CAMPUS LIFE

Argentine adventure sparks ideas

SMU students on a Latin American business study mission experience new enterprise opportunities and challenges, writes TAMARA MOHANAN KUPPUSAMY

WHEN a group of 25 Singapore Management University (SMU) students set foot in Argentina last year, they had very little idea of what was in store for them. Sure, they’d brushed up on their Spanish. Some had even taken a tango lesson or two.

SMU had also made sure the students learnt something of Argentinia’s history, culture and business environment. But nothing could truly prepare them for the breathtaking reality.

“It’s something you don’t just read about at SMU,” said 21-year-old Jayne Lee, who spoke to BT with other trip members. “It’s a real world,” emphasized the business and social sciences student.

“For me, it opened up a whole new Spanish-speaking world,” added Verapul Supanusonti, a 21-year-old studying business and economics.

The Argentine business study mission, led by Dr Glenn Miharton, was just one of the several missions the university holds every year. The aim of the missions is to immerse students in foreign business environments, to become acquainted with different cultures and languages, and to learn more about the enterprise opportunities and challenges in their chosen country.

Management student Timothy Teoh explained why he wanted to see Latin America: “Very few of us would actually think of going there for a holiday. Going there with the school was a good means to explore the country.”

“We get to see the opportunities that may be overlooked. People usually look mostly at China and India,” said business student Hon Wei Fa. Mr Teoh and Mr Hon, both 23, also study accounting.

When the students arrived in Argentina, they were dazzled by the sights they encountered. They recalls with wonder the demonstration held by protesters armed with baseball bats in Buenos Aires, unhappy over the government’s actions during the 2001 currency crisis.

“The poor still protest about the injustice of the whole thing,” said Ms Lee. “They throw stuff at shops.”

Others agreed it was “quite scary”, although management and accountancy student Avisin Cai, 23, said nobody was hurt.

What did the students think of such action? “I think it’s great,” said 21-year-old business student Elena Almechandani. “It’s people power,” added Mr Cai approvingly.

Mr Teoh observed: “The Latin American people are generally very passionate about everything they do.”

All agreed it was very different from Singapore through. “From our perspective, we do things very efficiently,” said 20-year-old business student Grace Ng. To do business in Latin America, “we would have to embrace and accommodate that culture,” she added.

Protests weren’t the only sights on the streets. Ms Almechandani stated that “we even do tango on the streets there,” and Ms Ng observed that “ween dining, they have tango performers in almost all restaurants”. All agreed that the local specialities—barras grilled beef was mouth-watering, along with the local beer and wine.

The electrifying atmosphere at a local football match also surprised the students. “The locals were getting so violent over the fact that Bora Juniors wasn’t scoring goals—they were getting very emotional. Even kids would badmouth the opponents and the parents were encouraging them!” said Ms Ng. “That’s how we learnt all the expletives in Spanish,” she added, laughing.

Some in the group saw spectacular scenery while glacier hiking in Patagonia. Others made a portentious climb to Inca ruins in nearby Peru. “We asked our guide if anyone had died on the track, and he was quiet. Then, he said: ‘Don’t worry, amigo!’”, exclaimed Mr Supanusonti. Some also tasted ceviche. “Ceviche is made into crocans, but the Peruvians use it for alleviating altitude sickness,” Mr Supanusonti said.

But the trip wasn’t all fun and games, and the contingent eventually kicked down to the business of visiting local companies.

Confectionery makers Arcor showed the team its business model and how politics is intertwined, said Mr Cai. And agriculture giant Cargill shared its insights into “how they survived the peso crisis”, said Mr Hon.

Ms Lee added: “This highlighted how resilient the Argentine environment is. It took them only two to three years to bounce back from the crisis.”

The group learnt more about the agriculture business after a trip to olives crushing company AGD, and were also impressed by dairy cooperative SanCor’s computerised systems. They learnt of potential local jobs too. “A key takeaway from the trip was learning about the internship and work opportunities in this region,” said Mr Teoh.

All in all, the trip showed the group that “Singapore is a comfortable zone and we must get out and see the world,” said Mr Teoh. Mr Cai added: “It really opened us up to business opportunities and the idea of living elsewhere. Latin America, for myself, represents a quite good place for me to live and do business.”