



# SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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Management Major,  
Global & Strategic Management  
Concentration  
International Business Minor  
East Asian Studies Minor

*Virginia Heard studied abroad in Singapore spring semester 2006. In the first of a two-part series she tells us about her experience.*

It took me 20 hours to fly from Washington D.C. to Singapore and it took me 20 minutes to walk from my gate at Changi airport to a shiny blue taxicab. It was hot and sunny on the equator at noon on January 1, 2006. Singapore is twelve hours ahead of the East Coast of the United States and as I stepped into the country that would be my home for the next four months, the New Year's ball was dropping in New York City. I was in Asia for the first time



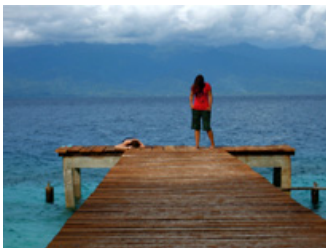
and I had nothing but a big black suitcase with me. I knew that my friends and family were all awake, cheering in the New Year and I knew that I was as far removed from them as I had ever been. I wished the driver a happy new year and turned my eyes out of the open window towards the blue sky, the wide road and the palm trees.

scrapers as my shiny blue cab skirted the highways of Singapore.

I spent the first day at a hotel on Orchard Road, Singapore's famous shopping area, adjusting to the temperature, time zone and atmosphere of the tidy, efficient and modern country. I took my time exploring the surrounding area and had simple plans. After a few days, I went the big, modern, green campus of the National University of Singapore and moved into my single dorm room. I was pleased to have two big windows with a view of the boat docks that circle Singapore's coast. I kept those windows open all the time, with only a ceiling fan cooling down the tropical heat that initially seemed inescapable. I surprised myself by quickly adjusting to the warmer conditions and I am now quite comfortable sleeping in 90 degrees with a fan on low.

I would return to Changi Airport throughout my four months in Singapore to take trips to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. I would scuba dive in Pulisan, be on the radio in Ambon, hike the Mulu Jungle in Borneo, meet artists in Hanoi, attend a funeral in Toraja, shop in Kuala Lumpur and sunbathe in Krabi. I would meet friends who would become my travel companions who would become the people that I trust in the most obscure and dangerous situations. Unaware of these things to come, I sat forward in my seat, eager to meet whatever they were. The great possibility of the future surrounded me in the shape of tropical plants, colorful buildings and magnificent sky-

After a week in Singapore, a country three times bigger than my hometown of Washington D.C., I was settled, comfortable and confident. Classes soon started and I was quickly immersed in my studies. I studied linguistics and theatre. I took two courses that focused on history, culture and economics in South Asia. Studying South Asia from Southeast Asia was far



**Republic of Singapore**

- 699.1 sq km
- 4 million people (growth rate 1.15%)
- 76% Chinese, 15% Malay, 6% Indian
- English, Malay, Mandarin & Tamil languages
- 31% Taoist, 28% Buddhist, 18% Muslim, 10% Christian, 4% Hindu
- Parliamentary democracy





more beneficial than it could have been if I were studying from the United States. Many of my professors and classmates were native to South Asian countries and they were able to share a perspective of the region untainted by the western eye.

I explored corners of Singapore so rich with life it took frequent visits to keep pace with the environment. I was constantly soaking in my surroundings and I was able to piece together a coherent understanding of the country and its citizens. There is a smooth clash, a happy collision, and a startling confrontation at every street corner in Singapore. Ancient traditions take place in cutting edge buildings. Tropical plants climb over new bridges. There is no lack of modern luxury as Starbucks, Gucci stores, and white Mercedes taxis fill the small country. Under the cosmopolitan skin of Singapore is a vibrant, natural life far different from Western cities. Chinese, Malaysian, Indonesian, American, Thai, Indian, European, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani men and women are living in Singapore bringing their unique heritage to the melting pot that is the city, the island and the country.



Singapore is so advanced in its infrastructure, in its policy and in its systems that it is literally shocking to take the bridge over the small bit of ocean to Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Only after traveling through the countries that neighbor Singapore did I realize how unique it is in the region. Crossing back into Singapore after being in Johor Bahru is like going forward in time. In a short plane or bus ride I could experience a world dramatically different from my own, a place where people lived in bare feet and had never seen a cell phone, a place where men farmed coconuts and children fished for the family's dinner. I spent most weekends traveling to different parts of Southeast Asia and I was able to push my comfort zone further than I thought I would ever have

to. It is in those experiences that I was really shaken and amazed. After days of "roughing" it, I enjoyed returning to the modern comforts found in Singapore. I took classes on a wireless campus and could have lunch at a Canadian burger place. In those school weeks in Singapore I rested and prepared myself for the next adventure outside of the cosmopolitan world. I will write about my series of adventures around Southeast Asia in the next newsletter.

When I left for Singapore I had a vague conception of Asia; after living in Singapore I have a tangible understanding of it. I have been exposed to and fallen in love with the beauty, the antiquity and the vitality of Asia. I came back to the United States with determination to learn more about Asia and I have added an East Asian Studies minor to my International Business minor. I plan living and working in Asia and I will be studying Mandarin Chinese in the fall.

One of the incredible people I met in Singapore is a man named Pang, a driver I met after a day at the beach. He offered me his business card and from then on he was my driver and friend. Several times a week, Pang would take me downtown. My friends and I kept CD's in his white Mercedes Benz. He loved to tell me about young passengers that he picked up and how they reacted when he played my CD's for them. No matter what time of night it was I could call Pang and, if he could not come himself, he would send a friend. When Pang brought my big black suitcase and me to the airport on my last day in Singapore we could not stop talking the entire ride. He gave me a gift that his wife had made for me and I left all of the CD's with him. We hugged goodbye and I promised to call him as soon as I came back to Singapore. It was not until I was boarded my plane that I realized that I had forgotten to pay him, and somehow it did not matter. A driver had not taken me to the airport, a friend had given me a ride.

- Virginia Heard



Look for Part II of Virginia's Report from Singapore: April 6<sup>th</sup>

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