Enterprising business students from Singapore experience the hospitality and corporate culture of the Middle East

Many in the corporate world have turned their attention to the economic wonder of the Middle East – specifically the GCC countries – but actually know very little past the widespread media image of the region. A group of 32 budding business leaders from the Singapore Management University (SMU), however, certainly returned inspired after having relished the first of its kind opportunity to embark on a fruitful one week Business Study Mission to the United Arab Emirates and Qatar aimed at gaining insight into the international business in this region.

The journey to the Middle East for these group of students started off with a day spent in Qatar followed by 2 days in Abu Dhabi and 4 days in Dubai. A packed and intense schedule met the students daily as they eagerly cherished the rare opportunity to observe and learn about the business climate of the Middle East through visits to government agencies such as the Abu Dhabi Department of Planning and Economy, Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority Dubai Chamber of Commerce and interacting with the Emirati officials. Company visits to renowned property developers such as Al Qudra, Akar Properties, Emaar Properties, Dubai Properties, and Nakheel, developers of the Palm and World islands, also proved to be an eye-opener for many of the students.

To these students Dubai is indeed a place where world-class masterpieces of real estate developments and architectural feats are being realized practically every other day. Current examples include the world’s only seven-star hotel, the Burj Al-Arab, and the ambitious waterfront development, the Palm Jumeirah, which they were fortunate enough to experience for themselves; while others soon to be completed and unveiled are the world’s tallest tower Burj Dubai, the world’s biggest theme park Dubailand, and the world’s largest shopping mall Dubai Mall. In a place where everything strives to be the biggest, the tallest or the largest, quality is the first consideration; it comes as no surprise to them that the UAE has become a melting pot for people of different nationalities, coming together to provide the best talent.

As they visited the various property developer giants, they were constantly asking themselves whether it was only a bubble; but one need only observe the monumental amount of capital committed to projects in the UAE to realize that the boom is just starting. Some US$30-50 billion already committed to long-term projects – and even more incoming – was in itself sufficient proof of the tremendous opportunities present in Dubai for these budding Singaporean leaders.

Already a few reputable Singapore companies such as Banyan Tree, Surbana, DBS and others have made the bold step to invest in the UAE. Why have others, then, not followed suit? Surely the opportunity is open – but it is a matter of taking the initiative, seizing the day, grabbing the chance. When asked about the possibility of working in the region after their graduation, majority of these students remarked that they will be more than willing to. With a number of them staying back to further widen their mental horizons through internships with various companies, these young leaders has surely chosen not to neglect the fast growing economy of the UAE and to be open and unconventional in their thought processes – hallmarks of SMU.

Hospitality Emiratis and Supportive companies

Business meetings aside, these students were fortunate enough to experience the hospitality of the Emirati people. Warm personal welcomes by the company management, elaborately prepared corporate materials, delicious receptions provided after every meeting and even a personal tour in 4x4 vehicles by one company specially for the SMU students of their project site – these were just some examples of the generous and warm hospitality extended by their hosts that the students were able to experience firsthand. Singapore companies operating in the same region, too, matched this hospitality; D&D Financial Services, Surbana, CapitaLand and Banyan Tree were instrumental in the success of this BSM.

Nor was this warm reception limited to corporate bodies and the mission’s hosts and sponsors. These students also got to experience the true hospitality of the locals as they were shown around in Dubai by the people they has just met. The depth of the hospitality shown to us by both the people, and the companies that hosted us, was frankly humbling. It was extremely heartwarming, meeting a people to whom everything, including business, is a deeply human experience. The UAE, obviously, has impressed with much more than their business developments.

Source: This article is contributed by: Febrianto Pratama Wisnata (SMU 2nd Year Business Student) and How Pow Ngee Wilfred (SMU 3rd Year Business Student).
Longing for more

A week, one realizes, is indeed a very short time given the vast developments in the UAE and especially Dubai. But it was definitely an enriching experience for this group of 32 students as this BSM to the UAE has provided the students a platform to look at the world from a different perspective beyond classroom learning and endowed them with invaluable experience with the Middle East economy and society – experience which is sure to serve them well, not only in performing business in the Middle East, but also in Singapore’s corporate arena, and, perhaps, in their private lives as well.

Indeed the scale, the speed, and the sheer ambitious vision of the leading cities of the UAE proved, to say the least, staggering – bringing home to the participating students the need to constantly re-evaluate one’s place in the world, and of the need for more forward-thinking, visionary leadership for their own country. More than this, however, this trip has provided motive, invitation, and opportunity for these students – and, hopefully, on a larger scale, Singapore itself – to enter into greater co-operation, both corporate and cultural, with the UAE.

For more details regarding our trip to the UAE and Qatar, or to enquire on how you can support our future BSM, you may email Professor Caroline Yeoh at carolineyeoh@smu.edu.sg or visit our website at http://www.business.smu.edu.sg/bsm/uaeqatar/.

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