Prior to leaving

I still remember vividly the myriad of emotions felt while I was in the plane, on my way to Stockholm, Sweden. I was excited and eager to embark on an adventure of a lifetime, yet I felt strangely apprehensive at the same time. It was the first time I was going to be apart from my friends and family for such a long period of time and I did not know exactly what to expect. I had heard from seniors who had previously gone on exchange that they had an amazing time overseas but deep down, I always thought that they were perhaps exaggerating about their experiences. I did not believe that a mere semester spent abroad could have such a profound impact on an individual.

Even though I knew that spending a semester abroad was going to be a key milestone in my life, I never did expect the huge impact that it would have on my life.

I had heard many wonderful and inspiring stories about how breathtakingly beautiful Europe is, with its magnificent architecture, vast landscapes and panoramic views. I chose to go to Stockholm, Sweden for exchange as I felt that this country could offer me the very best that Europe had to offer – gorgeous scenery, picturesque views, cold weather, and most importantly, a clean and safe environment. Looking back now, I can safely say that I made the right choice in going to Sweden because I never did once regret my decision.

While in Sweden

Most swedes are able to speak fluent English and when prompted, many will be happy to converse with you in English. Sweden is also home to Ikea, Volvo, Ericsson, Lakerol and H&M, amongst many other famous brands.

I have to admit, prior to arriving in Sweden; I did not have much knowledge about this Scandinavian country, apart from the fact that I knew it was going to be nail bitingly cold - and boy, it was! Upon arrival in Sweden, the first thing that hit me was how I was surrounded by white, fluffy snow everywhere. Blankets of frozen ice covered the pavements and I slipped a couple of times because I was not used to walking on the slippery ice. The temperature was around -10 degrees then (I had arrived right smack in the middle of winter) and it took me quite awhile to get used to the cold. How different it was as compared to tropical Singapore, where you start sweating within 5 minutes of stepping out of your house! It was indeed an eye-opener though, because experiencing 4 months of harsh winter permitted me to take part in many activities that were offered only during winter. I had a picnic on a frozen lake, was caught in a heavy snow storm which lasted for one whole day, had a few snowball fights along the way and of course, I made snowmen for the first time in my life! Best of all, I was fortunate enough to travel within the Arctic Circle to catch a glimpse of one of the World’s seven natural wonders – the aurora borealis (or Northern Lights). These experiences will forever be etched in my memory and I will never forget them for as long as I live.
Lessons at my host university were rather different from lectures and tutorial lessons conducted at NUS. Class sizes at KTH were smaller and students there were extremely vocal. Swedes, like many of their European counterparts, are very vocal and eloquent at expressing their opinions and views to an audience. Professors did not believe in spoon feeding us too as they expected us to be highly independent learners who would take the initiative to seek help if we felt that we needed extra guidance.

Swedes are generally friendly and will be more than willing to help you out if you’re caught in a predicament. I remember going to an Ikea outlet during the first week I was at Stockholm. I felt helpless while at the self-service counter in Ikea, looking around frantically because there was a long queue behind me and I was not sure how to scan my items and pay for them myself without the help of a cashier. Thank goodness there was a gentleman behind me in the queue who guided me in scanning and paying for my items quickly. We even stopped to chat for awhile after that as he was interested in knowing more about Singapore. This small incident was just one of the many which made me realize that Swedes are a warm and friendly bunch who will do what they can to make you feel right at home in a foreign land.

I cannot emphasize this enough - Sweden is a beautiful country. Vast greenery and azure, clear waters make up a large part of this country and it is no wonder that Swedes are very environmentally conscious. They are more than willing to go the extra mile in helping to conserve the natural environment. I shared a corridor kitchen with around 10 other corridor mates and we were strongly encouraged to sort out our rubbish according to the types of materials that they were made of.

I also had the pleasure of meeting many Europeans from all over the continent – Spaniards, Italians, French, Germans, and Belgians etc. They were all eager to know more about Singapore and were indeed surprised when I told them that our first language is English (and not some sort of ‘Singaporean language’!) and that no, we are not part of China. Telling them that chewing gum was banned in Singapore sure did raise quite a few eyebrows! I also learned more about the different cultures and quirks unique to other countries as well, making it mutually beneficial for me too.

**Traveling around Europe**

I seized every opportunity I could to travel around Europe, even going on several solo trips to England and Scotland. Never once did I feel lonely because I made friends everywhere I went. I exchanged life stories and had many interesting conversations with solo travelers from all over the world. It made me realize that money and career are no doubt two very important things in life, but they are not everything. I believe that it is imperative that I strive to maintain a maximal work-life balance in the future.

**Looking Back**

The 6 months that I spent in Stockholm were probably the best few months of my life, not only because I had the time of my life there but also because I grew up a lot during that period. Meeting people from all over the world changed my perspectives and outlook on life in general.

In Singapore, a comfort zone for most of us, we are used to having things our way all the time. Most of us still expect things to be handed us to us on a silver platter. We believe that it is our prerogative to have clean running water flowing from our taps, that our MRT trains run
smoothly and without a glitch, that our streets are safe even during the wee hours of the night, and that there should be a shopping mall at every nook and cranny so that we are able to escape from the suffocating heat and humidity. We often fail to count our blessings and realize that even though our tiny little island is not perfect; our merits far outnumber the demerits. For instance, we complain about how hot and humid it is here all the time when some people overseas are not even able to step out of their houses without being wrapped up in several layers of clothing first! Trust me; it is not easy tolerating the harsh cold weather especially when your skin starts cracking and bleeding due to the lack of moisture in the air.

Prior to leaving, I must admit that I had a very myopic view towards life and people in general. I think that Singaporeans can learn a thing or two from Europeans when it comes to judging others. Many Europeans respect and understand that different people have different hierarchies of priorities; most importantly, they believe that individuality should be respected and in fact encouraged! Diversity and acceptance of idiosyncrasies are key ingredients in making a place a largely conducive and pleasant home for people of all races.

I have also learned to count my blessings and appreciate my family members and close friends more. I envy how many Europeans are able to live life to the fullest as most are able to strike a perfect balance between work and leisure. In Singapore, we are too often caught up in the never ending rat race that we fail to pause and appreciate the finer things in life – the things that money can’t buy. By that, I am referring to relationships and strong bonds forged between you and your loved ones which cannot be bought by money or other material goods.

With that, I can conclude by saying that juniors should make a bold move and apply for student exchange to another part of the world – be it in Asia, America, Europe or even Africa! You will certainly not be disappointed. I strongly encourage students who have not been abroad, to step out of their comfort zone and travel out of Singapore for a few weeks at least, and experience first-hand how much the world has to offer. After all, university life is not all about chasing distinctions every semester and working from day to night trying to pull up our GPAs. My humble opinion is that the most learning is ironically done outside of the classroom. Therefore, I fervently believe that spending 6 months abroad was without a doubt, the highlight of my entire university experience.

I guess the only downside is that I am already itching to go on my next trip... And I can’t wait!

**Top 10 tips for living in Sweden**

1) Try the local Swedish dishes. There’s more to Swedish cuisine than just Ikea meatballs and mashed potatoes! Eating out is expensive though, which might actually be a blessing in disguise as you will be forced to brush up on your culinary skills! For the slightly more adventurous, be sure to try Surströmming, a swedish delicacy consisting of fermented (rotten?) herring. A word of caution though: Just a slight whiff of the stench might make you lose your appetite! This is definitely not for the faint hearted.

2) Never, ever leave the house without a jacket. Yes, the weather is erratic and you never know when it is going to get chilly just like... That.

3) The SL card will be like your lifeline. It works like an EZ Link card and it’s not wise to leave your home without it! The distances between metro stops are quite far apart and it will be extremely tiring to walk from one place to another.
4) Swedes are very beautiful and fashionable. They take a lot of pride in looking good and dressing up so when in Rome, do as the Romans do! It is rare to see a commuter in the train not immaculately put together.

5) Visit the largest Ikea in the world!

6) Walk down Drottninggatan, very much like Singapore’s Orchard Road. Have a cup of coffee at one of the al fresco cafés along the street and people watch. You will not be disappointed, trust me ;)

7) Take a cruise down the Stockholm archipelago. Stockholm is actually an archipelago made up of many small islands, thus what better way to explore Stockholm than by boat!

8) The nightlife in Stockholm is amazing. Sturegatan, Medborgarplatsen and Östermalmstorg are the hippest places to be at when the sun sets.

9) LIDL is the cheapest supermarket in Stockholm- very important for poor students on a tight budget! I visited this place up to three times a week to stock up on fresh meats, vegetables and snacks.

10) Travel up to other parts of Sweden where you will be awe-struck at the postcard views of this gorgeous country. And of course, make as many Swedish friends as you can! What better way to learn more about Swedish culture than from a local’s perspective?