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SEP at King's College London, London (2005/2006)

Introduction

Invigorating, Illuminating and Inspirational....

These are the three words that always come to my mind every time I recall my SEP experience..

Why SEP?

I decided to embark on the SEP journey because of several reasons. I wanted a break from my mundane but vigorous daily routine. I wanted to 'get away' from the stress that I experienced while studying for my examinations the semester before. (I think all of you could appreciate that too) Perhaps, I felt that I had to have some 'me' time from family and friends to keep my sanity in check. But what motivated me most was the fact that my CAP (Cumulative Aggregate Point) was going nowhere! So being a practical person, I decided to have a short break to invigorate myself and take things easy for a change. 'Enough is enough,' I said...I want a Holiday!

Why London and King's College London?

London, London, London. Let me repeat it again, slowly this time. London, London, London. Why I decided to go to the 'hippest', 'coolest' and one of the 'historically richest' city in the world? I can't figure that out! A prominent queen resides there. A legendary clock tower is located there. They even have this infamous bridge in a nursery rhyme that we all have at one point of our kindergarten lives deliriously sung. I just felt that London was calling me and it was just a natural inclination to be where it all happens.

Apart from the 'in' factor, London boasts some of the most prestigious schools in the United Kingdom (UK), one of which is King's College London. It has one of the best Geography Departments in the UK and consistently achieves top marks in its research ratings. The lecturers are well known and King's College has modules which are not available in NUS. What attracted my friend and I to King's College London was that we were the first two NUS Geographers to do a student exchange with them. We felt it will provide us a unique experience compared to our seniors. In other words, we were considered the pioneer batch! To go where no NUS Geographer has dared to venture was simply too great an opportunity to miss!

Cold weather, cool friends and even a cooler hostel!

What indicated to us that we had finally arrived after twelve and a half hours of flight was London's legendary weather! The two layers of jackets and a long john were still no match against the chilly, dry and strong winds. In retrospect, I think I was not able to acclimatize to the cold weather as fast as I had wanted. For the first few days, my movements were restricted shuttling from my room and the kitchen! However, that turned out to be a blessing as it gave me an opportunity to make good friends with my international hostel mates. They were thoroughly impressed with my culinary skills and 'delicious' meals which I prepared and shared with them. Indeed, I am now a firm believer that the key to making friends regardless where they come from is through their stomachs. They were also oblivious to the stashed seasoning packets in my cupboard!

Orientation Day and getting my bearings right!

Orientation Day was a breeze and all schedules were already prepared. We were briefed by the officers about the classes and the general living conditions in London. We had the typical 'Oh I am so excited about this exchange programme' conversations with our American classmates. Interestingly, apart from the US, Singapore was the only country which had students on King's College exchange programme that year.

Indeed, one of the most memorable moments was my journey to school. King's College is located beside the Thames River and it took me approximately 20 minutes to walk to school from my hostel. What romanticised notions that I had about the river in the English novels that I read came true. Armed with my MP3 player, I was

able to slowly soak in London's ambience. On my right, stood Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, Trafalgar Square, Somerset House and Saint Paul's Cathedral. On my left, were Shakespeare's Globe, Tate Modern Museum and London's Eye. It was truly a beautiful sight. Hence, each day to school along the River Thames became a journey of awe and quiet reflection.



Faisal, with the Big Ben and Westminster Abbey in the background

My learning experience

I was allowed to experience a different learning culture at King's College. Most lectures had small groups of students and the setting was informal. Calling each other including the lecturers' by first names made it a friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere. There were no lecture handouts and I had to take down notes furiously. We were given lists and lists of books to read from the library and class discussions were mostly led by students themselves. The three two-hour lectures that I had every week trained me to distinguish important facts and notes from the lecturer's anecdotes.

For assignments, I had to rely heavily on my NUS library account. In fact, I felt that NUS's library systems was much better and I had no problems finding my resources as compared to my American and British classmates who had limited access to various websites and information. Faced with a steep learning curve as most modules expected us to have background knowledge of British and European history, I spent most of my spare time reading up on our lectures topics. We also had to adjust to the Euro-centric nature and perspectives that they had. However, the highlight of my learning experience was when a renowned Geography Professor stopped a session suddenly and asked us, the Singaporeans for our opinions. The professors and lecturers in general have high regard, expectations and respect for Singaporean students and so the pressure was on us to perform well!

Live it all up in London

After my classes, I spent most of my time walking around Trafalgar Square, Chinatown, Covent Garden, Piccadilly and Soho just to appreciate the sights and sounds of London. And of course, being a Singaporean, I just had to shop during those frequent trips, after which, I felt tremendous pangs of guilt! Regular visits to the British Museum and the National Art Gallery also inspired me to take up sketching as well. (By the way, admission is free, so knock yourself out!)

When in London, you are expected to do what Londoners do...which is watching numerous plays and concerts all the time! I was spoilt for choice and I did go for a few West End productions though it will set you back a few pounds. Surprisingly, I spent most of my pounds paying for Singaporean dramas and plays staged by Singaporean students from Imperial College, London School of Economics (LSE) and University College London (UCL). Perhaps, it was a way for me to be closer to Singapore as homesickness began to creep in. I made lots of new Singaporean friends and we went for short holidays around Europe during the vacation period.



Faisal at the Trafalgar Square

Travel, travel and travel

Contrary to popular belief, traveling around the UK and Europe is relatively inexpensive. That is, if you can accept long coach rides, budget airlines and packet food. Just hop on a National Express bus and it will take you as it did for me to Oxford, Manchester, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Apart from that, I visited other cities such as Barcelona, Amsterdam, Venice, Rome, Florence and even Istanbul via budget carriers Ryan Air and Easy Jet. Studying in London gives you a reason to escape the city life and enjoy Europe.



Taking a break to tour Oxford (right) and Venice (left)

Carpe diem!

‘Seize the day!’ Personally, I think there is truth in this phrase. Do not just read this article and then dream about it. Do not just say, ‘I wish I could do that!’ Live your dream and do not be constrained by fear. Take the opportunity to travel, and study abroad to expand your horizons and perspectives. You will realise that the world is your oyster. Seriously, if you do not believe me, try it!

Since I was overseas, I took the opportunity to do a research for post-degree courses that I may want to take up in the future. I spoke to several coordinators from different universities such as King’s College and UCL in London. From those conversations, I realised that it was important to receive your post-graduate education in a reputable institution to further your career, marketability and interests. Indeed, the Student Exchange Programme facilitated this valuable interaction which has broadened my horizons and perspectives to go further beyond Singapore’s shores to seek knowledge and experience.