

Nur Ameera Bte Azman



Nur Ameera among blooming tulips at Keukenhof in Lisse, Netherlands.

Why did you choose to apply to the Netherlands, and specifically Utrecht University?

Going on exchange in countries beyond Asia would allow me to gain more knowledge regarding other economies and their relations with the rest of the world, as well as a deeper understanding on the type of policies implemented outside of Singapore. I also have a deep interest in art, hence the Netherlands would allow me to experience a rich assortment of art exhibitions and museums that I have always wanted to visit. Being an illustrator myself, I was inspired by prominent artists from Europe such as Van Gogh and Claude Monet, more so the meanings behind some of their paintings. Knowing how much thought was put into their craft makes me more motivated to continue illustrating!

How were your classes at Utrecht University different from that at NUS?

Classes at UU place more emphasis on collaboration with others, as well as interaction and rapport with the professors. Every tutorial involves discussions on the topics learnt, allowing students to voice different opinions and learn from each other, promoting a more fruitful learning experience. The students are also very vocal and not afraid to ask questions, something I should definitely learn from and try to adopt! The semester was also split into two periods of 10 weeks each, with two modules at a time in each period instead of the regular 5 at NUS. This meant I had more time every week to rest and revise, and enjoy my exchange in general!

What was the best decision you made during your exchange abroad?

Travelling! Being in the Netherlands made it much easier for me to travel to other nearby European countries due

to cheaper flights and extensive bus and train networks. I also managed to do things I would never have done or experienced in Singapore. One of my most memorable moments was when I travelled to Rovaniemi, Finland with a few of my friends. We got to see the Northern Lights in -22 degree Celsius weather, go husky sledding and try traditional Finnish cuisine which includes salmon soup and Finnish cheese with cloudberry jam!

What was something unexpected that you did in the Netherlands?

Learning how to cycle! Cycling is a norm in the Netherlands, and I came with zero knowledge on how to ride a bike. As transport fees are quite high here, using a bike to get to classes or to do grocery shopping does save a lot of money! I definitely struggled the first few weeks, especially with the cycling rules and etiquette. For example, it is compulsory to indicate with hand signals which direction you want to turn, which was evidently difficult for a newbie like me! Nonetheless, as I gained confidence and experience, I can now meander through Dutch streets without much of a problem.

What was your favourite dish there, and how does it compare to Singapore food?

I do enjoy the different varieties of cheese that the Netherlands has to offer! Their cheese is locally produced in many of their cities, such as Gouda and Volendam. They even come in interesting flavours, such as cumin, lavender and pesto!

Dutch food is definitely milder compared to Singapore, I do miss the spicy kick in my dishes! Something interesting that I found was that most, if not all eateries, always ensure that they have vegan options in their menu. That is uncommon in Singapore.



Lennard at the peak of Wineglass Bay Lookout, Tasmania after an hour hike.

Lim Jin Pung, Lennard

What did you find unique about the city of Melbourne?

At first, I had imagined Melbourne to be pretty similar to Singapore but I was pleasantly surprised by its distinct cultural features. Melbourne's rich coffee culture is probably what I'll miss most. Every street is filled with unique cafes and specialty coffee pop-up shops that serve affordable and euphoric brews; a necessity especially on a freezing morning. I was never a fan of coffee, but now I can't imagine going without my daily dose of barista-crafted mocha.

What were classes at University of Melbourne like? What was your favourite class that you took?

The classes here are very interactive, and they take class participation very seriously, especially for the Arts subjects. I wanted to take a subject that not only fulfilled my History minor requirements, but could also prove challenging and unfamiliar. My favourite class was a Level-3000 History subject titled History of Violence, where I learnt about the complexities and trajectory of violence across different time periods and regions, from late medieval German-speaking Europe to modern Indigenous Australia. The weekly analysis was raw, gruesome and intentionally disturbing, which was helpful in creating an accurate understanding of the topic and allowing me to more greatly appreciate the significance of events in the past.

What was your favourite place that you travelled to on exchange?

Cape Otway Lighthouse. It's a historical landmark located somewhere along Great Ocean Road and it is the oldest surviving lighthouse on mainland Australia. They preserved WWII telegraph stations here, so I had the opportunity to learn about Australia's secret WWII history, something I knew very little about previously.

It already looks really cool on its own, but I was surprised that they let visitors go up to the top of the lighthouse. When I climbed up and saw the glittering blue waters and lush greenery spanning far across the horizon, my eyes couldn't help but water a little. The extraordinarily strong winds that made moving around the top so difficult only made the experience more comedic and memorable.

What did you miss most about NUS while you were on exchange?

I missed the affordable and filling food. A filling meal of decent quality in Melbourne usually costs about 15 dollars. There were no food courts or canteens at the University of Melbourne, but on the bright side, this got me into cooking! With the help of my housemates, we managed to recreate tasty Singaporean food like laksa, nasi lemak and coffee pork ribs.

What advice would you give to students who are going on exchange?

It is very normal to feel homesick, and we all struggle with it while we are away from our loved ones. But try to see all this as an adventure and an exciting new experience for yourself; immersing yourself into another land's culture and lifestyle - a chance you might not get so easily in future! Also, I realised that being too thrifty can sometimes be suffering and irksome - depriving myself of food and experiences that cannot be replicated back home. I regret missing out on some freshly baked scallop pies at Apollo Bay because I felt at the time that they were too expensive. Be sure to optimise your spending and make the most out of your exchange!

What was the best thing about campus life at the University of Melbourne?

Campus life is always lively. During the Hindu festival, Holi, students from all backgrounds danced in the main plaza while being showered with coloured paint. Passers-by, including myself, were all smiles. Such vibrant events occur almost on a weekly basis. Also, university clubs and event organisers are always giving out free items and food!



Cape Otway Lighthouse.

What made you choose the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley)?

Among the universities available, UC Berkeley was my top choice because I was planning to take social science modules on exchange and this university was best known for its social sciences. The modules that were offered for other disciplines I was interested in also appealed to me such as the Introduction to Human Nutrition: Managing Life. Finally, UC Berkeley was also more preferable to me than other UC campuses as it works on a semester-based instead of a quarter-based system, allowing me to take my desired number of modules over a more spread-out timeline. This provided me with more free time and thus a better balance between education and exploration while abroad.

Tell us about your favourite class in UC Berkeley.

My favourite class was the Sociology of Education. I learnt so much about education and inequality in education, as well as the processes behind it, such as how income-differentiated parenting styles shape student identity and influence educational outcomes. I also enjoyed working on the assignments, even though they were difficult, as they made us think more about the processes that influence inequality in education and allowed us to apply what we learnt, providing creative room to suggest real-life solutions to these problems. For instance, for our final exam, one essay question asked us to imagine we were starting a non-profit for a local school district and allowed us to design its mission and strategy as well as write about its potential impact based on course material. The professor taught me many life lessons by conveying deeper truths and missions in his ending speech; that every child is meant to be loved and meant for so much more, how education is meant to help them learn who they truly are, what they are passionate about, to teach truth and plant seeds of hope for a better world. I remember him saying, "From deep inside my heart, you are welcome here", and I felt so moved in that moment. These moments where what he spoke resonated with me, made the class unforgettable.

What was your most memorable trip that you had on exchange?

My most memorable trip was a road trip to Yosemite. I remember having so many new experiences on this trip, like staring into the night sky and being in awe of the biggest stars I had ever seen. The views in Yosemite were also amazing; the snowy mountains and clear blue skies hiking up Yosemite falls were really beautiful. The waterfall itself was spectacular - water, as it flowed down from between the rocks, turned to snow and there was a rainbow painted across the middle. It was really a sight to behold.

What did you learn / realise about yourself from your exchange at UC Berkeley?

After travelling without much rest over spring break, I came back to Berkeley sick and exhausted. Because of this, I wasn't able to get started with the plans for work I had that week and had to skip a week of classes to recuperate. The shape I was in made me feel really bad about myself, and I kept thinking about the plans I had ahead of me. I experienced adverse reactions in my body; it was then that I realized how stressed I was feeling. This made me realize how many expectations I had put on myself in work and also in life in general. Not being able to meet my expectations made me feel ashamed of myself. Yet, in this experience, I also came to encounter love through my friends who cared for me in my frailty and told me that it was okay not to be perfect. In being loved and held, I could learn to embrace my own imperfections.



Cheryl hiking Yosemite Falls.

Doo Wei Jun Cheryl



The rainbow over Yosemite falls.