Two SMU students tell KELVIN SAM how an exchange programme in Milan has changed their lives

NADIA Lajam and Fiona Angelica are counting the precious days remaining before they leave Milan. Both Singapore Management University (SMU) students are on a four-month exchange programme with Bocconi University, and their final exams in two months' time will end with their return home.

"We are counting down the days because we are going to miss being here," said Nadia as she gestures at the autumn scenery. But that will not be the only thing that both girls will miss. They also talk about the new outlook they have gained in life and the enduring friendships they have made.

"I think it's important to spend more time overseas now. When you begin your career, you will always be burdened with work pressures. I believe being here as a student has made me more receptive to these new experiences," said Fiona. "Life here is truly different. You always hear about creating a work-life balance in society but this really takes place in Italy. People take two-hour lunches and close their shops during lunchtime!"

Of her experience, Nadia said: "When you are on exchange, you tend to meet international students from all over the world and that's just amazing. I have really gained a holistic picture of life here."

Priceless experience

Holistic is certainly the appropriate word to use for their Milan experience. Both students have been busy attending classes with students from over 30 countries, going for Italian language classes in the evening and even making weekend trips around the rest of Europe.

For Fiona, being in one of the fashion capitals of the world has helped the SMU student to take a step closer to her dream of being a footwear designer.

"It was a choice between an exchange programme in Spain or Italy since both are known for their expertise in shoe design. But I chose Bocconi because it was known as one of the best universities in Europe," she said.

"Besides, Italy looks like a boot on the map," added Nadia laughingly.

Going on an exchange programme in Europe however, is barely affordable. Both girls estimate the total cost of their trip to be about $11,000. Even a subsidised meal at the student cafeteria can cost more than eight dollars.

Still, both students say the experience is priceless. "You can't really put a value to the life-changing aspects of an exchange programme. Going on exchange alone allows you to see what kind of person you really are when you are stripped of your social network and everything that you are familiar with. It teaches you to be independent," said Fiona.

"Besides, I'm sure employers would appreciate a more cosmopolitan perspective from a widely-travelled graduate!"

"When I'm here in Italy, I feel this strong tolerance for your personal goals here. It feels like you can do anything you want in your life," said Nadia. "You can choose to spend your life basking outside a cafe or make a living by sketching pictures of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. People will be less quick to judge."

As the time of their departure draws near, Fiona sums up the optimistic sentiment that both girls have about their experience: "It's a little too early to tell, but something tells me that some of the people I meet here are going to be my lifelong friends."

-- Fiona Angelica

Friends for life: (From left) Fiona Angelica and Nadia Lajam with an Italian friend. Despite the high price tag for the four-month stint, the two SMU students say the experiences and relationships cultivated during their stay is invaluable.