

Escapade to Southeast Asia: A Trip to Singapore and Malaysia Sakura Eri Maezono

The week-long trip bound for two of the most rapidly developing countries, Singapore and Malaysia, organized and financed by Prof. Shiraiwa, began on the 16th of March. As the plane took off, I, together with Mr. Junya Hirose, waved our good byes to the Land of the Rising Sun. Despite the uncertainties as we were about to leave the safest country in the world, we were rather thrilled of the adventure that awaited us. We left Japan equipped with curious minds, intense enthusiasm, and the readiness to take on any challenge that would come our way. After flying for more than 12 hours, our plane landed safe and sound on the grounds of the “Lion City”, Singapore: a country which bears an awe-inspiring success story in building world-class education from an impoverished island in less than half a century ago. It was that sunny morning with a temperature of 26 °C which assured us we have arrived in Southeast Asia. We spent the first couple of hours in the airport alone as it is a city itself where there are movie theaters, incredibly beautiful gardens, a fish spa, a gym, a swimming pool, crafted with an over-all playful yet sophisticated architecture pleasing to the eyes. We left the airport mesmerized; The Changi airport is undoubtedly the world’s top-ranked airport. We dropped off our luggage at the hotel and took a short detour in Chinatown since it was within the vicinity.

Later that day, we met my friend who’s a student of the prestigious National University of Singapore (NUS). She brought us to NUS Kent-Ridge campus and toured us around. NUS is the flagship university of Singapore and the first Asian university that broke into the top 10-world university rankings (2013). It offers a broad-based curriculum with multi-disciplinary courses and cross-faculty enrichment from 16 faculties and schools. The university employs a global approach accentuated on Asian perspectives and expertise to achieve transformative education and research. True to the words of the school provost, the campus is a micro-model of globalized environment with over one-third of the student population accounting for international students. The melting pot of nationalities and cultures, slogans, encouraging and inspiring words everywhere you look, and the vibrant residential facilities topped with high-caliber education and cutting-edge research are the major features in NUS that molds an amazing campus life. The highlights of the trip were the central library and the university town or “U-town” for short. The central library hosts multi-disciplinary collections of books, including digitized, limited and special editions, covering a wide-array of disciplines published all the way back in the 17th century to the most recent versions. It’s composed of six floors and although the design of the place is different from that of the central library in the University of Tsukuba, it poses a similar atmosphere that is conducive for learning. U-town is an educational hub enriched with the diverse social and cultural perspectives of the community. It a perfect place to relax, eat, socialize, and all the more so, study. The campus is huge yet was not difficult to go around since there were shuttle buses available. We had a great time during the tour, as



we were also able to interact with other students. We ended the day by visiting the famous night Safari: The world's first wildlife night Safari park. As an animal lover, being able to walk around and have personal encounters with over more than 130 species of nocturnal animals was an experience to remember.

We spent the second day visiting the Arts Science museum and the 101-hectare horticultural attraction known as the "Gardens by the bay". As a biology-major student, seeing more than 250,000 rare plants and strolling among 16-storey-tall "supertrees" make up a perfect afternoon. We concluded our Singapore visit with the Singapore Flyer. We just had to admire the city as a whole and it indeed was the best way to do it. It was a breath-taking sight given 360 degree unobstructed views. Singapore won our hearts in less than 48 hours.

It only took an hour flight to get our next stop: Malaysia. From all of the countries I have ever visited, Malaysia had a very strong resemblance to my home country: the Philippines. Both nations feature striking contrasts wherein skyscrapers stand among wooden houses or 5-star hotels sit just meters away from natural wonders. Kuala Lumpur is a bustling city enjoyed by foreign tourists and locals likewise. It is home to Malays, Chinese, Indians and many other ethnic groups whom live together forming a harmonious society and a gastronomic diversity. In contrast with Singapore, the standard of living in Malaysia is relatively cheap.

One interesting thing that made me wonder how influential Japan is to Malaysia or how strong is the relationship between the two is the Japanese translations on subway/train stations' signs. After doing a bit of research, the economic relations, cultural and people-to-people exchanges and the "Look East Policy" implementation seem to be accountable for strengthening the bilateral relations between the two countries. The "Look East Policy" was implemented 32 years ago to follow Japanese work ethic and business skills as well as to be knowledgeable of the technological techniques from Japan. There has been 15,000 Malaysians whom have been sent to study and be trained at various universities and companies in Japan. It is also owing to this policy that the Malaysian economy has been industrialized with the help of Japanese investments and companies operating in Malaysia. In the recent years, another big step has been taken by the two nations to further reinforce their bilateral liaison: the establishment of the Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology (MJIT).

It was on our first day in Malaysia when we hopped on a cab to visit and quench our thirst for knowing more about MJIT under the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in Kuala Lumpur. MJIT is an academic institution partially funded by the Japanese government via the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). There are currently 23 Japanese university partners including the University of Tsukuba and five Japanese government agencies supporting it. MJIT aims to introduce Japanese-style engineering education tailored with Malaysian uniqueness for societal and industrial sustainability. Moreover, it aims to pioneer excellence cutting-edge academic and research in electronics, precision, environmental & green engineering and technology management through a holistic approach in its human development (Ningen-Ryoku) programs. With its tagline, "*Engineering the Nation With Precision For Sustainable Development*", MJIT has built a state-of-the-art system featuring the unique Senpai-Kohai relationship or mentor-mentee concept, the K.E.S. (Knowledge-Experience and Self -study) pedagogy concept of teaching and learning approach, 5S and Kaizen, with the advantage of having strong linkages with academics, researchers, and industrial companies in Japan.



The visit would have not been possible without the kind assistance of Mrs. Tuan Nor Azma Tuan Ismail and Prof. Norio Sugiura. Mrs. Azma, the MJIT-University of Tsukuba Secretary warmly welcomed and assisted us for the first two hours of our day-tour inside MJIT. She briefed us about UTM, MJIT and University of Tsukuba office in it. She also provided us with brochures for more details about MJIT, the four departments under it and the programs they offer. She later contacted Prof. Sugiura of the Environmental Engineering and Green Technology (EGT) Department. Prof. Sugiura talked about his research on improving deteriorated water quality by advanced water treatment technology for wastewater and water supply and more about the newly established Tsukuba office in MJIT. He was incredibly kind to tour us around and it was our honor to meet the other Japanese professors working in the same institute as well. Assoc. Prof. Hara, and his student were very hospitable to even tour us in various laboratories including those focused on characterization of secondary metabolites, environmental and applied microbiology. Prof. Sugiura even extended his hand helping us get back near our hotel and he even took us for dinner. We had a great time talking with him and we not only learned how to excel academically but also on how to be the person we want to be. Through sharing his life story, we realized that nothing is impossible. We should be strong enough to face challenges, stand our ground, and learn from our mistakes because those compose the recipe to succeed in life. We truly appreciated everyone we have met from the MJIT for his or her time and effort.



We spent the last two days discovering Malaysia's history, treasure troves of nature and culture. We went to see and take photos with the country's prominent skyscrapers: the Kuala Lumpur (KL) tower and the Petronas twin towers. The KL tower was officially opened to public in 1996 and is currently the 7th tallest tower in the world. According to the documentary about the history of the KL tower which was played at the amphitheater right beneath it, the tower also serves as an Islamic Falak Observatory to watch the crescent moon which marks the start of the Muslims' traditional month-long fasting, Ramadan. The Petronas twin towers, an iconic piece of architecture by Cesar Pelli, standing 452 meter-high, is a cultural center composed of 88 floors. The towers were Islamic-inspired and is said to be the reason behind its futuristic and historical touch. We also explored the Batu Caves where monkeys are accustomed to having people around them. We also strolled around Little India, China town, and the Central Market mainly to grasp a better understanding of the different communities. This Singapore-Malaysia journey is a trip to remember. No words can explain how grateful we are to have been given this educational trip opportunity. This is what learning beyond boundaries is.