Michael Poiani Selected for KPMG Global Internship Program

Out of hundreds of applicants from universities across the country, Michael Poiani was one of only nine students selected to participate in the KPMG Global Internship program. Participants in this program travel overseas to work as part of international client engagement teams. The following is Michael’s firsthand account of his once in a lifetime internship experience in Singapore.

Singapore KPMG

First Day

Even as I landed in Singapore, the journey I was about to begin had not really sunk in. This being my first time ever flying over the pond, I had no clue what to expect. I hardly slept on the 21-hour flight in and was rewarded with some amazing views of Singapore as we landed. I was amazed by the lights coming from the hundreds of boats floating in the ocean outside of Singapore waiting for their turn to dock and unload their goods.

I had heard great things about Changi, but it still did not prepare me for the amazing ease of navigating the well-organized airport. My car driver was waiting for me outside of immigration and I immediately realized after speaking to him that being in an English-speaking country does not guarantee that you will understand everything that is said. When stepping out of the airport and into the car, my first thoughts of Singapore reminded me of a hot Florida afternoon, though it was only 7 am.

The drive into the city was a beautiful one and I was surprised that one of the first eateries I saw on our drive was a McDonald’s. I asked the driver as many questions as I could and understood the answer to probably two of them. I soaked in as much of the surrounding environment as possible while also trying to decipher the broken English through the driver’s heavy accent.

My first impression of the city was of an amazingly clean and very organized place. I was staying in an amazing condominium in the middle of the Central Business District with an astounding view of the Singapore River and the beautiful city skyline. This area of Singapore is where Sir Stamford Raffles landed on Singapore for the first time claiming the land for Britain. You can see the Colonial British influence in most of the architecture in this area. Aside from the newer skyscrapers that seem to be sprouting all around this area, the buildings reflect on a time long ago when Britain was the governing body of this tiny island.

While walking around the city I further realized that Singapore is the cleanest area I have ever visited. I attribute this to the $1,000 SGD fines for littering and the banning of owning or chewing gum (it is considered smuggling just bringing it into the country). I also realized the great influence of the West on Singapore by their surplus of 7-Elevens and other American companies. Though this is a slight exaggeration, I feel as if I saw more 7-Elevens in Singapore then I did in my whole life in America.
The night of my first day in Singapore, I was taken out to dinner by two American expats who had been working in Singapore. These two individuals, along with other Americans during my time there, went a long way in making me feel comfortable in the foreign environment. The partner who I had spoken with before I visited and also had dinner with on this night, went above and beyond in watching out for me and answering all of my questions while I was there. He alone made my experience in Singapore better by tenfold.

Audit Work

I was lucky enough to be placed in the US GAAP department, which I was told is the best division in the Singapore branch of the firm. My first client was in its closing days and I spent most of my time in support for the team. I was tasked with filling out work papers for audit tests, vouching client’s numbers to the financial statements, and searching for supporting documentation for the tests already completed. I was able to interact with the client, which was not always the easiest of tasks considering the language barrier (like I said before, you would be surprised how hard it is to understand English with a heavy foreign accent). For the next client I was assigned to, I also spent my time on team support. I was able to assist the members of the team in completing their individual assignments, which enabled me to observe many different aspects of the audit.

I probably got my best work experience of the trip on my last week of the internship in Singapore. This particular engagement was still in the planning phases and I was assigned to the senior as we prepared everything for the beginning of the audit. This was my first time working on an engagement in the planning phase and it was a great learning experience for an intern to be a part of. One of the first tasks that I was given was to complete the planning analytical review. This test was designed to discover the significant accounts that would be concentrated on during the course of the audit. I was also sent to the client on my own (by this time I was much more comfortable with the heavy accents) to review the statutory records. I was also lucky enough to be a part of the planning meeting that occurred with everyone from the engagement team. It was extremely interesting to sit and listen to what is talked about before the work actually starts, and I believe I now understand a little better what we are trying to accomplish when reviewing the company’s information.
Exploring Singapore

I had three free weekends in Singapore so I decided to spend one exploring the country and the other two visiting neighboring countries. During the weekend I dedicated to Singapore I traveled from corner to corner trying to soak in as much of the culture as possible. On my first day of exploring I traveled to Little India, where I encountered my first Hindu and Buddhist temples. I was amazed by the craftsmanship that went into building these temples. The Hindu temple that I visited first was covered from ground to roof in hand carvings with the most intricate details. I can only wonder how many years it took for them to complete this temple. The smells and sights I encountered while in Little India were amazing. Unlike New York’s Chinatown, I believe this is what India may actually resemble.

After running across the amazing temples in Little India, I became entrenched in the idea of visiting as many temples as possible. I scoured Singapore, looking for every temple they had to offer. I was again amazed by the craftsmanship and beauty that went into designing these places of worship. I was lucky enough to walk upon one or two while in the middle of their proceedings and was able to soak in the rituals that went into these interesting religions. I visited almost every temple in the country of Singapore, which sounds like a greater achievement than it actually was considering you can drive from one end of the country to the other in approximately 45 minutes.

Of all things, I might have been blown away most by their malls. If you make only a short trip to Singapore then you might have the impression that Singaporeans’ favorite past times are eating and shopping, due to the fact that the country is busting at the seams with malls and food courts. Every stop on the beautiful and amazingly clean subway station empties out into a mall. Even away from the city in the residential areas you will find giant malls that seem to be busy no matter what time of day. The food that I encountered in my time there still makes my mouth water. I was told that Singaporeans love to eat and I could understand why when enjoying the amazingly diverse and tasty cuisines that they had to offer.
Cuisine

Because of Singapore’s extreme love and pride in its food, I had to devote a complete section to
detailing their vast cuisine. I was able to try food from every country in South East Asia and some
beyond. I fell in love with Asian food while I was there and realized that real Chinese food does not
include General Tso’s Chicken. Everything I had believed of Asian food in America was shattered the moment that I entered Singapore. One of Singapore’s signature dishes is
chicken rice, which might sound like a plain dish but when mixed with the fragrant white rice, it takes on a life of its
own. I did my best to sample every bit of the foreign
cuisine and challenged myself to try something new every day that I was there. Luckily enough, the KPMG office
was next to one of Singapore’s most famous hawker
centers. A hawker center, for those that have never
encountered one, is a collection of outside food stalls.
These stalls provide some of the most authentic and
cheap dishes that I came across. These centers are found
everywhere I traveled in Asia and continued to provide
food at a surprisingly high quality despite their rough exteriors. Lau Pau Sat is where I was able to try a
majority of my different cuisines. It even included a Wendy’s for the not-so-adventurous Westerners. I was
amazed by the sheer diversity of the food that I found there and did my best to try every stall that I came across.

I tried everything from Indian and Thai to Filipino and Vietnamese. I was also lucky enough (or unlucky)
to try tripe. It came in a noodle soup along with other cuts of beef including tendon.

I came back home to the United States, in love with everything I ate there. I told myself that
when I left I was excited to get back home to buy a cheese burger and some pizza (even though I had the
best cheese burger of my life in Singapore). When I made it back to New York I found myself two days
later visiting a Malaysian restaurant with my girlfriend trying to rekindle the memories of the food I
encountered in Asia.

Thailand

During my second weekend in Singapore I visited Bangkok, Thailand. Bangkok was completely
different from Singapore and I suddenly found myself immersed in the Asian culture I had expected to
see. Singapore showed much of its Colonial British influence, where Thailand showed its own culture
and heritage. Everywhere you look you can feel Thailand from its architecture to its amazing and
incredibly delicious cuisine.
I was a little leery of my travels to Bangkok as I had heard some interesting tales of the city. I was a little nervous to be in a foreign country of such difference to my own where English is not the primary language. As if I wasn’t nervous enough, the cab ride from the airport gave me all the reasons I needed to be scared of this trip. As soon as I walked out of customs I was hounded by individuals clamoring for my business for a ride to the city. I ignored these first people reasoning that if they weren’t going through official channels for their fares then they were probably not to be trusted. I had to take the escalators to the bottom floor to find the taxi stand where there was but one person who spoke English and none of which I could understand. I explained where I wanted to go and was then ushered into a waiting car with a driver who hardly knew any English. Behaving as I normally do when in a new area I was very wary to not be taken advantage of. The ride from the airport seemed to take forever and every few minutes I felt I needed to clarify with the driver that he knew where I wanted to go only to receive a mix of English and Thai words in reply that may as well have been gibberish. I tried to calm down by engulfing myself in the intriguing views seen through the cab windows. I was captivated by the appearance of their culture in their highways which boasted exotic overpasses including pagoda type structures and golden statues aligned along the road.

Despite all my worries the cab driver delivered me to my destination with little difficulty. I had chosen a four star hotel in the Silom district of Bangkok. I chose this hotel due to its close proximity to the sky train which gives you immediate access to all of Bangkok for around 50 baht which equals a little over $1.50. The hotel was also a short walk from the infamous night market where you can buy anything from fake watches to handmade Thai merchandise.

My first full day in Thailand was spent visiting the vast amount of Buddhist temples that are situated throughout the city. I hired a local tuk tuk driver (a three wheeled go cart) to take me to a boat taxi that would shuttle me up and down the Chao Phraya River where all the temples are located. This is when I learned a valuable lesson about Bangkok: don’t trust the tuk tuk drivers. I found myself in some back alley dock where they tried to sell me a personal river tour to take me on a two-hour trip around the river for 2,000 baht or around $60. Not only did they not stop at the temples I wanted to see but they were also around
$59 more expensive than the public water taxi I had planned on taking instead. Luckily enough, I caught my tuk tuk driver before he escaped and requested that he take me to the correct dock.

After getting to the correct dock for the water taxi I was transported along the river to some of the most eminent temples in Bangkok: Wat Arun, Wat Pho, Wat Phra Kaeo, and the Grand Palace. As I traveled through the city I was able to completely immerse myself in the amazing culture that makes Bangkok one of the most interesting tourist destinations in the world. While visiting the Grand Palace, which served as the home of the Kings of Thailand since the 18th century, I spent some time walking around a street market where locals were hawking various goods. I was able to try some of the best food I had tasted since stepping foot in Asia from these small stalls in the market.

Before departing to the airport on my last day I decided to make a trip to the Chatuchak Market. This is Bangkok’s version of a flea market and I was amazed by its sheer magnitude. Nearing the market from the sky train you can see the enormous amount of land that this market occupies. It covers approximately 30 acres and supports around 5,000 stalls. I found myself lost more than once among the immense amount of stalls and actually found myself wandering around Chatuchak’s version of a pet store. I saw animals ranging from puppies to roosters and even scorpion fish and sting rays. Among these stalls selling live animals for pets I had my first encounter with cooked bugs. It ranged from fried cockroaches and maggots to beetles and grasshoppers. As I am sure you are wondering, I did not try them simply because I did not think anyone would believe me and I did not have a video recorder on me at the time for solid proof.
Malaysia

I took the advice of a friend that I met while in Singapore to spend my last weekend in Asia exploring a new country. I took this opportunity to visit Penang, Malaysia. It was a short hour-and-a-half hop via plane from Singapore. I was offered one of two choices for my visit in Penang since the city offers two different types of vacations: George Town for history or the beach town of Batu Ferringhi. I decided that since I have spent the past ten years of my life in a small beach town in Florida, I would stick with my theme of exploring the history and culture of Malaysia over spending a few days in the sand and sun.

I realized that Penang was going to be a much different experience from Singapore and Bangkok upon landing and I noted how the airport was small and in much disrepair. I was able to get a good view of the local areas of Penang as I climbed aboard a public bus from the airport to George Town. I realized that my short flight had taken me far from the grandeur of the Singapore city with its strong economy and well-developed cities to a relatively undeveloped and depressed economy. I truly enjoyed this opportunity to observe a part of Asia that had not been fully westernized in order to accommodate scores of tourists year-round.

I was once again able to land myself in a great four star hotel directly across from public transportation. I found myself next to a stop that was serviced by a free bus intended to serve tourists and drop them at all the local areas of interest but had become merely a free way around town for some of the more interesting personalities I had met on my trip. While navigating around George Town I was relatively disappointed in the sites that I had been able to reach. I realized I had been spoiled by the amazing sights, sounds, and smells that I had been exposed to in Thailand and Singapore.

I decided I would be best served to hire a tour guide to show me some of the finer points in Penang and was not disappointed. I was able to join a friendly married couple, who were from Singapore of all places, on a five-hour guided tour of Penang’s most interesting spots. We began our tour on Penang Hill which gave an amazing view of the city. We had to hire a new driver to take us to the top of the hill in a four wheel drive jeep to trek up the seemingly impossibly steep inclines of the hill. Along our way to the top we passed a pack of monkeys jockeying for the occasion to collect any food that passersby were willing to throw to them. When we reached the mountaintop we were able to
enjoy the gorgeous view from a restaurant situated on a cliff overlooking the beach-front and city. We were reveling in the scenery when we spotted a sign warning us of the possibility of encountering venomous pit vipers. As luck would have it, after reading this we looked above us in the rafters and spotted two green pit vipers, each around two to three feet long. This is when I began to realize I needed to watch my step around Penang a little more cautiously.

After taking in the views from the hill, we relaxed at the foot of the mountain and enjoyed some cooling coconut milk directly from the coconut while watching monkeys fight over the remnants of food from the restaurant. We then moved on to the largest temple in South East Asia, the Kek Lok Si Temple. This temple was built over 100 years ago and boasts a 100-foot statue of Kuan Yin, “The Mercy Goddess.” We were once again treated to an amazing view of the city from the hill that the temple is built upon. The last and most exciting stop on our tour was the Snake Temple of Penang. It got its name from its residents, venomous pit vipers. These snakes are allowed to live and hang in every corner of the temple and have free reign over its grounds. Upon entering the temple, I looked to my left and saw two green vipers, similar to the ones from Penang Hill, perched atop a painting directly inside the door. Considering my extreme dislike of the serpent type, I was seriously perturbed but intrigued by this temple.

Leaving Singapore

After spending my month in Singapore I had begun to love the country like it was my own. The people of Singapore were some of the most generous and kind people that I had the pleasure of spending time with. I made many friendships that I hope will last a lifetime. Though I was excited to go home and see my family and friends again, I was also extremely saddened to be leaving. I must thank everyone from KPMG for affording me this amazing opportunity and must also thank the employees of KPMG Singapore for extending the friendliest welcome that I could have expected. Everyone I worked with jumped at the opportunity to take me in and show me the best time they possibly could in their home country and seemed to be just as interested in my culture as I was in theirs. The extents that the expats currently working in Singapore went to in making me feel comfortable and helping me along my way was amazing. I feel like I will never be able to repay them for their generosity and I only hope they understand how much their hospitality meant to me and how much easier they made my transition to working away from home. The amount of growth that I saw in my international persona was great and I feel that I have learned how to assimilate into a different culture no matter the degrees of its dissimilarities from our own. Taking advantage of this opportunity to learn and grow in an international environment was simply a priceless experience.