia from July-December 2004.

Housing accommodations are generally a problem in Sydney. Many/most exchange students arrive with two large suitcases and a backpack or two, not having a place to stay during their first few nights (or a full week, in some cases), and are forced to stay in a hostel while searching for a place until they find one that's suitable in location and within their price range. Hostels are generally in the \$20-\$25 AUD range, with the exchange approximately \$1 CAD ~ \$1.05 AUD. Be prepared to do the same.

I was lucky. Arriving in Sydney in early June, I had friends were currently on exchange in Sydney, so I was able to stay with them for a few weeks. I had also applied to UTS housing, and was accepted in early July. UTS housing was in a great location, right near downtown Sydney. Practically everything you need is within walking distance, and UTS was literally a 4-minute walk away.

The UTS housing contract is a rip off. They only allow you to sign 6-month or 1-year contracts. Signing a 6-month contract in early July keeps me locked in until early January, and I was going home before Christmas. That **WOULD** have meant lost revenue, but I was able to find a friend to take my place. So keep this in mind before you waste \$60AUD on the application fee.

Prioritizing is an importance consideration. If I had to do it all over again, I would have lived beside Manly Beach or Coogee Beach (probably Manly because they have Beach Volleyball), instead of downtown Sydney. Living in downtown Sydney wasn't much different than living in downtown Toronto, so it was somewhat of a waste. As well, you have to decide how you are going to prioritize school.

First of all, you don't go on exchange for school. You don't. If you think you are, you're kidding yourself. Further to this point, since you really won't be going to very many (if any) of your classes, you won't really need a place near UTS. This is another major reason it would have been great to get the real "Oz" experience, and live 1.5h away at Manly Beach.

Secondly, the academic standards at UTS are quite low. UTS used to be a technical institute (like Ryerson), and was subsequently upgraded to the status of "university"... while the academic standards were kept at "technical institute" level. I didn't do particularly well at UTS, but that was because I (literally) did zero work. I've heard stories from friends about how they ranked at the top of their classes, and about how they got 100's in some of their courses, etc. Just imagine taking a Calculus course at Ryerson instead of Waterloo, and you've got the right idea.

These are the courses that I took:

| University of Technology Sydney Course | University of Waterloo Equivalent Course |
|---|---|
| 31777 Human-Computer Interaction | SYDE 348 User Centred Design Methods |
| 48240 Uncertainties and Risks in Engineering | MSCI 452 Decision Making Under Uncertainty |
| 91777 Chinese Language and Culture 1 (Unit 2) | CHINA 102R Basic Chinese 2 |

As well, I managed to get approval to take the following courses at Waterloo by “long-distance” while in Australia:

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|------------------------------------|
| SYDE 461 Systems Design Workshop 2 |
| SYDE 533 Conflict Analysis |

Australia is expensive. I would say that generally, everything in Sydney is about 1.5x more expensive than anything in Toronto. Mind you, that’s a bit on the high end due to that the CAD is a bit stronger than the AUD... and that Aussies incorporate their tax directly into their goods. Still, Australia is expensive. Housing is ridiculous: I paid \$150/week, and that was a bargain. Most people pay in the \$180-\$200/week range, depending on how nice the place is, and where it’s located (they pay rent by the week in Australia, not by the month as in Canada).

Travelling is expensive as well. I didn’t do nearly as much travelling in Australia as I did in South-East Asia, just doing two two-week trips up and down the east coast. Backpacking was completely different than in South-East Asia: roadtrips were the norm. My friends and I rented two cars and headed to south to Melbourne and Tasmania, and then we also rented cars and went north to Brisbane, Byron Bay, and Fraser Island (the biggest sand island in the world).

I had a few flights around Australia as well, using two budget airlines called Virgin Blue and Jetstar. Qantas also offers (relatively) cheap flights. Although not as cheap as flights in South-East Asia, they are still not too bad of a deal.

So, since I didn’t do much traveling, what did I do in Sydney? *Party!!* Exchange students end up living all over the various parts of Sydney, and there are house parties going on ALL THE TIME!! Going to the International Student Orientation was extremely important in Sydney since you won’t necessarily be living with the other exchange students. You’ll meet people right off the bat, and then network quickly to meet many others.

Who else is there to help you? Peer Networkers!! (aka. Orange Shirts). These are UTS students who volunteer their time and services to helping get acquainted with life in Sydney. They are a great bunch of people, and get to know them if you can. They’ll take you out to eat, show you around Sydney, introduce you to other people, and anything else you can think of.

Another service you might want to consider is the Tandem Buddy. The International Student Office runs a program called Tandem, which pairs up an international exchange student with a native Sydney-sider. Whereas the Orange Shirts are general helpers, this person is assigned to you specifically. It never hurts to have an extra person to lean on, just in case!!

Tips:

- If you find yourself strapped for cash, a good portion of exchange students in Sydney take on part-time (aka. casual) work. To do this, you need to first get your student visa, and then spend another \$50 AUD to upgrade it to a student-work visa.
- Unlike Singapore, you *have* to get your student visa in Australia, which is upwards of \$400 AUD.

Post-Exchange

Coming back to Waterloo, there were still a few more things left to do.

I had to get course equivalencies for all courses taken while abroad. Undergrad core courses are approved by the Undergrad Chair (in this case, Professor McPhee), while all electives – CSE or TE – are approved by individual instructors.

I also had to complete my GENE 303 report (which is this report that you're currently reading!) for my International Studies option requirements.

NOTE: if you took a language course, be prepared for the course instructor to test your knowledge and abilities (i.e. speaking, listening, reading, and writing) before he/she grants you equivalency.

Final thoughts

I'm completely broke now... but I wouldn't have traded my experiences for the world. My time on exchange was great: I got to go traveling and backpacking, got to meet some fantastic people from all over the world, and I get to graduate on time with my class and my friends! In terms of opportunity costs, I only had to give up one work term. If you're not willing to give up a work term, you don't have to if you just go on one exchange, and if the semesters match up perfectly (as it does with the Winter semester in Singapore). Then, you can just secure a job while you're there, or beforehand, and then start as soon as you get back. Several exchange students did just that while in Singapore.

Which was better, Singapore or Australia? That's a question I always get. My cop-out answer is that *both* were amazing... but for two completely different reasons. In Singapore, I did an unbelievable amount of traveling. In Australia, I met soooo many more people, and partied all the time. It really depends on what you want from your exchange in order to make such a judgement.

If you are even just *considering* an exchange, I recommend without the slightest reservation that you go. Waking up and looking forward to every day in a new country... that's just not a feeling that you get while you're in Waterloo!

Have fun, and contact me if you have any questions!