



Mr Tan Rui Feng (far right) at one of the local stores he visited as part of his duties as an intern.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAN RUI FENG

SMU student finds common ground with Ugandans

He chose internship position in the African country

JAN LEE

When Mr Tan Rui Feng, 23, told his friends that he was going to Uganda for an internship, he was surprised when some of them didn't know where it was.

"To some people, Africa is just Africa, they don't really make a distinction among the different countries," said Mr Tan, who is now in his third year at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Uganda first caught Mr Tan's eye when he was browsing SMU's career portal for overseas internship options.

Bidco Uganda, a joint venture between agribusiness group Wilmar International and African consumer goods firm Bidco offered an internship position in Uganda.

Although there were also positions available in China and Indonesia, Mr Tan, a business and social science student, chose Uganda.

He said: "I had never been to Africa so I wanted to explore the region. Uganda was also the only country with a sales and marketing position open."

In his 10-week attachment, which lasted from May to July last year, Mr Tan visited Bidco's factory to understand the company's products, which were mainly cooking oil, soap and detergent.

He also spoke to local shopkeepers who carried the products to understand the sentiments of consumers who purchased them.

Finally, he visited a palm tree planta-

tion - which produced palm oil for the company's products - as part of his job.

Although his friends and family were worried with him being so far away, Mr Tan was fine, although his stint had its challenges.

Still, it is not without its challenges and issues. Jinja, the town where Mr Tan stayed, is powered by hydroelectricity and it often experienced blackouts on Sundays when more people stayed home and electricity usage was high.

FRIENDLY

Along with another Singaporean intern, Mr Tan stayed in Bidco's company lodgings with other employees. He enjoyed chats with the local employees, who could speak English.

He said: "Ugandans are friendly and welcoming. They will share with you their life stories if you are willing to listen."

"When I talk to the local people and the youth, they are always so supportive of their country, they would buy things from their own retailers and support local goods."

A taste of Uganda has sparked Mr Tan's interest in the rest of the region.

He added: "I definitely want to go back to Africa again."

"Aside from being able to live independently, the exposure you get is just so different from Singapore."

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