

# Notes from a Slightly Bigger Island

Singapore is a small country, even if some inspired travel writers would say that the British Isles are also rather small. Now approaching the midway point of the academic year, we invited our Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom student members to share their experiences navigating these Albion islands. This letter is the first in a two-part series exploring daily life in a foreign city.

- Gabriel Kwok,  
28th Editor, SMSUK



Wildon with some friends over for a home-cooked meal!

Text and photo by Tan Wei Loong Wildon

*"There is no place like home."*

Having grown up in Singapore, I have long taken what we have for granted: an efficient transport system, good food and, more importantly, friends and family. Clearly, I am a patriot (I proudly back the Singaporean National Football Team) and wholeheartedly love Singapore. However, with an offer from the University of Bristol to work towards, I dare say, the best job in the world, I packed my bags and moved to a different city.

Looking back, my first year abroad was a tough one, filled with a lot of tears and calls back home. Not knowing how to cook, never having truly lived alone with five other strangers, not being able to call "Mum!" when the chicken was not properly cooked – all these were really scary (although that was quickly combatted by FaceTime, and my mother got to see all my cooking failures first!). Homesickness got the better of me and it felt like an unsurmountable challenge set up for failure. But I reminded myself of what a friend from church had encouraged me to read before I left – Psalms 121 – and I continue to take comfort in that. Gradually, I learnt how to enjoy the imperfections of things around

me, and how to be flexible with them. I was also recently introduced to the concept of the "Circle of Influence", which encourages us to focus on what we can control and not waste energy worrying about the things that we cannot. Easier said than done, I know, but I have learnt that worrying does not make the situation any better. What I can do is make the best out of what I am given, and this has made me more mature in the way I approach every situation now.

I have been coming back to this piece multiple times, as I tried to find a conclusion to it. This time, I have come back to it feeling absolutely heartbroken, having just watched England lose to France in the World Cup. But I realised that I am only feeling this way because I have been made to feel very welcomed here and have become part of a community. I have experienced both the highs and lows in football, from watching the Bristol Rovers win 7-0 on the final day of the league to clinch a promotion spot, to witnessing England getting knocked out despite playing very well, and we can draw the same parallels to life. We have our good and bad moments, hopefully more

good than bad. We celebrate the good moments and learn to get past the bad; and honestly, the bad moments make the good ones even sweeter.

I wake up every day thankful for having been given this opportunity to study overseas. I had been living in my own little bubble in Singapore, and this experience has allowed me to open and broaden my perspective. My ideas and beliefs are challenged constantly, making me sure in what I stand for and what I oppose. More importantly, I want to use this opportunity to thank the many supportive friends and family that stuck by me in this journey – be it the Singaporean friends who cheered me on despite being 11,000 km away, or the new ones I made here that I know will stick for life.

Wildon is a second-year medical student at the University of Bristol.



Text by Ryan Chen

We associate “home” with familiarity and comfort, a sense of reassurance, security and ease. The opposite can be said of the term “foreign”, where we expect to face the unknown and deal with the unfamiliar. This forces one to be adaptable and open, to embrace the winds of change and how they shape one differently. Even at the halfway mark of my degree, in my third year of university in the same city, I must confess that much of what I thought I had long accepted as “home” for the coming years still greets me as “foreign”. This time, the transition from the pre-clinical to clinical phase of medical school was the main highlight of my year, and it made me feel like a stranger once again.

The past two years have taught me much about living abroad. Independence and self-sufficiency were key, as I soon found myself taking charge of more aspects of my life. In the blink of an eye, grocery runs, cooking sessions and laundry time became part and parcel of a week’s work, all while juggling my lectures, tutorials and extra-curricular activities. Very soon, the pace of medical school teaching started to intensify, and I found myself drowning in a massive backlog of Panopto lectures.<sup>a</sup> As Christmas approached, inches of

valuable daylight slowly vanished, plunging everything into darkness at a mere four o’clock. It was not long before I started missing home – its familiarity, its fondness and, most importantly, its sense of belonging.

It took a while for me to get used to the hurly-burly of medical school and the challenges posed by living abroad. But I began to appreciate them, embracing how they taught me countless priceless lessons. Responsibility, resourcefulness, and resilience were recurring themes. As I gained more confidence, I began to venture out. I have always wanted to travel, so I started by visiting various cities across the UK – Cambridge, Oxford, London and Edinburgh, to name a few. Eventually, I set my sights on exploring the European continent, booking a flurry of Ryanair and EasyJet flights at student-friendly prices to destinations such as Venice, Amsterdam and Copenhagen. In 2022, I travelled solo for the first time and had my first driving trip with friends. It was definitely something to tick off that bucket list!

Clinical year came, and with it, I bade farewell to the city of Leicester for my out-block postings. This year, I would spend 12 weeks in the neighbouring

city of Kettering for my surgery posting, living in on-site hospital accommodation on weekdays. University lectures became a thing of the past, and smaller-scale tutorials led by senior doctors became the norm. The day no longer started with a seat in the lecture theatre at 9 am, but rather began in a small side room in the hospital going through patient lists, preparing to go on ward rounds as part of a medical team. Once again, I felt like a fish out of water, the reset button being pushed, having to adapt to new environments of learning and living. In the clinical years, the looser timetabling inevitably led to a loss of structure and organisation, but it also promoted independence, self-discipline and liberty.

Overall, living in a foreign city has taught me much about myself and the world around me. Only with an open mind and heart can there be much to learn and even more to embrace. ♦

Ryan Chen is a third-year medical student at the University of Leicester.



#### Note

*a. Panopto is a learning management system used by many universities to stream their lectures online.*

#### About SMSUK

*The Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) is the representative body for Singaporean medical and dental students across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Since 1994, the society has continually supported and advocated the interests of its members, helping generations of students navigate the transnational healthcare landscape.*

SMSUK's recent day trip to Bath and Bristol

