

Cameron Gilchrist

2016 End of Summer Report: Singapore

A year ago, I never thought I would work or live in another country. Five months ago, I barely knew what to expect as I headed off to intern in Singapore for two months. Today, I am thankful for my experience – the skills I learned, the people I met, the places I saw – and for the Foundation's support. While the purpose of my summer was to intern at a foreign direct investment advisory in Singapore, I could never have planned for the things that impacted me the most. The people I met and the places I saw both inside and outside of work were beyond memorable, but before I could truly connect with new people and learn from places I had never been before, I had to get into the rhythm of daily life. All three of these elements made my summer one of the most unique experiences of my life.

Day in the Life

From what I hear, working abroad is a much different experience than studying abroad. However, it perfectly suited the kind of exploration that I enjoy most, which is learning through participation. I got to explore Singapore by taking part in the business world, developing a daily routine, and creating my own communities inside and outside of the office. At the core of my summer was a Monday through Friday routine that started at 7am. I would wake up and get dressed for work, knowing that it would be a miracle if I didn't walk in to my office with at least a slight glow of sweat. Then it was downstairs for a quick breakfast and a five minute walk to the train station. Although it was a part of every single day, my train ride to and from work never failed to be impactful. After walking through jam packed stations that ring with the movement of thousands of people, navigating a precarious balance of order and chaos, I would enter the quiet train for a 40 minute commute.

I valued my time on the train. It was a chance for reflection, reading, people watching, and thought. In a place that constantly felt busy, I appreciated that time seemed to slow down on my way to and from work each day.

As soon as the doors opened at my stop, the force of thousands of people moving with a purpose again took hold. I made a short walk to work where I would inevitably face an unexpected challenge. Diving in to an unfamiliar situation, or sometimes being thrown into them,

became a constant part of my work life. Few dull moments ever dampened the tone of my small office, and I usually left feeling worn but oddly energized. Again, the train ride home offered a chance to sort through the day's events and take inventory of what I was experiencing. Even on my last day of work, I never failed to find a sliver of amazement when thinking about my situation.

The final part of my daily routine involved getting as far away from work as possible – something that didn't always happen – and building a life outside of the office. Whether this was meeting people for dinner, stopping by a bar with friends, or exploring the city, I made sure I was really living in Singapore, not just working there. School assignments sometimes led me to spend the night considering the nation's social inequalities or reflecting on the impact of a dominant work culture. However, it was the time I took to explore and learn about Singapore by participating in the flow of daily life that allowed me to find intellectually stimulating material for my assignments. The things I saw, heard, and did as a part of my everyday life both inside and outside of work grounded my perception of Singapore and served as a foundation for my learning.

People

Thinking about my summer separately from the people I worked, lived, traveled, and learned with is impossible. Each of them added a different flavor and contributed a unique point of view that influenced me even when we weren't together. At work, I spent at least nine hours a day with a professionally and culturally diverse group of people. We represented Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, India, England, France, Canada, and America. All eight of us had different professional and educational backgrounds, spanning from me as a Junior in college to my boss who had over 20 years of experience and was a certified accountant to boot.

What made the people in my office even more interesting was the variety of their world views. Of the four interns, one was born in India but went to high school in Singapore and goes to college in Canada while another was half French and half English, spent his early childhood in Singapore, went to school in Canada and was fluent in Mandarin. The third intern was born in Vietnam but moved to the US in middle school and went to college in California, making me the minority by being born and raised in only one country.

Not only was my office diverse, but all of us were willing to share our experiences and learn from one another on a professional and personal level. Whether I had a question about the corporate tax structure in Singapore or one of my co-workers wanted to know about the mood surrounding the presidential election, we all felt comfortable asking. We exchanged stories about everyday life and discussed ethics, politics, and law from all of our distinctly informed perspectives.

On top of the diversity within our office staff, our clients came from all over the world. From Minnesota and Hawaii to Australia and China, I spoke with clients from more places than I can remember, all working in different industries and facing different problems. Not one interaction was exactly the same, and that was incredibly exciting.

Outside of the office, the other interns that lived in my hotel formed another engaging community that played an irreplaceable role in my summer. The group of 14 students from four different colleges all working at different companies in Singapore made up another group that put me in the minority. Over half of the interns were born outside of the US and I was one of two Caucasian students in the group. From our backgrounds to our studies in school to our professional pursuits, we were a diverse group in almost every sense of the word.

Even though we were all from different places, we bonded over being foreigners in Singapore. We formed a community committed to making the most of our time in Singapore and Southeast Asia as a whole. Like at work, the other interns and I quickly formed a line of open communication. We shared our experiences with one another, and sometimes it felt like I had 14 internships and could be five places at once because of how close we all became. Even if I didn't get to see something first hand, I got to hear about it from those that did. We constantly reminded each other not just of how lucky we were to be interning in Singapore but how lucky we were to be doing it with such amazing people.

Places

Although I spent a majority of my time in Singapore, visiting Vietnam was one of the highlights of my summer. While spending four days in Hanoi would have been amazing on its own, I traveled with another intern who grew up there, which elevated my experience tenfold. From the very beginning of the trip, I was stunned by his family's hospitality. They welcomed

me into their home on the first night and did everything in their power to ensure I enjoyed my time in Vietnam.

After a month and a half in Singapore – a relatively organized city-state in comparison to the rest of Southeast Asia – the surface level chaos of Hanoi hit me like a punch to the chest. It was both exciting and draining. My friend wouldn't even let me cross the road alone for the first two days because it required unwavering trust in the hundreds of drivers to weave around pedestrians; hesitating or altering my path unexpectedly would certainly cause an accident. Walking down the street was an adventure in itself, and I tried to absorb all that I could in just a few days.

Visiting Vietnam changed my understanding of Singapore. Before my trip, I had no first hand context of the rest of Southeast Asia. Although Hanoi doesn't represent an entire region, it was indicative of another side of Southeast Asia, one that Singapore barely exposes. While Singapore was meticulously developed and is a beacon of global business, Hanoi is a mosaic of development and runs on unwritten rules. From my understanding, Hanoi is much a closer picture of the rest of Southeast Asia than Singapore. After seeing that other side I'm inspired to explore countries like Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines – places I gained familiarity with through my job but never got to visit.

Conclusion

This summer, I learned how to live and work half way across the world. I met people that were different than me in every way imaginable and formed communities with them that were built on the exchange of thoughts and experience. I traveled to places that made me feel more foreign than I have ever felt before, and it was incredible.

Working in Singapore for a summer was a life changing experience, and the Foundation played a significant part in making it possible. I am grateful for their commitment to supporting Sigmas in the pursuit of growth. The Summer Enrichment Scholarship is an unparalleled opportunity to involve Lodgers past, present, and future in an experience worth sharing.



My coworkers and boss



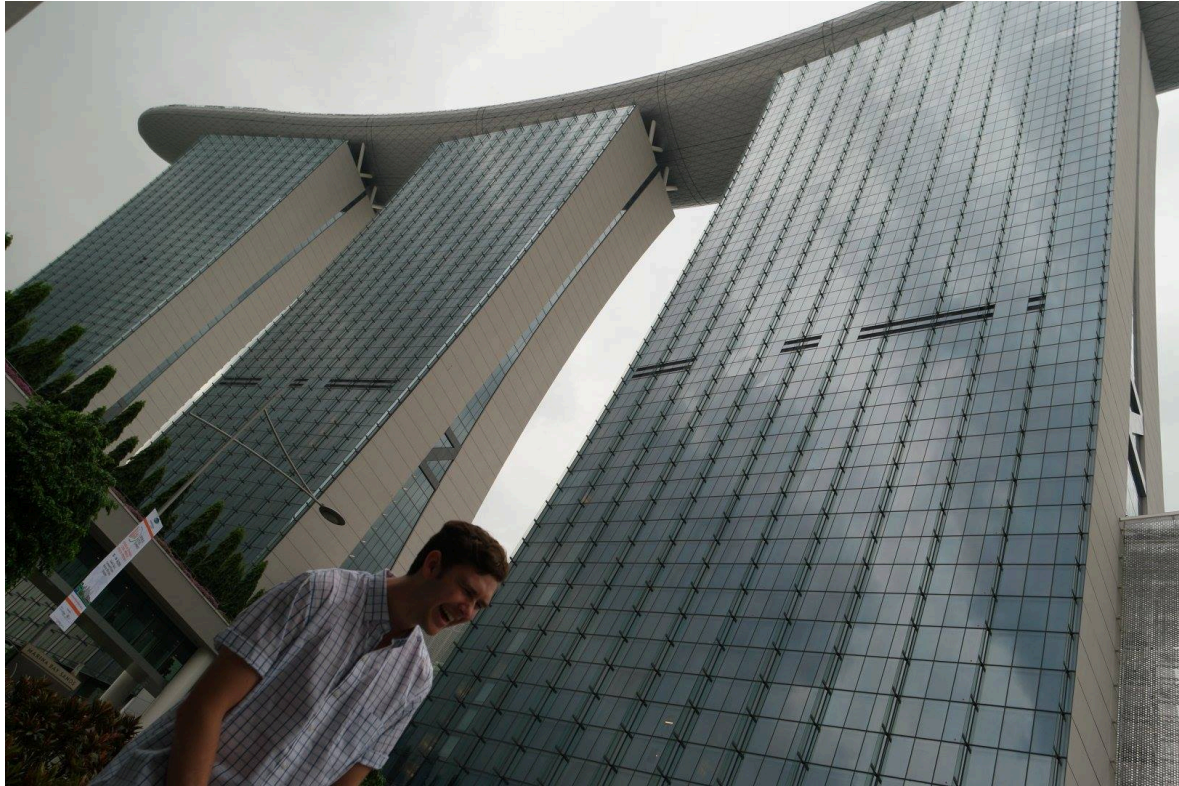
The oldest school in Vietnam, now a shrine



A stop on a tour of Halong Bay in Vietnam



Street in Hanoi's Old Quarter



Marina Bay Sands in Singapore



MacRitchie Reservoir Park in Singapore



The Botanic Gardens in Singapore