

GO BOLD OR GO HOME

How to travel on a (very tight) budget

Blogger Isabel Leong spent less than S\$7,000 travelling to 15 countries in Europe. Here is how she did it.

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SINGAPORE – Isabel Leong is barely 23 years old, and she has already travelled to more than 105 cities in 30 countries — mostly on her own dime.

And now, the Singaporean hopes that by sharing her travel tips and experiences, students here, especially those who are cash-strapped, will be motivated to go out and see the world.

“(Travelling) opens up their minds about the possibilities of the future. A lot of young people (like me) are lost about their life direction, and going out there and being exposed to different people and their life stories can give them some insight,” Leong said in an interview with TODAY. “There are a lot of soft skills to learn as well, including adaptability, independence, social skills and intercultural knowledge.”

Leong started supporting her own travel adventures in 2013, beginning with the usual destinations like Bali and Phuket, and then eventually heading off the beaten path to smaller cities and towns around the world, like Cambodia's Kampot province and Cantabaco in the Philippines. In 2015, she went on a student exchange programme in Rouen, France, where she began travelling around Europe in earnest. Since 2013, she has been to 64 cities in 16 countries.

To fund her exploits, she worked part-time for about four to five hours a week to pay for her own food and transport, and saved whatever she could to fund her travels.

“I became financially independ-

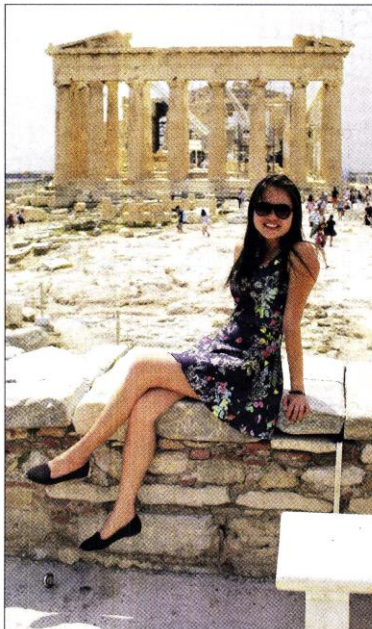
ent after junior college. There was an eight-month break after I graduated from junior college until school started in university. I took the time to explore different occupations and what I liked. I did everything from admin work to telemarketing to being a camp instructor,” said Leong, who recently graduated from Singapore Management University. She now runs a travel blog on student and budget travel called belaroundtheworld.com, which she set up last year.

“That was when I found out the importance of saving up. When I was in university, I also worked as a gym instructor, training clients part-time while juggling my studies.”

Leong also became an expert at travelling on a tight budget, spending less than S\$7,000 over three months travelling to 15 countries in Europe. She kept a mental meal budget of about S\$10 per day whenever she travelled, and stocked up on apples to keep herself from going hungry.

Instead of staying at expensive hotels, she also chose to couch-surf, which allowed her to stay with a host for free in exchange for prepacked bak kwa (barbecued pork) or a Singapore magnet. And even though most of her couch-surfing experiences have been positive, one particular incident in France taught her to be more judicious about her choice of hosts.

“As a beginner in couch-surfing, I wouldn't select solo male hosts. There was one time I was in the south of France, in Nice, I couch-surfed with a



Isabel Leong in Athens, Greece. PHOTO: ISABEL LEONG

guy. He expressed designs and it was quite scary. I tried to make up emergency plans in case he went overboard, but luckily I held my (ground) and he didn't pursue it any further,” she said, adding that the host had started getting “uncomfortably” close to her, and had even offered to let her

snuggle with him on his bed.

“I was constantly talking to my friends at home — but not my family because they would be worried sick — in case anything happened they would know what happened. It deterred me from couch-surfing, but I still went on after that, mostly with families or couples, though.”

Here are Leong's three other tips for young travellers:

> BRING YOUR STUDENT CARD

“This is one very valuable tip, because museums and even train tickets offer cheaper student ticket deals, especially in Europe. Sometimes you even get to go to museums for free.”

> DON'T BE OSTENTATIOUS

“A lot of students, when they travel, are very worried about whether they would get pickpocketed. What I tell them is to try not to be too ostentatious about their belongings. Keep your bags zipped and don't wear expensive-looking watches. They also talk about not putting your wallets at the back of your pocket, and that is also true because I have had instances where people were feeling my butt for stuff on a very packed train in Prague.”

> BE BOLD

“If you are thinking about whether to do (something), just go and do it. You are only visiting a place once and you don't want to leave with regrets. One of the boldest things I have done was to go bungee jumping in Phuket. My friend and I were (hesitant) at first, but we decided, what could we lose? Since then I've been (braver) about adventure (travel).”