Elvis Chiu meets people with an entrepreneurial bent at an Israeli college, LIN ZHAOWEI reports

ANY people are wary about visiting Israel, given the constant media coverage on the unstable Middle East situation. But for Singapore Management University undergraduate Elvis Chiu, it was the best place he could have gone for an exchange programme.

"I didn’t want to go to the conventional, more popular places like the US and Europe or Asia," said Elvis, who is graduating in business management this year. "I felt that the Middle East would also be an interesting region to explore."

The devout Christian was also keen to visit Jerusalem, known as the Holy Land. His adventurous spirit made him the first SMU undergraduate to go on an exchange programme to Israel at the Interdisciplinary Centre (IDC) Herzliya, as well as the first exchange student the Israeli college has received. Herzliya is a coastal city located north of Tel Aviv. Even though he was only one of the few Asian faces on campus, Elvis was made to feel welcome by the students there.

"The Israelis are very warm and approachable. Some would just come up and start asking me questions about why I came to Israel and what I thought of the country and the Middle East region," Elvis recounted.

But the 23-year-old is no stranger to staying abroad. A Hong Konger, he has studied in Singapore since secondary school. During his time at SMU, he had also gone to India and China for community service and study trips.

In IDC Herzliya, Elvis took courses in business and government at the Raphael Recanati International School, where English is the language of instruction.

One thing that struck Elvis was how vocal the students there are. "The students were so active in class participation. In a lecture hall, it is not uncommon to see 20 to 30 hands up to ask questions."

He also noticed a strong sense of entrepreneurship there, even among students. "Many of my friends there are running businesses or planning to start one even though they are still in school. And they are not afraid to fail."

Elvis almost did not make it to Israel, because of the war in Lebanon last July. His parents, who were supportive initially, feared for his safety when the military conflict began and asked him to give up the trip. Fortunately, the war ended by mid-August and he was finally able to convince his parents to let him go for the exchange programme in October.

Safe and sound
Throughout his time in Israel, he kept in touch with his friends and family mainly by phone and Skype, to assure them of his well-being.

But in truth, he never felt that he was in any danger while there. He points out that the security checks are very stringent and there are only a few "problem areas" in the country.

The other thing he needed to get used to was the different work week in Israel, which starts on Sunday. And during Sabbath, starting on Friday evening and ending Saturday evening, everything grinds to a halt — including shops and the public transport network. Elvis recalls having to buy all his groceries before the shops closed on Fridays.

Better understanding: Elvis, who hails from Hong Kong, believes that a key lesson of his trip was getting to know the situation and developments in Israel and the Middle East better and the magnificent Ramon Crater and another one to the Dead Sea.

In his free time, he travelled with his Jewish friends to many other places, such as Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the Negev desert, the Sea of Galilee and the Golan Heights. Elvis also visited neighbouring countries like Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

Elvis believes one of the key take-aways of his trip was getting to understand the situation and developments in Israel and the Middle East better. "People think it’s not safe here, but it is mainly because the media focuses on the conflicts in the country. But there are many things about the region you cannot fully comprehend unless you have been there. And Israel is a beautiful country."

Elvis is so smitten with the country that he now thinks of it as his "third home" after Hong Kong and Singapore. "I still keep in touch with the developments in the Middle East now, through various news websites. I also plan to visit Israel again when I have the chance," he says.