

University of Waterloo  
Faculty of Engineering  
Department of Systems Design Engineering

# **Making the Most of International Experiences to Singapore and England**

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the International Studies Engineering Option

**Paresh Mistry**

January 31, 2005

Option Coordinator: Professor Peter Roe

## **Introduction**

From January to August 2004 I went from sipping Singapore Slings in the blazing sun to munching on fish and chips sheltered from the rain in a pub. I started my international experience with a four-month academic exchange to the National University of Singapore, and continued with a summer work placement in the UK. In total, over the 8 months I visited 7 different countries, met countless number of people, and had some of the best experiences of my life.

## **Academic Exchange to Singapore**

Choosing to study in Singapore and, in particular, at the National University of Singapore (NUS) was one of the best decisions I have made. The country itself, while small, was an exciting city to live in with an interesting culture, busy night life, and incredible variety of food. NUS offered an ideal environment with several hundred other exchange students. Finally, the close proximity of Singapore to many other South East Asian countries made travel easy and affordable.

## **Life in Singapore**

Singapore is a small, modern, and clean city-state. There is not a great deal to see and do, but be sure to explore what Singapore does have to offer. Most Singaporeans are Chinese, Malay, or Indian in descent, so there is an interesting blend of these cultures. By exploring Singapore you can learn a great deal about all 3 cultures without traveling very far. What I found most fascinating is that there is a distinct Singaporean culture, which is a mix of Asian values strongly influenced by the former British rule and current penetration of American pop culture. As I'm sure know Singapore is infamous for its strict laws and punishment. I found it interesting to see how this style of government has shaped the opinions and personalities of the Singaporean people. It is surprisingly easy to spend 4 months living in Singapore without really learning anything about their culture, so be sure to make an effort to learn about and experience Singapore by attending

community events, getting to know local people and generally being open to new activities.

One of the best aspects of Singapore is the variety and quality of food. It is easy to find just about any Asian cuisine, such Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Hong Kong, North Indian, South Indian, Indonesian, Malay, and more. One of my favorites was the Malaysian food which is a cross between Chinese and Indian. Be sure to keep an open mind and try new things. As a food enthusiast one regret that I do have is not splurging on some of the finer restaurants in Singapore at least one or twice. However, I did go to a chocolate buffet at the Fullerton Hotel, and I recommend that to any chocolate lover if it is still offered.

Despite being a very tame and orderly society, Singapore does have an excellent night life. There are a number of excellent clubs, and other night spots so just listen for the buzz around campus to find the best party on any given night. Clubs can be quite expensive though. Cover charges can be as high as \$35 Singapore Dollars (SD), and alcohol is expensive both in clubs and on the street. Be sure to grab some duty free on your way into the country!!! Having said that, Singaporeans have a great concept called free-flow or liquid buffet. At some clubs on certain nights your cover includes unlimited drinks up until a certain time. This is common place for girls, and happens from time to time for guys.

## **Studying at NUS**

NUS is one of the top Universities in Asia and as a result is host to hundreds of international and exchange students from all over the world, and most of them live in Prince George's Park (PGP) Residence. Living in PGP was an excellent opportunity to learn about many parts of the world by meeting really interesting people from a wide variety of countries from Morocco to Indonesia, and build lasting friendships with people that I was able to explore Singapore and other parts of South East Asia with.

However, it is surprisingly easy to associate with people that are similar to you. Be sure to make an effort to meet and get to know a variety of people. One regret that I have is not meeting more local Singaporeans. The Singaporeans that got to know the best

were 2 that I met while traveling to Cambodia. However, getting to know local people is a challenge when you are constantly traveling outside of Singapore.

In addition, since the University welcomes so many exchange students the faculty is often quite accommodating. In my experience, Professors allowed me to miss one midterm and double weight the second, deliver a presentation a week before scheduled, and work in groups of all exchange students in order facilitate a travel around South East Asia. I found that Professors are willing to accommodate your requests as long as you demonstrate your commitment to academics. In general, most of the courses in Engineering were exam focused with few labs or assignments during the term, so finding time to travel was relatively easy. You can accomplish and do a great deal during a 4-month exchange to Singapore but it requires that you plan early and quickly, and maximize your time.

### **Traveling South East Asia**

Singapore is the perfect hub to travel around South East Asia. Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma are all short trips away. Some people I met even traveled to India, Australia, and The Philippines. Since I chose to go to England after my exchange to Singapore my traveling was limited to what I could fit in during the school term and 2 weeks after my last exam. In total I spent 6 weeks traveling South East Asia including parts of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia.

My favorite trip was to the Islands of Southern Thailand. I visited Phuket, Ko Pha Ngan, Ko Samui, and Ko Phi Phi. These islands had beautiful beaches filled with lots of University aged backpackers, and an exciting night life. Perhaps the highlight of the trip was the notorious full moon party in Ko Pha Ngan, which is a massive beach party that takes place every month on the full moon, and attracts thousands of tourists and locals. All of these islands also have large markets where you can pick up cheap souvenirs and knock-off brand name clothing and accessories. You may also want to consider have a suit tailored in Thailand. Unfortunately, many of these Islands were devastated by the tsunami at the end of 2004, so it may be some time before tourist activity is restored.

Within Thailand I also traveled to Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Bangkok is a cosmopolitan city with an exciting nightlife, a lot of history and culture, and excellent shopping. Chiang Mai is much quieter but an excellent destination for jungle treks and Thai cooking classes. Of all the countries that I visited I would encourage anyone traveling SE Asia to make Thailand a high priority.

In Indonesia I visited Bintan and traveled many parts of Bali and Java. Bintan is a small resort island with beautiful beaches but not a lot to see and do away from the water. However, I went to Bintan with 13 other exchanges and we had an incredible time surfing, body surfing and playing volleyball during the day and partying at night. Since this was our first trip together it also gave us an excellent opportunity to bond with one another. We chose to stay at a more expensive resort that cost about \$100 Canadian for the short ferry ride to the island and air conditioned rooms. There are much cheaper alternatives but the resorts have much better beaches, equipment for rent (such as surf boards) and host parties at night.

Bali was another highlight of my trip. The southern end of Bali is filled with beach towns and is flooded with tourists, many of which are Australian. Further north there are mountains and volcanoes that you can climb and numerous temples. One mistake I made was visiting too many temples. In any city or country, whether it be temples, palaces, or whatever, unless you have a particular interest pick a couple that seem special and give the rest a miss. If I could re-do my Bali trip I would spend more time enjoying the beaches and learning how to surf. Bali is probably one of the cheapest places in the world to surf.

In Java I flew into Jakarta and traveled east to Yogyakarta making several stops along the way. Jakarta is really just another big city with some interesting museums and one of the biggest mosques in the world. The highlight of Java was Yogyakarta which is cultural centre of Indonesia. There are 2 ancient temples in the area, Prambanan and Borubodor which are both magnificent, as well as many other historical sites and displays of cultural art work.

Within Indonesia I would definitely recommend Bali and Yogyakarta as destinations. Bintan was a fun and convenient trip because of the proximity to Singapore,

however, Indonesia now requires a visa which cost \$25USD which makes Bintan less economical than before.

In Cambodia I visited Siem Reap, which is a city built next to the ancient temple complex of Angkor Wat, and Phnom Penh, which is the capital city and has several historical sites documenting the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge.

Finally, in Malaysia I only visited Kuala Lumpur which is a metropolitan city with a rapidly growing economy. There are some interesting sites such as the Petronas Towers, and the Batu Caves which is a Hindu temple built inside a cave. There is also some excellent shopping both in shopping malls and at night markets. All in all, since Kuala Lumpur is a cheap bus ride away from Singapore I would definitely recommend a stay of 3 or 4 days. Malaysia also has some of the most beautiful islands in South East Asia. While I did not get a chance to visit them those who did absolutely fell in love with them.

South East Asia is full of things to do and see. You will be limited only by your time and budget so it is important to maximize both. Air Asia ([www.airasia](http://www.airasia.com)) is a discount airline offering many flights around South East Asia. Check their website often for promotions and book early because the cheap tickets sell fast. Be sure to plan early in the semester and when you are in Singapore take the time to explore and enjoy the nightlife, but study smart and hard when you hit the books. It is possible to have a broad variety of experiences and still do well academically, but it takes discipline and focus.

## **Work Placement in the UK**

Initially I had tried to secure employment in the UK with the London office of a former employer. When this fell through, I decided that I would spend the summer in England regardless and look for work when I got there. As a result I spent about 1 month looking for work and 3 months working. Over the 4 months I lived with relatives in different parts of the country. I also traveled England quite a bit, but made only a single trip beyond.

## **Looking for Work**

Job hunting in the UK was a difficult and stressful task. I was able to enter the country and begin looking for work right away because I have dual Canadian and UK citizenship. Furthermore, I did not have to worry about financing the first month of my trip because I have extensive family all over the country. If it were not for these 2 factors I would not have even fathomed staying the UK for 4 months without having previously secured employment.

Having said that, searching for employment in a new country was an incredible learning experience. Not only was this the first time that I was looking for work without the aid of the Co-op department, but I had no professional network, my education was not particularly recognized, and I had to learn how the recruiting process worked in the UK. While this was very challenging, it forced me sell my skills and abilities new ways and find creative ways of contacting employers. I began my search by contacting companies directly, and inquiring about summer internships. As expected the bigger companies had already hired for the summer and the HR departments in smaller companies were not very receptive to my applications. I then began looking for contract roles by contacting recruitment agencies. Recruitment agencies all promise the world, but deliver very little. The difficulty in finding contract work was that I was competing with very experienced workers, and the short length of my stay limited the number of opportunities available to me. In the end I found a contract role as a Technical Support Analyst for Hummingbird UK, through a family contact.

My advice to anyone trying to find work on their own is to apply for internships early and try to contact department managers directly. As Co-op students we have a lot of valuable skills to offer and managers are typically willing to find the funding for a student if they believe that you can make a meaningful contribution.

## **Living in England**

While the lack of sun and frequent rain ensured that I would not seek permanent employment in England, I did enjoy the social culture. I was particularly fortunate that

the Euro-Cup soccer tournament took place during my stay. This was amazing spectacle of National unity, even greater than Olympic or World Cup hockey in Canada. The Euro-Cup combined with the typical English love of the pub made for a very entertaining month. I also enjoyed frequent pub lunches. A pint at lunch from work was a novelty that I thoroughly enjoyed.

The biggest drawback of living in England was the cost of living. A night out in London would easily translate to \$100 - \$150 CAD. So if you plan work or study in England, be sure to save you pennies before you go.

Since I have extensively family all over England I cover a great deal of the country. Fortunately, I always had a free ride and a place to stay. Among my destinations were Essex (East London), Leicester, Leeds, Manchester, and South Hampton. Traveling England was very different from traveling in Asia because I was always with family. My tourist activities were limited but I can say that Leeds and Manchester both have an excellent night life and are worth the trek north.

Leeds was also an excellent shopping destination, which was another high point of living in England. The fashion in England is far superior to that of North America, and it is one of the few things that can actually be reasonably priced if you can find some good deals. The business attire is particularly excellent, so I stocked up on shirts, pants, and ties in anticipation of post-graduation employment.

## **Traveling Europe**

For a number of reasons I chose not to travel Europe very much at all. In fact, I only one made trip to continental Europe, and that was to visit 2 friends in Amsterdam. If you have never been to Amsterdam it is definitely a place that you need to visit while you are young – I think the reputation speaks for itself.

Because it took a full month to find work I wanted to work for as long as possible before returning home, so I had very little opportunity to travel. While I could have made weekend trips, the expense combined with the fact that I would have been traveling alone made it quite unattractive. Since I was returning home to an 8 month study period saving



my money was a top priority. I also plan to return to Europe after graduation with some friends.

While traveling Europe is much more expensive than traveling Asia, there are many cheap flights from England to other parts of Europe. A few airlines that I came across when deciding whether to travel were EasyJet, BMI Baby, and Ryan Air. Even British Airways has some cheap flights.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, my international experiences were the best 8 months of my University career and perhaps of my life thus far. In Asia, being exposed to such a rich variety of cultures and seeing extreme poverty first hand added new perspective to my life. There is a whole other world outside of North America, and unless you experience it first hand you cannot really understand the issues that affect the world as a whole. Seeing people that live much simpler but happy lives made me rethink my ambitions and helped me prioritize my life. I think that traveling has a unique impact on each person, but by exposing you to a different way of life it forces you to reconsider many norms and standards that you take for granted. I would not say that I am a significantly different person now, but I do think about things differently and have challenged aspects of my life that I previously accepted because they were all I knew.

In addition to seeing and experiencing different things, you also meet very interesting people. An academic exchange is a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet such a wide variety of people of the same age that share your interests and curiosity of the world. By sharing stories and ambitions you will undeniably generate new ideas and plans for the future.

Without a doubt, my exchange to Singapore and subsequent travels of South East Asia were the highlight of my trip.

My work experience in England offered a much more subtle change in culture. However, I do feel that working in England added to my professional abilities considerably. It not only added an interesting dimension to my resume, but it also gave

me the opportunity to work in a different business culture and develop an understanding of global business and the economy outside of North America.



A beach party at Sentosa Island, Singapore.



A South Indian festival in Singapore.



The Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur – a Hindu temple built within a cave.



Surfing in Bali.



Mosque Istiqlal in Jakarta – the third biggest mosque in the world.



Part of an ancient temple in Yogyakarta



A canopy tour in Ko Samui – gliding through the top of forest.