The many shades of our single world

By JOHN LAM

I WRITE this article in my dormitory in the quaint Canadian town of Calgary where everyday is a plethora of accents fills my ears.

As an exchange student in a cosmopolitan institution, I act as an ambassador of sorts for both Singapore and the Singapore Management University (SMU). This includes relaying about a small land mass near the equator, dispelling chewing gum and caning-related myths, as well as shared stories on life in a campus at the heart of a busy business and cultural district.

The varied overseas opportunities offered to me as a Lee Kong Chian scholar have opened my eyes and I adapt and learn from different cultures.

One of the most memorable experiences was Project Utopia, an overseas community involvement project in Johannesburg, South Africa, which involved 20 of my fellow scholars. We conducted team-building camps for the youth there, swept the floors of schools emptied by civil service strikes, built a library for a local high school and executed various community project activities over a period of three weeks. The South Africans were so intrigued by the presence of 20 Asians sweeping the classrooms of their schools that one of their local papers featured us prominently.

This was more than two years ago but I can still vividly remember the “never say die” spirit and the energy that the South Africans and their children possessed, manifested in the way they talk and walk. I was impressed by their perseverance and tenacity to learn, and felt that if they had lived in a more stable and developed environment they would have stood out among their generation. The half-a-dozen laptops we donated to Malvern Primary School would be now be out by the knowledge-hungry youths.

Besides the camaraderie and bonds forged among our group of volunteers, Project Utopia had been a great way to learn what it means to serve the community. It left an indelible impression in helping us understand what it is to be a socially responsible and ethical graduate.

Slightly more than a year later, I had the opportunity to visit several countries in the Middle East under the university’s Business Study Mission. This allows students to study and experience a specific country’s or region’s business and economic environment. I headed to Abu Dhabi following 15 weeks of lessons, meeting guest speakers, writing reports and undertaking project work.

It was a 180-degree turn from South Africa. This was a region flush with capital, and instead of building libraries for the poor, we had to plan networking meetings and programmes to ensure we could learn as much as we could in the short time we had about doing business in the Middle East.

We quickly found out that business is done very differently in this part of the world. While Singapore’s brand of efficiency is treasured, many Middle Eastern businesses find Singaporean companies too business-oriented. In a place where some major contracts are still signed in a tent-like majlis, Singapore’s entrepreneurs have to learn to spend more time developing business relations than business proposals.

What I found similar to the South African youths during our interaction with the Middle Eastern undergraduates was a generation hungry for knowledge. At Abu Dhabi University, after a presentation which introduced Singapore, the Emirati youths responded with many questions and much curiosity about our island nation. I could feel that my Middle Eastern peers were passionate about pushing their already affluent countries even further in the next 30 years.

Awed by the magnificence of Dubai’s Burj Al Arab, spurred by the developments in Bahrain and overwhelmed by the history of Saudi Arabia, I returned to the Middle East in my next semester as a teaching assistant.

Four months later, and I am once again studying – at the University of Calgary. I am reading European history alongside derivative, in a place where options are constantly used to hedge the volatile oil commodity it produces. I am lucky to be able to spend some time in a university located just an hour away from the beautiful Rockies.

Just as I am finishing off this article, my French and Australian roommates beckon me to join them to watch one of Canada’s famous hockey games. My final thought was the privilege I felt in having travelled to such varied places in the world, and the gratitude towards the people that I met, for they have really enabled me to see the world.

Forging bonds: Mr Lam (centre, front row) and his fellow scholars during their trip to Johannesburg. He says as an SMU exchange student, one of his most memorable experiences was Project Utopia, a community involvement project in South Africa.

This is the first of three features by students from the Singapore Management University Lee Kong Chian Scholars’ Programme. The writer, John Lam, is a final-year undergraduate pursuing a double degree in Business Management and Economics at SMU.