Meat is sweet?

TAFADZWA MARASHA, 20 (Zimbabwe, below)
Just completed his first year in information systems management at the Singapore Management University

DON'T ask Mr Marasha if he's into football – most people assume that of Africans – because he "hates" it. Try Singapore Idol instead, as he is an avid follower of the reality singing show, and sheepishly tells you he thinks undergraduate Jonathan Leong is the best.

And don't ask the Zimbabwean if he goes "hunting". "People have this primitive image of Africa. They think of men with spears. It's not offensive, I actually find it quite amusing," says the soft-spoken and articulate 20-year-old, who's been going out with a Singaporean polytechnic student for the past four months.

More than a year ago, he was waking up at 4am and travelling 75km to make an 8am class at the University of Zimbabwe where he was studying tourism.

While he set his sights on transferring to a university in the United States, a friend was planning to study in Singapore instead as it was more affordable.

He decided to follow suit and applied to SMU online. He was accepted after a telephone interview while his friend didn't make the cut.

When he broke the news to his mother, a sales executive at a printing company, she didn't believe him and asked for SMU's phone number.

"She thought I was joking," says Mr Marasha, who has four younger siblings and whose father works as an ambulance medic.

Singapore proved to be a "major" culture shock on arrival. "I've never known meat to be sweet," he says of sweet and sour pork which he eats at coffee shops. "Now I love it."

While Mr Marasha, who lives in a student hostel in the Novena area, has a grant from the Ministry of Education and an interest-free loan which covers his tuition fees of $22,000 a year, he mans the campus gym reception to help with his daily expenses. Part of the ministry deal is that he will have to work in Singapore for three years after he graduates.

During the current school break, he took on another two jobs – one as telemarketer for a makeover studio, and another selling donation coupons. For the latter, he had to go door to door at HDB housing estates.

"On a Saturday morning, when you're just awake and the door bell rings and it's this black guy standing there asking you for money – the reactions I get are quite funny."  

Tan Dawn Wei