

Catch the trade winds in your sails

Business study missions during our undergraduate days were enlightening, says **THENUGA VIJAKUMAR**

DURING my undergraduate degree, I went on three business study missions (BSMs) to Chile, New York and Israel. The course is structured such that the class learns about a specific industry in the region or country that it will be visiting and then spends about 7-10 days there visiting businesses and companies to gain further insight into the industry. As an undergraduate, it is not often that one finds the time or opportunity to travel to far-flung places, so to be able to do that as part of my undergraduate course was a chance I jumped at.

The trips make for good conversations but more importantly they always bring warm thoughts to mind and a smile to my face. Sifting through memories to write this piece, I am struck by how vastly different each country and trip was and yet how at ease I felt in each. Learning about the countries beforehand laid the groundwork to appreciate them more, for had we been airdropped there with no background, Chile and Argentina would have been intimidating, New York loud and maddening, and Israel coloured only by political lenses. Instead, I want to call South America home one day, I don't remember feeling as

alive as when I stood in Times Square, or as moved by the resilience of a people as in entrepreneurial Israel.

These past few weeks, you have read some of the other students' thoughts and feelings. Today, I share with you some of my most vivid memories.

When you've spent 15 weeks living vicariously in South America through literature, movies, pictures and the professor, you develop itchy pants syndrome, commonly characterised by excited jumpiness and an inability to be still when convening at the departure hall. However, after flying for 36 hours (throw in another four for ground delays and airline mistakes), this is replaced by catatonia.

This was subsequently broken by the whirlwind of activity that was the next few days as we shuffled from appointment to appointment, with companies and business associations, in upscale neighbourhoods to neighbours of thieves' markets, from Santiago to Valparaiso. South America and Asia had been signing several free trade agreements (FTAs), and Chile was one of the most active countries in the arrangement. In general, their business community was extremely receptive to trade with Asia, especially since the Chi-

nese market was burgeoning rapidly, increasing the demand for raw materials like sand and copper for developing their infrastructure.

This brings me squarely to our mind-blowing trapeze through the Codelco copper mine, a company that would clearly benefit from the newly signed FTAs. Picture a large group of orange-clad people knocking our helmets and headlamps into one another while we plodded around in protective boots that weighed an infant each, gingerly treading into a slippery mine with water to our hips that was like an underground obstacle course from a Japanese TV show. Eventually we emerged at the exit equally amazed and happy that we hadn't caused any damage to the mine or ourselves.

Different rush

New York was a different rush. It was about a lifestyle, about the crushing crowds and blinding billboards and traffic noises that tattooed a beat in your being.

This trip and course centred around the Madison & Vine partnership; think BMW short films with Clive Owen or the Absolut Vodka musical, brands that created entertain-

ment centred almost exclusively around themselves. To understand the phenomenon better, we visited media companies, advertising and PR agencies and guerrilla marketing firms galore, where we learnt about their industries in general, and their thoughts about the sustainability of Madison & Vine and even their speculations about whether print would survive the Internet. The general consensus was that it would survive the Internet, and a new status quo would be achieved in media mixes - a reality we are experiencing today. They also shared their lifestyles and sources of inspiration in the hive of creativity that is New York. This was learning experience that not many would have had outside of the course. It was particularly inspiring since the majority of the class aspire to enter that industry.

From one industry-specific trip to another, my final BSM to Israel was centred largely on technology ventures and entrepreneurship. We looked at more than just the types of technology; we also explored financing options and worked on business proposals for an Israeli company that could consider entering the Singapore market. This was a more student-driven course since we put together some of the visits by liaising directly with the Israeli companies. My group, for instance, arranged the visit with Given Imaging, which developed the pillcam, a little ingestible device with a camera that took pictures of the digestive tract to detect problems. The company was a gracious host and truly took pride in showing off their facilities and products, which was very exciting for us.

As I travelled through Israel, there were two thoughts that struck me: the first was the beauty of the country and the people; the second was the diversity of the places we visited. Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv all had a different personality and it was refreshing, but also mildly surreal. What impressed me most in Israel was that the construct of failure did not exist. To them, you just dusted yourself off and tried again until you succeeded. There is no pass-fail divide in that sense and this has contributed to the high rate of entrepreneurship in the nation.

The BSM was not simply coursework with a travel component; it was a chance to interact with layers of a foreign country that is not available on merely touristic pursuits. As Mark Twain once said: "Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

The writer holds a first degree in business management and is currently pursuing a Juris Doctor at SMU School of Law



Inspiring stuff: People our group met shared their lifestyles and sources of inspiration in the hive of creativity that is New York