

Well, I'm sorry it's taken me a while to get this email out, but hopefully you'll enjoy hearing about a slightly crazy place, popularly known as Singapore. First of all, it's HOT. I'm not talking slightly uncomfortable, it's not 'gee, should we open a window it's a little warm' hot, it's "wake up to 35 degree heat and 130% humidity" kind of hot. The easiest job in the entire country has to be the weather guy: "Tomorrow's forecast is for hot, humid weather, with the chance of a monsoon." Every. Single. Day. You can't dry clothes outside, so my roommate and I have splashed out on an \$8 clothes rack that sits under a fan 24/7. If you want an idea of how hot this place is, know that a third of all power usage in this place goes to air-conditioning and fans.

So, where am I and what am I doing? Nanyang Technological University, the second largest of the four or so universities over here. I'm on the western side of Singapore—not a massive distinction when you consider the entire country is about 40km in width—near one of the few air bases. They like to make sure their aircraft work, so we're treated to a nice dose of afterburners at least once a day, usually at around 1am. Actually, about every five hours. That might be inconvenient anywhere else, but the kids here don't go to sleep until about 3am, so it's not as though you're interrupted. Seriously, people here have a great sleep cycle: classes start at 8:30, most lectures and tutes go for at least 2 hours—I have a four hour block from 8:30 on Tuesdays—all the way through until about 9:30pm. We play interwing games against the other people in our residence halls, and these games of soccer, street soccer, pool, volleyball, etc usually kick off at around 10:30, ending at maybe 1 in the morning.

I'm taking a mixture of second and third year communications and business subjects that keep me interested. My feature writing lecturer is actually the dep. Ed. Of the Straits Times, the largest and most reputable paper in Singapore—sort of the equivalent to SMH, challenged only by a few smaller ones and "the new paper", which is the same as the Daily Telegraph. Politics in Singapore is a touchy subject. Singapore has the most stringent defamation laws in the English speaking world. Daylight comes second, followed by Australia bringing up a distant third. Theoretically, the People's Action Party is a democratic party that represents the hopes and dreams of all Singaporeans. In reality, they're the governing party and have been since independence, and out of 86 MPs there's only about 6 opposition/independent members of parliament. If you criticise the government, you're in the running to win a) a massive lawsuit for libel/slander that you will surely lose and will pretty much bankrupt you and you family, b) a nice stamp on your passport that says *persona non grata* and gives you a chance to see the rest of the world or c) a public denouncement of you and everything you stand for by the Primie Minister in a major national address carried by every television and radio station.

They're not ogres or anything, in fact most people you speak to have been happy with the last Prime Minister and are cautiously optimistic about the new one, so no real problems there.

My roommate Nick is also from Club Mac, and he's an excellent guy; he knows only too well the meaning of "Beer O'Clock"—that's another thing: these kids don't drink that much, so we've become the resident alcoholics by default. Granted, we did go shopping

the other day, and we did come back with \$30 worth of groceries and \$90 worth of beer. But still.....we had a floor BBQ the other night, and our proffered beers were actually rejected, if you can believe that. I can see some open mouths as you read this. I know. We're working on them, teaching them drinking games and other bits of educational gold. The floor we're on is conveniently titled "Down Under", and we got a Canadian girl to draw us a green and gold sign that proclaimed our heritage that we hung on the door. We would have done it ourselves, but we discovered we were pretty inept when it came to colouring in between the lines.

The people here are shy but friendly—I've been invited to a score of events, with everything from a Hungry Ghosts Chinese festival to several house parties and someone's wedding reception. We're having a great time being "Ungmo" here, which literally translates to 'red hair', and it's what they call foreigners. Sort of the Singaporean version of the Japanese *gaijin* I guess. It's hard to get used to *Singlish*, a mixture of English, Singaporean English and who knows what else. They throw the word 'lah' around after everything for no real reason, and if you want to say "more" you say 'plus'. So instead of saying 6:30 tonight, you say '6 plus, lah'. It's scary how quickly you find yourself mimicking it!

A lot of the exchange students here hang around primarily with each other, and I won't deny that my closest friends are other Ungmo, but there's a small group of us that spend more time with the locals than the others, and it's a much better way to enjoy the stay: the reality of the insights into their culture and their attitudes is excellent, as opposed to relying on a chapter in the lonely planet. At the moment class is fairly undemanding, so there's a lot of pool being played, a lot of going to the pool—which, by the way, is adorned with deck chairs, palm trees and manicured lawns, not so much a uni pool as a converted resort—and trying out the unbelievable array of different food and juices. The food here is a national obsession, and a huge bowl of noodles and dumplings that's too big for one sitting will set you back about \$2. There's so much to choose from I doubt I'm going to be able to sample it all before I have to go. Actually, who am I kidding.....

Another quick Clash of the Cultures story regarding alcohol consumption: we were invited to play drinking games the other night, and when we turned up we were presented with a deck of cards. No dramas. Thumbmaster? Strip poker? No, turns out it's a new game. How do you play? Well, *lah*, you turn over four cards and then use any combination of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division to get the number 24, ok *lah*? Last person to get it has to drink.

Nick and I looked at each other, then back at the cards, then at the alcohol. Were we reading this correctly? A drinking game where the least academically gifted student is punished with alcohol? Where the object is to execute rapid and accurate mathematical equations? (Rachel Ruff, I thank you!) Nick and I just smiled and reached for the alcohol. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto....."

I hope everyone is well and I look forward to hearing what you're up to!