Grad trips now a rite of passage

More fresh graduates are travelling first before starting careers

By Eisen Teo

GRADUATION trips have become a must for freshly minted degree holders, who see them as a rite of passage ahead of starting their careers.

The trips – usually lasting between five and 15 days – take place in May, June or July, after final semesters end in May.

Those who already have jobs lined up sometimes even push back their first day at work to accommodate travel. Ms Arine Tham, assistant vice-president of human resources at Daiwa Capital Markets, said: “These students know they have to start work very soon after their new job is confirmed.”

Of the 50 fresh university graduates who spoke to The Straits Times, 38 said they were going on graduation trips. The remaining ones are giving such trips a miss because they are short on cash or want to start work instead.

But all of them – even those not travelling – agree such trips are more significant than overseas exchanges because they mark a young person’s transition to the working world.

Budgets for trips range from $500 for cheap getaways on budget flights to thousands of dollars for more exotic, exclusive itineraries, mostly funded by the students’ savings or their incomes from part-time jobs such as tutoring.

Because the graduates regard these trips as their last long vacation with schoolmates before settling into full-time jobs, most seek a trip to remember.

In August, Ms Estelle Low, 22, will jet off to Sweden with a friend on a month-long backpacking trip. The $4,000 she will be spending is worth it, she said. “I doubt I’ll get an opportunity to travel so carefree like this with my best buddy. Nothing beats the feeling of liberation and relaxation before career stress kicks in.”

The journalism graduate from Nanyang Technological University is taking a month’s leave from her new job in corporate affairs – and is very thankful to her boss for letting her do so.

Student trips used to be funded by parents or bank loans as far back as 20 years ago, said Ms Alicia Seah, senior vice-president of marketing and public relations at CTC Holidays.

Now, however, students say Internet travel portals and budget airlines mean they can afford and customise more trips.

And downturns seem to do little to ground such trips. Although many scaled down the durations and budgets of their trips during last year’s recession, students continued to travel, choosing nearby destinations in Asia and Australia rather than Europe or the United States.

Singapore Management University (SMU) finance graduate Lim Rong Jie, 25, who spent a week in China with a friend this month, said: “Sometimes, when the economy is bad, it’s better to travel as other currencies will depreciate against the Singapore dollar.”

And as Ms Olivia Chiu, 23, also from SMU, put it: “We graduate only once in a lifetime. I’ll still go celebrate whether or not there’s an economic crisis.”

Fresh from an 11-day family holiday in Europe, the finance graduate will jet off today on another trip, this time to the US with three friends.

While her parents paid for the first trip, she is dipping into her savings from five previous holiday internships to pay for the second – roughly $6,500.

Additional reporting by Angeline Tan and Chuang Bing Han