Top 10 international internship stories

ACADEMIC YEAR 2015/2016
The entire 10 weeks of this internship was very fruitful and fulfilling. The first week was orientation. During the orientation, we were brought to the entire facility. The first stop was the main office where there were 4 main departments: HR, IT, Finance, Marketing and Sales. We were briefly introduced to each person; they were very friendly and welcoming. The second stop was a tour around the whole factory/refinery/plant. We saw the different stages in the production plant. At every stage, there would be a manager/supervisor explaining to us the process taking place. Being an engineer, it was an eye-opener for me as it was my first visit to a production plant. We were also brought out of the main factory (palm oil) into the secondary factory processing shea nuts, which could only be grown in certain regions of Africa, and lastly to a rice warehouse. Rice was a new product being brought into the markets of Ghana by Wilmar.

From the second week onwards, I was handed a project that dealt with implementing a new market channel to promote their new rice brand. My sales supervisor only gave me limited information and details on the project, as he wanted it to be an independent project, leaving me to plan the whole project by myself which was an extremely great experience for me, in both the planning and interaction with the locals in the markets. There was also a local sales team member attached to me in case there were any language barriers. This allowed me to see how he worked, experiencing their work lifestyle, which is much more relaxed as compared to Singaporeans. My sales supervisor was very willing to teach me whenever I was in doubt or required help, but only when I asked, which made me independent in executing the project. In the last week, the HR department brought us to the palm plantation, about a 6-hour drive from the guesthouse. The scenery was breathtaking, and the air was fresh. This was the first plantation I had ever been to. On the return journey, we stopped by the Cape Coast Castle, a historic site used to export slaves to Europe.
Though the standard of living in Ghana is much lower than that of Singapore, the living conditions within the boundaries of “Wilmar properties” were superb. It was said that out of all the countries in Africa that Wilmar had a presence in, Ghana had the nicest guesthouse. The apartments were big, ranging from 1-3 bedrooms in each apartment. There were custodians to clean the house daily; laundry was done daily and three meals cooked a day by “chefs”. The whole apartment had air conditioners, and surprisingly there were no fans. However, the Wi-Fi in the guesthouse was a problem, the only problem in fact. It was fragile, and even the expatriates were unhappy about it. All in all, it was a very pleasant ten weeks, a high living standard with a friendly and safe local culture. However, there were not many “touristy” things to do on the weekends.

Apart from the work experiences as mentioned, there are several issues that Ghana struggles with. The corruption in Ghana is a problem; resulting in a high unemployment rate and inflation. A decade ago, the local Ghana currency (Cedi) was on par with the USD, now it's 1 USD to about 4 Cedis. They also do not manufacture much, importing almost everything, hence whatever that is being sold on the shelves is very expensive, much more expensive than our local NTUC supermarkets, which came as an honest shock to me. I was expecting things to be cheaper, maybe like the cost of living in Malaysia. As such the locals can only afford to go to the local street markets to get their groceries. Only mango, watermelon, and pineapple are cheap; it was lovely to have kept eating mangoes. The electrical supply is often unsteady, with power trips at least once in every 3 days, but the locals do not complain. Furthermore, Ghana does not even have an “MRT” transport system, and we Singaporeans are already complaining about a 20-minute breakdown. The situation in Ghana and Singapore is very different, but it made me think about how fortunate we are. The most interesting thing that happened to me was the police demanding money from another guy and I. It was almost like a bribe, my first ever encounter. The entire internship was really much better than I had expected it to be. Most people would be rather apprehensive upon hearing the word “Africa”. It was an eye-opener as well as a fruitful and insightful 10 weeks of learning.

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Sri Lanka is a beautiful country blessed with scenic landscapes, and the people are very helpful and friendly. I had the opportunity to go up-country to Kandy for a span of five days to visit the other children’s home. Kandy felt more laid back as compared to the capital city of Colombo, and I had the chance to experience Poya (full moon). I walked around some Buddhist sites and am appreciative of how religions are able to coexist harmoniously within the country.

Being a female Chinese student in Sri Lanka, I was a minority and had encounters of gender inequality. There were times when it felt unsafe especially towards the evening, as compared to Singapore where it is safe to walk the streets alone (late) in the evening. I experienced several cases of cat-calling, inappropriate gestures, and stares from men in certain areas. Especially at the beach, it was a highly male dominated space. Speaking to local female Sri Lankan friends, they raised the fact that it was a cultural norm; and women were seldom found hanging around outside alone or in groups towards the night time. Getting back before dark was essential throughout the entire span of my internship.

As there were strict routines and schedules planned for the children in the home to follow once they returned from school, much initiative was required on our part to initiate separate programmes for the children during their free time, especially during the weekdays. These activities had to take into consideration their normal day-to-day work and were often catered to different age groups.

The little English-speaking language ability of the children reduced the depth and range of activities that we could do with the children – e.g. conducting story-telling or communicating some life lessons/values. On a personal level, it was also difficult to share our lives with the children and engage them in deeper conversation because of the language barrier. The best way to overcome such differences was to learn Sinhala actively from the staff and children, a skill earlier mentioned.

and communicate certain words and phrases to them I actively learnt Sinhala from the staff, children, and Sri Lankans that I met – being sure to write down the words and pronunciation in a way that I understood. I also intentionally got hold of language books from nearby Sri Lankan bookstores which translated English to Sinhala, to facilitate the learning and bridge the gap between the children and myself.

Occasionally, even though certain activities were planned for the children, they would raise their needs – e.g. help in English. Thus, on my part, I learnt to be more conscious, intentional and understanding to these needs. For instance, to teach the younger children in Kandy to write the alphabet, I used the materials I had to draw lines on paper to assist their handwriting.

During my internship period, chicken pox, seasonal cough, and lice were health issues of varying degrees which spread among various children. Being close to the younger children, I was exposed to lice. It allowed me to learn about their living conditions and empathise with their daily challenges. Being in a different cultural environment, these skills and experiences have been a new learning curve for me that I will take into consideration when I am contemplating a future career outside of Singapore. Due to being rather unfamiliar with the nature of the projects at the start, we could not fully implement the initial plans we had planned out before the trip. Along the course of the internship, it was a constant journey of discovering the best way to communicate our ideas to the supervisor, staff, and children. The ideas that we were able to communicate to the project coordinator were the ones that were observed during the internship.

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As an intern in STEMconnector, a company focused on promoting STEM education along with connecting national state and local STEM entities, I learnt Engineering from a business perspective and encountered multiple opportunities to explore my interest in marketing and branding. One of the primary skills that I acquired over the course of my internship is the ability to talk to many different types of people to present myself as a confident and competent part of the organisation. I think that leadership ability is the most significant thing that I gleaned from the experience. The personal style and interpersonal skills shown by the supervisors and colleagues enhanced good working relationships in promoting a productive work environment in STEMconnector. I have benefited immeasurably from this aspect of my internship experience. As for leadership, I think I had a “transformational” style that began with establishing myself as a role model to gain team members’ trust and confidence. I also empowered followers and encouraged the team to develop their full potential and contribute more effectively based on the organisation and needs. I find that strong leadership doesn’t have to be accompanied by hard personalities and demanding expectations.

Along with my internship and course, I also conducted several informational interviews. As a student who is introverted, this was a challenging aspect for me in the programme. “Aim high, conquer yourself and do your best.” I said to myself, and set up my target to conduct ten interviews this summer. I tried to break out of my comfort zone, and seek the opportunity to meet, interact with and form a professional relationship with a large group of people such as the VP of Global Equipment and Engineering Technologies in PepsiCo and the CEO of AstraniTechnology Solutions. Because of that, I ended up talking to seven professionals. These individuals provided insight into their own careers in technology and engineering, discussed career goals and strategies for breaking into the field and served as uniquely valuable resources for me to become a professional leader. What’s more, I believe that the knowledge and insights I have gained from visiting the iconic sights in the nation’s capital city and encountering this unique abundance of people, places, and events have been among the most substantial contributions to my personal growth that I have experienced. All of these have significantly impacted my future overseas professional development.

As a female engineering student, I was trying to take every opportunity to adapt myself to the environment. I am especially happy to be part of the Maker Movement in DC to have had a positive impact in encouraging young people into STEM fields, and spread the word of STEM to bring a dynamic perception to the public. If we want to attract the best and brightest minds into the fields that will move us forward, we must look to all of the population. More women can contribute to our field, and we can help make that happen.

My internship experiences this summer have been uniquely fulfilling in a variety of ways. I acquired several new skills within a real-world context and was able to apply these skills to contribute to the success of an organisation whose mission closely matches my own. I was able to set up my personal vision, and find happiness with my professional life. Most importantly, I really appreciate the genuine relationships I built with people in my professional network. My new skills and connections have helped me to prepare for a future career better.

Washington D.C is a place full of networking opportunities. I additionally signed up for a series of Meetup events, which provide a platform for professionals to network. This included talks held by the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation (ITIF), National Academy of Science and Engineering, and many more. I discovered that to be a good leader in engineering required not only polished technical skills but also the confidence gained from having a thorough understanding of life. I feel that effective networking is about what you can do for others, instead of asking for a one-way connection. During various networking session, I was aware that I was serving multiple roles as a representative from STEMconnector, a student from The Washington Center, and an ambassador from the National University of Singapore. I think Singapore – as a business financial center in Asia, should create more networking opportunities and conferences for young people to grow professionally and get inspired.

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said STEM Skills will remain crucial to Singapore’s success for the next 50 years. I gained relevant experience when I was involved in an event called Maker Faire, where I was a volunteer. This event is free and open to the public. It provides opportunities for children, as well as adults, to learn basic concepts needed in STEM field jobs, including electronics, industrial design and architecture products. Visual arts students from diversified gender backgrounds used everything from sensors, laser cutters, and the circuit boards to design their own projects. I hope Singapore could also adopt STEM so as to stimulate the interest of the young people in science and technology.
Interning in Tehran – the political and economic capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran – has been challenging yet hugely rewarding. It is a unique and rare opportunity to gain insights into a highly complex and opaque business environment. It has allowed me to build meaningful relationships with Iranians from all walks of life, from the religious conservatives to more liberal Muslims, and from those veterans of Iran’s past wars to the new generation of Iranian youths. Naturally, as a political science student, these lessons inform, refine, and change any preconceived notions I have had about the country, and they undergird the need for a nuanced understanding of any business or academic community.

On a more personal level, these two months in Iran have taught me to appreciate good governance and to continue to aspire to greater ambitions. Iran is a country blessed with thousands of years of history and intellectual innovations, and is today likewise blessed with a highly educated population – however, due to its political situation, opportunities are extremely limited, and youths have no choice but to settle for jobs which do not match their prior training or education. There is hence a severe hunger for self-improvement and a strong desire to engage with the outside world. This hunger for self-development and desire to engage the international scene are things which Singaporeans desperately need – whether or not they have the privilege of attending universities or not.

I would suggest that NUS students keep an open mind and dispose of any preconceived ideas they hold about Iran and their people. I would highly encourage them to engage with locals in the everyday setting and to attend an elementary Persian language course - even basic knowledge of the language would enable them to hold productive conversations with ordinary people and to navigate their way around both Iran and neighbouring countries. Daily conversations with Iranians would help them appreciate the power and impact of international (Western) media and the effects of politicised religion among Iranian youths. In a more pragmatic sense, Singaporeans or students who wish to expand their intellectual horizons or to penetrate new markets should consider learning new, yet unconventional, languages to more effectively
and meaningfully engage with the business community and society of their destination. Just like how knowing the Chinese language and culture would help one unlock one’s economic potential in China, the same applies to Iran.

I have intentionally layered my internship with an intensive Persian/Farsi language course at the University of Tehran. Doing so equips me with the necessary Farsi I need to navigate my way around the city and to, albeit minimally, understand the topics being discussed during meetings with my boss/colleagues or with clients. I would recommend that NUS students educate themselves on basic Farsi at home (i.e. learning how to write Farsi script, present, past, and imperative tenses) so that they can advance to Elementary II level at the Dehkhoda Institute.

The NUS International Internship Award has been nothing but pivotal in helping me afford my place of stay (i.e. student dormitory), daily meals (especially since my internship occurs during the month of Ramadan and all eateries are closed during this period), as well as my daily commute to and from meetings with my colleagues. Collectively, this funding has allowed me to pursue my internship without worry.

The financial relief has also allowed me to travel to cities outside Tehran, such as Esfahan, Kashan, Hamedan, and Yazd. These trips have been essential in highlighting how Tehran is strikingly different from other cities in Iran – the same way visitors should not expect other Southeast Asian countries to be a mirror image of Singapore. Also, these trips add to a more nuanced understanding of Iranian society as they have enabled me to meet a more diverse group of Iranians.

As Parthian is a new company set up just as I had arrived in Tehran, my colleagues have been and still are looking for a new office space in a location away from Tehran’s severe traffic issues and pollution. I performed my work at a café of a hotel as all other cafes were closed during the working hours of Ramadan.

Over the death anniversary of a religious Imam, I traveled to Hamedan, the oldest city in Iran, to visit the relatives of my host family. After a 5-hour drive from Tehran, Ahmad and I stopped by a cucumber plantation and decided to harvest some of them as gifts for the host family in Hamedan. The farmers expressed to Ahmad that they were honoured to have received their first foreigner on their plantation.

My visit to Hamedan was especially rewarding because of my meeting with this family. The daughters of the family were match-made to their husbands once they turned 15 years old and all females of the family don the chador in public (a large black cloth that is wrapped around the head and entire body, exposing only the face) – yet they hold surprisingly progressive political and religious views. Clearly, perceptions of Muslim or Iranian women should not be defined by the covering they wear.

To conclude my internship and language learning in Iran, I embarked on an 8-hour bus ride to Yazd, another ancient desert city in Iran, with my peers from Dehkhoda Institute of the University of Tehran.
The entire programme is insightful and valuable as it is tailored for interns to learn as much as possible instead of doing menial or routine tasks. The first two weeks was orientation. During orientation, you will be attached to each department head and tour the various departments. You will be able to understand the entire production process as well as how the accounting, finance, sales, and marketing complements the company operations. The next three weeks is carried out in the market. You will be able to travel to one or two different districts every day. This will allow you to see the distribution channels that the company has. Also, it is a valuable experience as you will be able to see firsthand how business is done in a developing country. There is a lot to learn, and the supervisors are very forthcoming. They are willing to explain and teach us things that are not obvious to an outsider. The last part of the internship is to give feedback to management and how you can improve the current system. You will also work in the finance department, and it allows you to gain insights on crude palm oil trade and other FMCG products such as soap and detergent.

The main takeaway of the internship for us is the way businesses operate in a developing country. It is vastly different from what we are used to in Singapore.
The standard of living in Uganda is considerably lower as compared to Singapore. It is better not to expect too much from the accommodation, such as Wi-Fi or AC. Students should come with an open mind. There are not many major issues we encountered during our internship. The company helped us in every way possible, and the management is very willing to listen to our concerns and help us be as comfortable as possible. Locals are very friendly to the extent that you might feel uncomfortable which means that making friends is not a problem here. It is also very safe here in Uganda. Locking up valuables and being vigilant are more than enough to fend off theft.

Uganda is almost identical to Singapore in the 1950s. The infrastructure and lifestyle are very similar to our olden days. Daily food consists of beans and bananas, farms everywhere and people are very laid-back and content with enough food for the day. It can be very intriguing to see how the locals live by the day, without too much concern for the future, which is very different from how Singapore’s society is today.

The common misperception of Africans not having enough food is also not applicable to most parts of Uganda. To our surprise, it can even be safe to say that they have more food than Singapore. Most of the locals own small farms to grow their crops and food to support them. What we need is to challenge all the stigmas related to Africa and let Singaporeans experience life in Uganda. Locals are friendly and less skeptical; we can learn so much from them. With the recent debate over the sense of entitlement among the younger generation of Singaporeans, it will be very beneficial to encourage more of them to see the life of Ugandans.

The entire internship was enjoyable and insightful: there are no issues throughout the programme. Uganda is a beautiful country. We hope that the stereotype of Africa would change soon.

"It can be very intriguing to see how the locals live by the day, without too much concern for the future, which is very different from how Singapore's society is today."
I have benefited immensely from the programme by embracing the challenge of uncertainty in an unknown foreign land, a land that is entirely different from Singapore. That includes its vast differences in population size, land mass, transportation system, weather, food, culture and common language of the majority. The challenge has helped to strengthen my ability to adapt and overcome uncertainties more confidently.

The main lesson I wish to share with others going on a similar programme is always to stay curious, embrace changes and be flexible. An overseas working experience will definitely be accompanied by different living conditions and habits of interactions. We should not be dissatisfied if the situation is not the same as it is in Singapore. Different countries work on various sets of rules and expectations.

Upon landing in India for the first time, I was not accustomed to its public transport system. I needed it to reach the arranged accommodation by myself. I knew nothing about the appropriate amount to pay.
The chaotic scene outside the airport with minimal signage and assistance did little to relieve the stressed. There was no previous similar experience for a basis of comparison. Although much information is available online, I did not have sufficient knowledge to transport myself to the accommodation safely. Seeing a foreigner like myself with different physical features, many local strangers came to offer their different opinions and even their private transport services. It was a challenge to evaluate the safest option in the middle of the night. Finally, I came to learn about the location and existence of pre-paid taxi. A police signage on its counter gave me a higher level of assurance. It was a “read-only” and untested decision. There was no such public transport service like in Singapore. Hence, it was a challenge of uncertainty which I had learnt to overcome.

On the academic front, the programme has taught me to read constantly, challenge the status quo logically and improve them. For instance, I was fortunate to experience how my supervisors sought to improve the company’s services and products constantly. This was despite themselves being highly regarded in their own fields. Moreover, they came from internationally recognised and trusted companies such as TATA and Singapore Airlines. They did not base their decisions only on past experiences. They were well-read and highly meticulous. There was no 100% guaranteed successful decision. At the very least, they tried to make the best-informed decision. Mistakes made were quickly acknowledged, rectified and shared to prevent them from being repeated.

Greetings of “Sir” and “Ma’am” are commonly used to show profound respect to persons of higher authority in India. These are not commonly used in Singapore among fellow colleagues. We would instead greet using Mr and Ms followed by the last name to show respect. Complexity arose due to the preferences of different supervisors to be acknowledged differently. It took time for me to adjust to their level of formality. It was further simplified as my relationships with other colleagues became warmer. Hence, I adjusted to the different greeting of formalities in accordance with the local conditions.

The NUS International Internship Award and IE-YTP Market Immersion have strongly contributed to my experiential learning and career development. They gave me peace of mind regarding the total living expenditure. It took up the largest portion of my budget. Hence, I was able to focus on the internship and learning opportunities that came along. I was not emotionally burdened by the financial constraint placed on my parents related to the additional costs of living overseas. It included the cost of air transportation and accommodation.

I would definitely recommend this company to other NUS students. The organisation is willing to share their knowledge and opportunities with interns. They treated me as part of their own, not as an intern but a full-time employee. They trusted my ability to deliver on time and quality. The tasks assigned were also critical in helping in their decision-making process. Furthermore, I was able to fit in well with the warm support provided by all the colleagues. It even included colleagues with whom I had no working relationship. They taught me to negotiate the daily interaction outside the company and the working of the company and country. It would not be a smooth journey without many uncomfortable moments of adjusting to a new environment. Stay curious and humble to learn from others. There was no perfect opportunity and ideal condition. It was about making the best out of the given opportunities.
I am very thankful to IRO for offering and facilitating this opportunity to go on an internship in India with Seva Mandir, a rural development non-government organisation (NGO). This overseas experience has been invaluable and formative.

In terms of professional development, I was able to practise field research skills in rural communities and observe how aid is delivered in developing economies from donations to administration and finally, implementation and evaluation. I also learnt about the challenges of NGOs in India, mainly involving a shift in the nature of their work (there is a trend of the grassroots organisation becoming more distant from the rural communities and assuming the role of a middleman to government or international donors). I was able to gain knowledge regarding changing workplace dynamics (increasingly high turnover especially of young graduates who join prominent agencies just for portfolio enhancement and of experienced field workers who are unhappy with lower pay and promotion prospects compared to the educated recruits). I was also exposed to some of the realities of living and working abroad and in the developmental/NGO sector. A better understanding of these challenges helped me to prepare myself in terms of expectations and competencies for the future as I continue to seek short to medium-term opportunities abroad.

As a Geography student, I saw for myself some of the case studies and academic approaches to issues being played out in real life. The political economy of drought, natural resource conflicts, etc. are among the issues which the NGO had to help resolve. While writing evaluation reports, I was able to apply some of the concepts learnt into the appropriate context. At the same time, I also learnt that case studies and concepts are also limited by context and local experience. Creativity and fortitude are often more important to achieve development and solutions.

Being alone in a foreign environment provided the best training ground for independent learning, working and living. The values of being adaptable and culturally sensitive are essential in establishing friendships with the locals, many of whom were very kind to help me navigate through the everyday challenges of working and living in India. Finally, doing an international internship also opened up plenty of opportunities for travelling!

There are many lessons which I learnt from both the organisation and country. The most interesting would be the concept and practice of ‘Jugaad’. Jugaad is an Indian, unorthodox way of innovation, of finding any way to get the desired outcome. Many of its examples are found in everyday situations such as using a recycled bike motor to power a sugar cane press. The emphasis is on thinking out of the box and making use of available resources with minimal cost and wastage. Schools and companies can learn from such localised and frugal concepts of innovation to encourage creative thinking in projects to achieve environmental and cost sustainability.

I strongly recommend fellow NUS students to embark on their own journey of personal and professional development with an international internship. For Seva Mandir, they do not only seek out a certain profile of students. Hence, it is important for applicants to identify their own areas of interest/expertise and be flexible with it too. A certain degree of fitness is also expected due to the demands of field work and travelling in rural areas, but that is all part of the fun!

**HUANG JIANYI**

**I-INTERN WITH SEVA MANDIR (UDAIPUR, INDIA)**

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

**FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES ( GEOGRAPHY)**

Jhabla village, where Jianyi’s work place is based in, is spread across a 10km radius within the Aravalli mountain range.
As a financial analyst intern, I was tasked to complete a few analysis projects. The first project is the air ticket cost analysis where I analysed the costs of air fares over the months and came up with suggestions for budgeting and for reducing costs which included analysing the destinations and origins of the travel because there are many different nationalities involved. A systematic review based on yearly, monthly and country basis was put up after analysing and categorising the data. The report was then summed up with reports and data summaries integrated with suggestions for future reference.

The second project is the transportation cost analysis. My objective was to reduce their transportation cost. Hence, I analysed different transportation alternatives and calculated the costs and the efficiency of each case. This project is the most challenging one among all the others because of the involvement of more people. The collection of data from the finance department, logistics department, transport coordinators and operations call centre was indeed arduous due to the many different types of data needed to be extracted to calculate the exact costing and to review the efficiency of the transport routes properly. A new efficiency index was built to compare the various routes and determine the relative efficiency. This report involved many possibilities of calculating the averages, and many assumptions had to be made. With the data summary, we concluded the budgeting and reviewing of the guards’ transportations.

The third project involves the accommodation costs. The main aim of the report is to provide a better budget for the company based on the individual security projects they take up. The fourth project delegated to me was to analyse the costs of the guards. The main purpose of the report is to provide a better budget for the company to find out the cost yet to be incurred and the cost already incurred in the situation when the guards leave the company before the end of service.

In my opinion, Qatar is a growing economy, somewhat similar to Singapore during her initial growth as there are limited human resources. With the upcoming World Cup in 2022, Qatar is gradually preparing and paving the developments for the large volume of incoming tourists. They have this area called the West Bay, which is very similar to our Marina Bay. I believe that in the years to come, we can see Qatar growing to be like Singapore, slowly and carefully planning their transport systems and their housing to attract more investors into this country. With so many foreigners in the country, they have done a good job trying to maintain the culture and not to lose it. It is important for a country not to forget its roots while becoming more commercialised and globalised. Despite the large numbers of foreign talent, the locals do not feel threatened to leave their country as the country has laws that help and protect the interests of the locals. I feel that it is right for the government to try and retain the locals with the incentives and laws they have implemented. With that being said, it is also important for the locals not to abuse the advantages.

Due to the rich Muslim culture in Qatar, the non-Muslims will also be aware of their actions and behaviours to align it with their teachings. Singapore being a multi-religion country, I believe it is also important to respect one another’s practices by being more sensitive to their festivals. For example, during Ramadan, there should be more flexible time given to the Muslim for their prayers and sufficient rest.

The most important and valuable skill I have learnt during my stay here was to communicate, respect and handle people of different nationalities and religions. As Qatar is a country with limited local population, they also depend on expatriates to grow their economy, resulting in a country filled with people of different backgrounds. It has equipped me with the necessary skills to pursue a career outside of Singapore in the future. The interactions I have with the various expatriates have taught me a lot. It is then when I learnt to see things differently.
I-INTERN WITH CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL (APIA, SAMOA)
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE - FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (GEOGRAPHY)

From the period of 12 June 2016 to 5 August 2016, I was attached to the Conservation International Samoa (CI) as a GIS Intern for CI’s BIORAP (biodiversity rapid assessment programme) 2016. The scope of my job included familiarising myself with various maps of the key biodiversity areas the survey intended to cover - including topographic maps as well as remote satellite images of these areas. I came up with preliminary maps for the pre-survey trail cutting, following input from different scientists on possible sites of interest (e.g. a crater that might house interesting birds or an altitudinal transect that might have uncommon plants). These maps were then used for the pre-survey trail cutting, shown to the local villagers, who then, based on their traditional ecological knowledge of their own forest, evaluated the feasibility of such a trail, and, when necessary, suggested alternatives. I went along for the trail cutting with a GPS to mark and map the route that was cut and came up with new maps to prepare for the actual BIORAP survey.

These new maps, as well as the digital GPX files, were then passed to the scientists for the BIORAP, so they could navigate in those sites and choose where to plot their transects and point counts.

Besides the map work I was involved in, I helped out with the logistics of organising a survey which included camping for up to 4 nights in pristine forest sites. This included moving food supplies, camping equipment and grouping up such items into various sets so each scientist team could have enough supplies. During the actual BIORAP, I also followed the coastal team for one of the sites and assisted the marine biologists in doing sample counts along various transects of the beach areas. Lastly, I followed the Birds team as well as the Plants team in different areas to map new transects that they wanted to explore and got the opportunity to see the scientists in action, with their data collection methods.

The whole experience of living abroad for 2 months was also new to me, especially in a place as unfamiliar as Samoa. It was refreshing to immerse myself in a different culture and observe both the similarities and differences of working in such a place. Coming here also prepared me better for places that are not as urbanised as Singapore, and taught me to adapt to different cultural norms. For example, in Samoa, which is heavily influenced by Christianity, most shops were closed on Sundays, and thus, the other interns and I had to plan and sometimes buy, in advance, what we were going to have for dinner.

One unique trait about Samoa is the presence and strength of local communities. Most lands in Samoa fall under the jurisdiction of different villages, and for the survey, we had to get permission from 4 different villages to access their forests for the survey. Even the government officials that worked with us had to play by the rules set by the village chief. This is different from Singapore, where the government usually has a lot more power. We faced conflict with the local communities more than one occasion, and plans had to be changed because of that. While I did not understand what was going on in the council meetings that the Samoan government officials had with the village elders, I did notice the respect and earnestness the project manager showed to the villagers. The BIORAP also included capacity-building as one of its aims, to bring local villagers along with us and teach them about the biodiversity of their forests, as well as how to manage it sustainably. The focus on community ownership and a strong sense of community was interesting to me, as Singapore has lost most of its vestiges of “kampong-spirit”. While estates in Singapore are nowhere near as commend, the ownership of public spaces and green spaces that the villagers have here is something I feel Singapore can learn from – government and NGOs should work with grassroots and local communities in projects, and aim for a two-way learning experience for both parties, in order to further whatever goal they may have, be it environmental and social.
As a student and aspiring marketing researcher, I really enjoyed my time at Volkswagen. The opportunity helped me realise that I did not make a wrong decision in choosing a career in marketing research. At first, I believed that my responsibility would strictly pertain to daily administrative tasks; however, my experience at Volkswagen turned out to be much more than that. My team ensured that I was very involved in many projects, in some cases, they would allow me to take the lead in presentations. In one case, I researched and compiled the necessary information for a new car concept that will make its debut in the future in China. I worked directly with team leads and managers to help assess and determine the project’s viability. My research included numerous marketing techniques such as geomarketing, SWOT analysis, new product conceptualisation, etc. As a marketing assistant, I played an important role in turning detailed research information into concise and readable information for both technical and non-technical audiences. I also analysed current after-market solutions and created potential market overviews for innovative equipment items (e.g. head-up display ‘HUD’, dashboard camera, etc.) which were considered and implemented for the company’s future model strategy. I felt that my overall contributions were meaningful and impactful which is something that I did not initially expect from this internship.

In all honesty, going into this internship I had little knowledge of automobiles; but, today I can safely say that I am now an expert when it comes to car knowledge. From brands to every single part of the car, I have now gained a vast understanding of the industry. I hoped that joining an internship outside my comfort zone would be the best way to challenge myself, and fortunately this experience did not disappoint my expectations. At the job, I was very exposed to using Microsoft Office, and I believe that this experience has helped me develop a higher proficiency at using this tool. In fact, I have worked with colleagues to implement macros, and I also participated in creating my teams very own Excel tool template to assist in facilitating price index data input and calculations to support the project’s pricing strategy. Furthermore, I became an expert at exporting data, as I was subject to translating a large amount of information on a daily basis. The experience helped me further refine some of the soft skills that I already possess, and it allowed me to really put into perspective how to apply what I had learned in university to the real world.

I acquired technical and non-technical data analysis skills such as sales data analysis for market trends, extensive competitor analysis, and competitive price analysis to name a few. Upon gaining a deeper understanding of the auto industry, I can safely say that I could see myself pursuing a career in this industry. Having worked with people from numerous backgrounds such as Germany, France, China, USA, and Canada made me realise that a multi-cultural environment leads to having a very dynamic team culture. As we are all from different backgrounds, it helps drive more interesting opinions and ideas. I did not have any difficulty interacting and integrating myself into the team. As a matter of fact, despite our different backgrounds, everyone I worked with was very friendly and helpful.

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Front cover photo: Esther Koh Hui Min, i-Intern with World Vision Lanka, spending a fun-filled Saturday afternoon at the Dehiwala Beach playing team-building games, Colombo, Sri Lanka.