By CINDY TONG

MS PEGGY TAN, a senior associate at public relations consultancy East West Public Relations, had the opportunity to pursue her Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree at the prestigious London School of Economics. Yet, she chose to continue her studies in Switzerland.

"It was the course content of the MBA programme offered at the University of St Gallen that appealed to me from the start," said Ms Tan. She explained: "I started my career as a writer in the media industry, and later moved on to related work in corporate communications and public relations. St Gallen offered me an MBA programme specializing in media and communications, which I felt suited my needs well."

The school then won her over completely by helping her make her temporary move to Switzerland as painless and convenient as possible. Its administration staff put her in touch with a Malaysian student from the previous year's batch, and both girls were soon in touch.

Ms Tan recalled: "I took over the apartment she was renting — inheriti-
ning all her books, her notes, and even her kitchen utensils. It made my life a lot easier since everything was already in place when I arrived. Even today, we remain good friends."

Education in Switzerland

It is not just active involvement in student welfare that enables Swiss education institutions to stand out. The country's 12 universities boast comprehensive course curriculums in subjects such as the life sciences, business and engineering.

Dr Susanne Pirhofer-Hess, director of the Swiss Embassy in Singapore, a platform of the Swiss Embassy for education, research and innovation, said: "Switzerland has a strong tradition in academic excellence dating back more than 500 years. "We have produced some of the world's most famous Nobel Prize winners, including Albert Einstein and Kurt Wüthrich. Many of our institutions are constantly on the list of the best European universities."

Today, research publications from Swiss institutions are enjoying similar success. Swiss publications take first place in citation rates for scientific research papers in molecular biology and genetics, engineering sciences and physics, just to name a few.

Around the world, Swiss institutions are most well-known for their undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in the biomedical sciences, business administration, hotel management, international relations and human sciences.
Adapting to Swiss culture

Despite the high quality of education, Swiss institutions remain a largely unexplored territory for most Singaporeans. The language barrier is probably the reason, seeing that Swiss universities typically conduct classes in French, German or Italian. Some universities, such as the University of St Gallen, offer degree courses in English, but this is only limited to selected programmes. However, most institutions also offer language preparation courses for foreign students.

Ms Tan was fortunate that her MBA programme was conducted in English. Even so, she said it was inevitable that she picked up German during her one-year stay in Switzerland. She said: “I don’t think there is any way you can live in Switzerland and carry on your day-to-day activities without picking up one of its languages, be it French, Italian or German. Even if your classes are in English, you will still need to buy groceries and converse with the locals.”

“The cultural immersion in Switzerland is almost absolute, and whatever the outcome, you will inevitably pick up a third language. I suppose that has to be one of the many advantages of pursuing your education in Switzerland.”

Mountains of opportunities

After the initial language barrier, foreign students in Switzerland will find a wealth of educational opportunities open to them. For one, the cost of university education is heavily subsidised, and the fees for one school year will generally not exceed $2,000.

The diverse student population, comprising nationalities from all parts of the world, also enables a multicultural experience. Ms Tan recalled: “In my class of 33, there were 18 different nationalities. My classmates came from as far away as Serbia and Bulgaria.”

In Singapore, students who are interested in short educational visits to Switzerland will find plenty of opportunities available. Students from the National University of Singapore can attend summer language courses in Switzerland, while graduate students from the university’s department of geography frequently participate in exchange programmes.

Just last month, an entire class of students from the Singapore Management University (SMU), including a lecturer, flew to Switzerland on a novel exchange programme. Their Swiss counterparts, also including a lecturer, then arrived in Singapore to take their places at the SMU.

Students who are interested in education in Switzerland can find out more about programmes offered at The Swiss House. For more information online, visit www.swishouse.org.sg.

Cindy Tong is a freelance writer.