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Southeast Asia might not be many young Singaporeans' first choice as a destination for work or study, but some have taken a leap of faith and ventured into the region. TODAY's Voices section is publishing first-hand accounts of those who have spent time in Singapore's closest neighbours for a variety of meaningful pursuits.

In this instalment, Mr Clement Wong, 21, who recently completed a three-month internship in Jakarta, describes how the experience was a fruitful one. After a brief hospital stay there, he was thankful that he had a group of friends he could count on.

By

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I did my first overseas internship in Jakarta from May to August 2022 under my university's Global Innovation Immersion (GII) programme.

I picked Indonesia because it is home to a growing number of start-ups. I was also eager to discover how titans such as Grab, Lazada and Shopee have capitalised on Southeast Asia's largest economy.

My internship was with Gradient Venture Studio, which "designs, launches and scales disruptive high-growth start-ups together with entrepreneurs and corporations".

I was tasked to do research on regional market needs.

I zeroed in on industries such as mergers and acquisitions (M&A), construction and fashion to identify potential areas of innovation, before converting those results to a set of technical requirements for the pre-development of new products.

My project, specifically, conceptualised an online marketplace for small business owners in Indonesia to engage in M&A transactions.

I recall experiencing culture shock when I first set foot in Jakarta.

For starters, the food was very affordable, but you had to be adventurous with your choices and explore where the locals went.

Next, the public transportation system was not as robust as that in Singapore. While trains and buses are the norm back home, private ridesharing services triumphed in Jakarta — it was a luxury to ride on a Grab or Gojek almost every day.

I found the locals to be welcoming, and eager to teach us about their culture and communities. They also seemed to go about their everyday life at a slower and relaxed pace, a trait I believe "kan cheong" (anxious) Singaporeans can learn from.

At work, there were inevitable language barriers. My colleagues were fluent in English, but that did not apply to our clients, who conversed in Bahasa Indonesia.

It was difficult enough to make myself understood, let alone master the language.

Fortunately, the GII team planned a series of classes that taught us the key nuances of using the language at work, such as how to address our supervisors, write emails, and greet people in various settings.

As the bulk of our work involved user research, a challenge we encountered was identifying user groups, given how vast Jakarta is.

Thankfully, we tapped various GII alumni or partners who were familiar with the city and who directed us to industry experts in the spaces we researched — from company associates to C-suite level stakeholders — to help with our research.

This internship taught me how to conduct in-depth market research to validate business hypotheses. It also strengthened my confidence to work alongside software engineering teams during the development of Gradient's projects.

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Apart from the opportunity to immerse in a new culture, I had the chance to live independently, which is a valuable skill.

However, this was put to the test when I was hospitalised for five days due to a severe case of food poisoning. It was mentally draining not being able to rely on my family.

While we communicated regularly via video call and text, nothing could replicate the warmth of having your loved ones with you. To make matters worse, the piling healthcare costs and work only amplified my stress.

Thankfully, I had my fellow interns around me whom I could confide in, plus the GII team who kept an eye on me to make sure I was well taken care of.

They were my support when it came to everyday matters. We all felt homesick every so often but sharing that feeling with them, and engaging in new experiences together, helped alleviate that discomfort.

Handling the occasional curve ball while overseas has only made me stronger and more resilient.

I also got to connect on a deeper level with my fellow interns, and together, we learnt how to take care of one another.

On a personal level, being away from home has taught me to appreciate and recognise the value of family in my daily life.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Clement Wong, 21, is a second-year Information Systems student at Singapore Management University.