In love with distant Chile

Two SMU undergrads speak to KELVIN SAM about their learning experiences in exotic Latin America

The first blush, the group of 30 Singaporean delegates to Chile appeared to be savvy corporate veterans attending an overseas MBA programme. They were dressed in immaculately neat business suits, were articulate and carried themselves with an easy air of confidence during company visits. Talking to Sumerry Leonardi and Sheena Cheong certainly reinforced such an impression.

Sheena and Sumerry spoke eloquently about exploring the largest subterranean copper mine in the world, visiting the Santiago Chamber of Commerce and attending presentations by renowned Chilean professors. Further probing revealed that both Singaporean delegates were Singapore Management University (SMU) students on a Business Study Mission (BSM).

"BSMs provide students with a chance to understand the complexities of doing business in places with distinctly different political, economic and cultural dimensions," explained Sumerry. Both SMU students signed up for the BSM to distant Chile because of their destination’s exotic nature and the exposure to Chile’s industries.

Experiences to remember

“I signed up for BSM Chile because of its geographic diversity. Chile has both the snow-capped mountains of the Andes and the world’s driest desert,” said Sheena. “During this course, we were required to complete group projects focusing on Chile’s industries, thereby allowing us to gain specialised knowledge about the various aspects of Chile’s economy.”

Both undergraduates chose projects with a marketing focus. Sheena’s team completed a marketing proposal to reduce the wine industry’s surplus supply problems, while Sumerry’s team recommended a strategic solution on boosting Chile’s tourism industry.

Both of our proposals highlighted the need for Chile to highlight its national competitive advantages such as its stable political climate, its low crime rate and its reputation as Latin America’s star economic performer,” said Sheena.

Growing confidence: Sheena (second from left) and other delegates of the Business Study Mission to Chile posing outside a church there.

The two SMU delegates spoke warmly of their memorable experiences in Chile. For Sheena, the delegation’s full day visit to the largest subterranean mine in the world represented the highlight of her trip.

“The copper mine is owned by Codelco, the world’s foremost copper producer, and we had the chance to go into the copper mine. It was really amazing witnessing the sophisticated mining equipment in action and discovering the presence of so many amenities. It was certainly surprising to see clean dining halls and offices within the mine!” said Sheena.

For Sumerry, the rich diversity of the experiences offered by the BSM meant a lot to the entrepreneurial Indonesian student. “During our study mission, we were not limited only to the business aspects of Chile. Through presentations and networking sessions, we had an opportunity to learn about the cultural and political aspects of Chile as well. I think that’s pretty important because doing business in a foreign country requires an entrepreneur to think about business, cultural and political factors.”

Going to Chile has certainly shaped Sumerry and Sheena’s perspectives about their careers. Staying in a hostel during her travels around Latin America inspired Sheena’s interest in joining the hospitality industry after graduation. “During my stay in a hostel in Argentina, I really enjoyed meeting friends from around the world. It’s extremely refreshing to meet people from dramatically different cultures and backgrounds and to learn from them. I believe working with an international hotel chain will allow me to do just that,” she explained.

Sumerry summed up the sentiments of the BSM delegates simply: “Our time in Chile has opened up possibilities of working in the Spanish-speaking world. We have to improve our Spanish first, though!” said Sumerry grinning.