SMU student Chuah Sun Soon takes on the world in half a year

25-year-old SMU student Chuah Sun Soon is a social entrepreneur who co-founded the social enterprise Envi Jewellery in 2008. He has been on a whirlwind tour of the Russian Federation, visiting various regions and meeting with local officials to discuss business opportunities. He also visited Lithuania, Slovakia and Russia, where he gave several talks and workshops. In September, he will go to South America for another round of engagements.

Chuah recently returned from Russia, where he was invited to give a talk at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. His presentation was well-received and he received a standing ovation.

In the Chinese diaspora, people are well aware of the cultural heritage and contributions made by SMU students in the past. However, few have heard of Chuah Sun Soon. The news of his success on the world stage has now come as a surprise to many.

Translation:

His 12,000km journey of thanksgiving – From India to Russia, a motorbike journey of blessings

After completing his internship in India, 25-year-old SMU student Chuah Sun Soon makes a journey on motorbike from India to Russia for his exchange programme. He bought a motorbike and rode solo through 14 countries, 12,000km. "I've received help from people of different countries, so even though I was travelling alone, I wasn't lonely," says Sun Soon.

12,000km – from India to Russia, this is what SMU student Chuah Sun Soon did on a solo motorbike journey through 14 countries.

I arranged to meet him to hear the tales of his journey. This afternoon, he arrived on his motorbike. His steady handling of it must be a result of having traversed through different countries and terrains.

"I like to travel. I paid S$1,500 in India for that motorbike I used for my journey," he says. Point to the t-shirt he was wearing he quips, "this is my battle gear." He had won this while on his journey.

Fulfilling a big boy's dream

Last July, Sun Soon began his journey, dressed just like this. He was in New Delhi for his internship, working in a social enterprise that helps ex-convicts find jobs. He soon got news that his application to do an exchange programme at the Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics has been accepted. That's when he decided he will make the journey on a bike.

He spent one and a half months crossing countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, spending about S$5,600.

He describes this as a journey that has "fulfilled a big boy's dream". That's because he's seen the documentary about Ewan MacGregor's trip with his buddy Charley Boorman on two-wheels and was inspired to challenge himself.

Sun Soon's adventure did not end once he reached Russia. Upon finishing his exchange programme, he took trains, buses and even a ship, crossing East Siberia, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia before returning home in January this year.

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Of the two different journeys, Sun Soon felt the journey on wheels allowed him to have a more in-depth interaction with the locals and sometimes even to experience the cold or warmth of society. He felt his return journey was more of a regular backpacking trip. "Riding the bike let me walk into the lives of the locals. I spent a lot of time in my other journey waiting for trains, buses and so had lesser time to interact with the people," he points out.

The most unforgettable part of his journey was not the beautiful scenery or astounding architecture but rather the people and incidents that warmed his heart.

In Slovakia, he stayed in the home of a colleague he met while interning in India. "They were so warm, helping me resolve the problems I encountered on my journey – all these without expecting anything in return. His family only told me to remember the blessings I've received and to pay it forward," he recalls.
Warmer folks in the poorer areas

On this free and easy trip, there were times he didn't even know where he was heading or where he would sleep for the night. The petrol station, the park, even a stranger's car, have all been places where he spent the night.

On a cold and rainy night in Turkey, he had no choice but to take shelter at a petrol station. "The station attendant felt it would be difficult to find accommodation so he let me stay there and because he saw that I was wearing too little on that cold night, he kept keeping me warm with cups of tea," he explains.

He realised that the more backward a place is, the warmer the people are. "Passing through the European countries, I noticed that they don't bother about the people around them and it felt more self-focussed. When I wanted to ask for directions etc, they would be less likely to come to your aid voluntarily," he says. On the other hand, in places like Iran, Pakistan, when some families knew that I was travelling alone, they would even fight to host me. I was very struck by their simplicity and warmth," he says.

It was in Iran that Sun Soon was most touched. One day, he was travelling through a high altitude area when his motorbike broke down, he had no more petrol, a tyre was punctured, his gears and his front headlamp were also out. "I was thinking how could I carry on this journey. Fortunately, a middle-aged man stopped his vehicle and asked if I needed help," he recounts.

But we couldn't communicate. So the man called home and got his daughter who spoke English to speak with Sun Soon. "He even invited me home and they hosted me warmly. His wife cooked many lovely dishes and his daughter even gave me her room to sleep. The next day the uncle brought me to buy spare parts and he personally repaired my bike for me," he says.

Even though his was a simple journey but it was filled with heartwarming memories from different lands. "A beautiful journey is not about returning with souvenirs but to leave filled with the warmth of human interactions. I've received help from people of different countries so even though I was travelling alone, I wasn't lonely," says Sun Soon.

Where he feared most: The borders

Pakistan had a bomb attack, Iran's presidential election resulted in chaos in the capital, the world was under the threat of H1N1 – Sun Soon's journey had more unexpected elements because of this backdrop of global and regional problems.

So as to not have his family members, especially his aging grandmother, worry about him, he did not tell them about his plan. He only told a few good friends and told them that he should be out of contact for two weeks then should they contact his family. "Whenever I could, I would go to an internet café to tell my friends via MSN that I was fine," he says.

But the uncertainties were not his greatest obstacle. Rather they were the unpredictable weather and the lack of trust between people.

"As I was unfamiliar with the local areas, I had a few incidents. Once a heavy downpour that led to a flood soaked by laptop and my books. But well, there are always unexpected things in a journey. So I just take it a step at a time," he says.

But his greatest fear and worry is the times when he has to cross a border. "Crossing one border and entering into another country, another society, another world. Moving from a more backward area to a city, the feeling is different each time. Along with the change in weather and temperature, it made the journey even more tough," he says.
At first, he was wary of the help he received

From 40 degree Celsius India to a cold Russia, Sun Soon experienced different climates. In fact when he was in Austria, the temperature dropped to zero degree Celsius. “I was not prepared. I only had two long pants, two tops and a windbreaker. Fortunately, some kind souls rendered help. I received an outercoat, gloves etc. In the stark weather conditions, I experienced warmth.

But frankly, he was a little wary as coming from city-state Singapore, such generous gestures of help were rare. “At first when I saw strangers coming to help me, I was worried if the person was genuine or had some ulterior motives.

Later, I thought things through. I learnt that the walls between people were built by oneself. The true, the good and the beautiful is a unconditional giving that has always been around. Rather it is us city-dwellers who have built walls around ourselves, not daring to accept the pure and genuine help,” he says.

And so he has dubbed his trip a “people’s journey” - it is a journey of interacting with people of different nationalities and cultures and a journey of discovering human nature.