

Further Notes from a Small Island



Text and photos by Gabriel Kwok

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Down the road from the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom's (SMSUK's) editorial office in East London (also known as my bedroom), traditional Cockney mingles with Estuary and Multicultural London English as Received Pronunciation chimes in from the BBC channel. The accents quickly change as we move north into Leicester and the East Midlands, who owe as much to the Angles of Mercia as the Viking Danelaws landing 400 years later. More prosodies emerge as we continue northwards, an incredible array of Northern and Urban West Yorkshire voices catching our

ears as we cross Hadrian's Roman walls and the Pennine Hills into Scotland. Meanwhile, across Bristol and Somerset, multiplex versions of West Country English recall both the ancient Celts and the court of Alfred the Great, King of the Anglo-Saxons in the House of Wessex. Great Britain may well be a small island, but her very topography attests to an astonishing tapestry of peoples and traditions, hitherto unknown to us distant observers. Of course, any culture necessarily recalls both triumphs and indignations, presenting a most formidable task for any traveller to navigate. However, since everyone is inevitably shaped by some sort of cultural substrate, not least our future patients, we would still do well to put our best foot forward. Experiencing another culture firsthand, then, must surely rank among our greatest privileges as international medical and dental students.

I still find myself startled by how we have been moulded and challenged through this time abroad, living among people who can be so different from ourselves, while clearly remaining *Singaporean* in our own distinctive ways. Of course, there are at least two, perhaps equally fallacious, temptations to beware here. Uncritically embrace every new idea, and one risks becoming completely untethered from anything substantive, spiralling aimlessly from one non-sequitur to another. Yet, persevere too steadfastly in old assumptions and particulars, no matter how hard-earned, and one may end up with an entirely different kind of disconnect, unable to learn from blind spots and shortcomings. It is truly such a privilege having this time abroad, but this also calls for a certain kind of wisdom: one that can learn from the best of other people without losing sight of the values which have served us well.

This two-part mini-series of letters from the UK has seen Wildon, Ryan and now Nicholas recount their experiences in Bristol and Leicester, presenting the everyday minutiae which have become so intimately familiar to many of us. Indeed,

It may be helpful to remember that "culture" shares much in common with "coulter", as in "cultivation" or the edge of a farmer's plough – evoking images of both regeneration and furtherance, of a people constantly reshaping topographies in service of one another, while also recognising these things are neither infallible nor immutable. May we learn well as we look to serve our future patients, who may well be very different from us.





Text by Nicholas Lim

It is 9 am on a Thursday. My alarm goes off and I get out of bed. I am instantly greeted by a blast of frigid air, a stark reminder that I am no longer in sunny Singapore. After freshening up and a quick breakfast of cereal and milk (goodbye to S\$3 *chai tow kway*), I return to my room and look through the previous week's lectures. At half-twelve (or 12.30 pm, as we might say back home), I make my way to the kitchen again, this time to cook lunch. It is often something easy like pasta or dumpling noodle soup. I am usually done washing up and ready to leave by quarter to two (1.45 pm, not 2.15 pm!).

I step into the -10 °C weather for a leisurely stroll to the university with my housemates. We arrive just in time for the 2 pm lectures – the usual start time for us second-year medics. Our lectures are followed by self-directed group work where we explore clinical and theoretical cases together. My group not only uses the time to work, but to socialise or banter about some dreary lecture that we have had. The lively atmosphere is one of the highlights of my day. It is amid this that I catch a glimpse of the sun setting at around 4.30 pm. Group work ends at 6 pm and we walk back together in the dark. Thankfully, my group mates live nearby.

After getting back, I find myself missing the scents of home again as I cook dinner. The food here tastes a little different, as if missing a certain ingredient. Perhaps it is mum's love (or maybe just MSG). Thursday is laundry day, and I spend some time getting that done. I remember a time before I had a drying rack, when I had to sleep under damp clothes because the dryer was faulty and I had nowhere to hang them

– an experience I would not recommend. My housemates have now returned home. They are a lovely bunch, so we often stay up late talking about anything and everything under the sun, bantering or sharing our struggles.

Some weeks, I have placements on Thursdays even though I am still a pre-clinical student. This is actually in a nearby town outside Leicester called Kettering. Kettering's hospital is smaller than Leicester's, but this also means we get more guidance and exposure. I think this will help me build a good foundation for the clinical years. You get the usual spread of patients here – most are extremely helpful and pleasant, but occasionally you do get some grumpier ones, and understandably so. Of course, these are part and parcel of any facet of life and we learn to take them in our stride, as cliched as it sounds.

Overall, the pace of life is less hectic here in England and our learning is very self-directed. This gives us more flexibility in managing our day-to-day activities, extracurricular commitments, and responsibilities like grocery shopping, chores, or cooking. This can still get quite overwhelming at times (thank goodness I do not have to deal with taxes yet), but such are the realities of life. I have learnt to look back on the small things and find small moments to celebrate, be it small pockets of me time or chances to meet friends I have not seen in a while. Living overseas has definitely made me more independent and appreciative of the things my parents do for me.

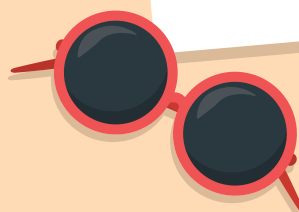
Academics aside, Leicester is also very culturally diverse. It is home to the world's largest Diwali celebrations outside India, testifying

to the huge South Asian diaspora here. Unsurprisingly, I am becoming less of a stranger to Bollywood music, which is played at parties from time to time.

On weekends, I try to take the opportunity to travel, since I am already all the way in the UK. My travels have ranged from a short day trip to neighbouring Nottingham, to a weekend getaway in Oslo. It is amazing how much the cityscape can change despite travelling less than an hour away – a refreshing change from the red brick buildings of Leicester. Besides being plenty of fun, these experiences have helped me to widen my horizons.

My past one-and-a-half years have been enriching and have enabled me to grow as a person. I have learnt to be more independent while gaining a newfound appreciation of other cultures, and I would not trade these experiences for anything in the world. ♦

Nicholas is a second-year medical student at the University of Leicester.



Legend

1. SMSUK's weekend trip to Budapest, Hungary
2. Above & Beyond: Unpacking the Future of Medicine, SMSUK's Annual Conference held in London, UK and organised in collaboration with Malaysian Medics International