

My Year in Singapore - Han Tonnu

Hi, my name is Han and I'm a mathematics undergraduate student. I spent the last year in Singapore for my year abroad, and here I will be describing exactly what that was like for me.

If I had to summarise this past year into just a few words, it would have to be "once-in-a-life-time experience". I never really knew what to expect but it's safe to say that it was better than I could have imagined. I made unforgettable memories, life-long friends and experienced so many new cultures.

About Singapore

One of the first things I noticed when arriving in Singapore was how diverse it is. There are many ethnic groups in Singapore, namely Chinese, Indian and Malay, which also means a wide range of languages spoken i.e. Mandarin, Tamil, Malay and English, however English is the main language. Diversity also means a large variety of great food and that was one thing Singapore did not disappoint with. There are food courts and Hawker centres on almost every corner! They are made up of stalls of so many different types of food like Korean, Mala hotpot, Ban Mian, Indian, Japanese and, of course, Chicken Rice. Food courts and Hawker centres are similar but Hawker centres tend to be more open air i.e. they may have a roof but not indoors, whereas food courts are usually indoors and airconned. Moving onto the weather, aircon is definitely important. Singapore is very hot and humid all year round but most places are very well air-conditioned, like malls, public transport, lecture halls, to the point where you should bring a jumper to not get too cold in the aircon. There is a fair bit of rain and thunder too, and they are usually much more intense than how we get it in the UK. In terms of getting around Singapore, the public transport is very good. The MRT is the train system that connects Singapore and there are also many buses. Both of these are clean, reliable and spacious and take contactless card payments. There are also many taxi options- Grab and Gojek were the most popular and cheapest options and they are both used around most of Asia. Overall, my favourite thing about Singapore is the safety. Nowhere is 100% safe (so still be mindful) but Singapore is pretty close- for example being able to leave your phone on a table to claim it or being able to safely walk around at night.



About University



I spent my year at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). I stayed in halls on campus, which were quite different to those in the UK. At NTU and the majority of universities in Singapore, there are a mix of single and double rooms (double meaning you share with a roommate), and most rooms do not have an attached bathroom. The floors are split by genders and the rooms on each floor share a communal bathroom. My floor had about 25 rooms and the bathroom had 5 toilets and 4 showers, but there was never a problem of waiting for a toilet/shower, there would usually only be one other person in the bathroom at the same time. There was also a mix of aircon and non-aircon rooms. I was unfortunately given a non-aircon room, which was cheaper but not pleasant at all in hot Singapore. There were, however, communal aircon spaces that I would go

to cool down like study rooms or lounges. One thing that surprised me was how the halls do not have kitchens, there is a pantry with a microwave and kettle, but no space to really cook. This meant we would have to buy our meals from the food courts/canteen- which are there a lot of. The NTU campus is huge. It is made up of about 23 halls, 13 canteens, department buildings, libraries, sports facilities and the infamous Hive. Thankfully there are free shuttle buses that loop around the campus.

In terms of studies, NTU has a two semester system: Semester 1 is from Aug-Dec and Semester 2 is Jan-May. This means exams are taken at the end of each semester as opposed to the end of the year and module choices are completely separate for each semester. I found the modules here had a stronger coursework/project focus including group projects and this was nice to experience a different working style and meet new people. I really enjoyed the free choice of modules that Warwick gave me. I decided to take some Maths modules but also lots of other modules I had an interest in like Data Analytics and some languages like Mandarin, French and Vietnamese. There was even a Basketball module that I took, which was so much fun. There were a lot of cool modules at NTU that most unis don't offer such as Pilates, Weightlifting, Sculpture Class and other sports like Football, Tennis etc. but these are quite hard to get a place in. There are, however, many clubs, societies and sports teams you can get involved in- both for the university and your hall.



Highlights

My favourite thing abroad doing a year abroad was being able to travel to so many different countries. Travelling around Singapore was great, for example seeing landmarks like Marina Bay Sands, Sentosa etc. but it was also a great base to travel around Asia. I got to visit so many countries and experience their cultures, such as Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia (Bali), Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan. This was such an amazing experience and I made so many memories on these trips.

Another highlight was getting to meet people from all over the world. The exchange programme at NTU (and other unis) take on so many students (around 200) and they are all in similar positions- coming to a whole new country to study, hence everyone was very friendly and open and it was really easy to make new friends. Also, whilst travelling you get to meet people from all walks of life. One thing I did not realise before was, most other exchange students (not from the UK) are only on a semester programme. In the UK, the majority of exchange programmes are for a year, but this is only really the UK that does this, so when the new semester comes, you'll meet more people and make more new friends.

Tips and Advice

- **Put yourself out there.** This would be my number one tip- try to meet and talk to lots of people and get involved with hall activities, societies or just casual things arranged by exchange students. When I went, there was not much arranged for us in terms of social activities to meet other exchange students, so it was pretty much just down to us. There should be a Whatsapp groupchat, which you should definitely join.
- **Try new things.** Similar to the last point, be open to trying new things. For example, food you haven't tried before or cultural activities.
- **Carry cash.** A lot of places in Singapore do not accept Visa/Mastercard and/or contactless payments. The places that do not accept these are hawker centres or smaller stores. They have their own "NETS" system, which you need a Singaporean bank account for.

- **Open a bank account as soon as you can.** If you will be there for a year, I recommend opening a bank account as early as possible. This will save you money in conversion fees and it will allow you to use the “NETS” payment system, which is used pretty much everywhere and this is a great help. The bank, DBS, is quite quick at opening an account for you and this can be done online so I recommend opening with them- it should take about 4 weeks, if you provide the right details.
- **Get Telegram.** Telegram is the most popular messaging service in Singapore. This is what students tend to use and you'll find many channels for your halls, university and societies/clubs here.
- **Student marketplaces.** You may need to buy things i.e. for your room, so instead of buying them brand new, see if there are students selling them as this will save you money. Telegram has channels such as “NTU Marketplace”, where other students post items they are selling. Common items people get are fridges, fans, wifi routers.
- **WiFi.** NTU dorm rooms do not come with WiFi. The hallways, lounges, and communal spaces have WiFi, but once you enter your room, there will not be any so you will need to get a WiFi router, or you can use an ethernet cable to get WiFi onto your laptop and use the WiFi from there.

To conclude...

I could not recommend doing a year abroad enough! I have made endless memories, amazing friends and also been pushed out of my comfort zone, which has only led to my personal growth.

If you have any questions or need help on anything, feel free to email me at han.tonnu@warwick.ac.uk :)

