

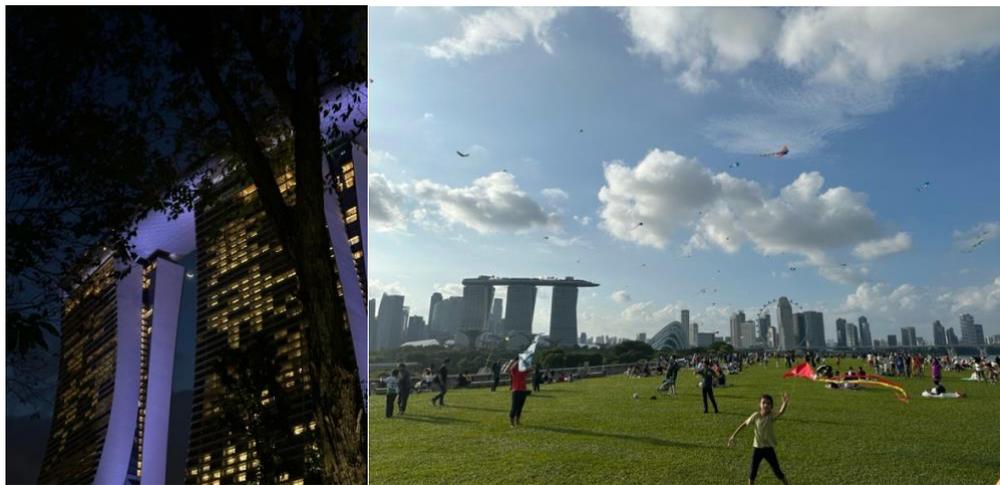
EEP Experience Report

Participant: Luca Kirsten

Company: Garuda Robotics

Time frame: 01/2024 - 06/2024

Email: luca.kirsten@tum.de



Preparation

In 2022, during the second semester of my studies, I was introduced to a unique exchange program by my faculty at the Technical University of Munich (TUM): the Entrepreneurship Exchange Programme (EEP). This program fosters the academic and professional growth of high-performing students in Singapore, shaping them into young, independent entrepreneurs. Enthusiastic about the diverse opportunities offered by the program over a short six-month period, and motivated by a desire to explore Southeast Asia, I decided to complete my exchange and internship in Singapore.

The EEP entails an internship with a Singaporean startup, providing students with hands-on experience in a dynamic, young company's work environment. The National University of Singapore (NUS), as the TUM's partner university and the local EEP coordinator, facilitated the initial selection of potential host companies. About six months before the program started, students were provided with a list of over 100 startups from which they could choose their top five preferences. My focus was on finding a company in a field that appealed to me and with good organizational structure and challenging tasks.

After submitting the preferences, NUS notified the chosen startups of the students' interest, leading to the formal application process. If a startup expressed interest in hiring a particular student, the student would be contacted by NUS and go through the standard company selection process. In my case, due to financial difficulties, my original internship placement fell through, and I only secured a position with Garuda Robotics after arriving in Singapore—an exception for the EEP. NUS staff facilitated the introduction to Garuda Robotics, which led to a phone call and subsequent in-person interview with the company's CTO and co-founder, Jiin Joo Ong, who later became my supervisor. The interview focused on my expectations for the internship and whether my skills and experience complemented the company's needs.

Most of the logistical arrangements, such as university enrollment, visa application, and housing procurement, were supported by NUS. I applied for the "Work Holiday Pass," which is offered by Singapore's immigration authorities to students from selected universities. This pass allows students to work and study in Singapore for up to six months. The application involved an online submission followed by an appointment at the Employment Pass Services Center (EPSC) in Singapore. A language course was not necessary since English is the official language, but I took a Chinese A1.1 course before my stay in the hopes of learning some Chinese while in Singapore.

Internship at Garuda Robotics

I completed my internship at "Garuda Robotics," a Singapore-based startup specializing in aerial robotics and drone solutions. The company, now about ten years old, also operates in Malaysia and creates value for business clients in industries such as agriculture, military, and oil & gas by integrating customized drone and AI solutions. As a Business Development Intern, I gained insights into marketing, product launches, customer relationship management, and international event exhibition processes.

One of my main tasks was to help market a new product and acquire customers. I was responsible for creating a website, marketing videos, and emails for the product. This experience allowed me to learn not only about the dynamic and regulation-dependent commercial drone industry in Southeast Asia but also about general startup operations. From day one, I was expected to work autonomously and reliably, finding solutions to complex problems with minimal prior knowledge. This required me to familiarize myself with various digital tools independently and seek help proactively from colleagues when necessary.

Although I was contractually required to work 40 hours per week, my actual working hours varied depending on the company's current workload. I was free to organize my schedule as long as all tasks were completed. I had the option to work from home or use the office located in a startup innovation park near "One North." Towards the end of my internship, the office moved to Pasir Panjang Road. All the employees warmly welcomed and supported me, but I primarily reported to Jiin Joo Ong (CTO), with Mark Yong (CEO) as my "buddy" for any second opinions or concerns.

As part of a course at NUS, I conducted a scientific case study on a core issue facing my startup. I explored which country would be suitable for Garuda Robotics' next expansion, analyzing both qualitative and quantitative factors and conducting industry best-practice analyses. This case study earned me 12 ECTS at TUM. Additionally, my international experience of over 90 days qualified for 3 ECTS as part of the "International Experience" module in my degree program. As a side remark: the module "Venture Creation", a hands-on approach to teaching the initial phases of ideation, start-up creation, and validation as well as business model development (i.e., students come up with their own start-up idea and develop + pitch it), results in a 6 ECTS elective at TUM.



Accommodation in the Host Country

Singapore is well-known for its state-managed housing system and notoriously high rent prices. This can especially be a challenge for foreigners who don't have access to government-subsidized housing (HDBs). During my internship, I stayed at Sheares Hall, a dormitory provided by NUS. I was able to secure this housing due to my enrollment at the university, though the limited availability of NUS accommodation means places are allocated by lottery when demand exceeds supply.

I lived in a roughly 10 square meter room near Pasir Panjang on the west coast. My room had a bed, desk, and wardrobe, and I shared bathrooms with about 20 other male residents

on the floor. Sheares Hall also had facilities such as washing machines, a cafeteria, a sports hall, and a small gym. Notably, my room did not have air conditioning, which can be difficult for Europeans to adjust to due to Singapore's high humidity and nighttime heat.

If students are unable to secure university housing, they should be prepared for high rent prices. Renting a room in a shared apartment typically starts at around 1,000 SGD. PropertyGuru and apps like Cove are useful for finding such accommodation. Singaporean landlords often prefer quick move-ins, so I recommend arriving 1-2 weeks before starting work to allow time for viewings and immediate move-in. In total, a monthly housing budget of 500-1,500 SGD is realistic, depending on availability and the type of accommodation chosen.



Daily Life and Free Time

Singapore serves as an ideal hub for traveling throughout Southeast Asia, with flights to neighboring countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia available for around 50-100 SGD. More distant countries like Australia, China, and Japan are also more accessible from Singapore than from Europe. During my stay, I took the opportunity to visit Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia for short holidays over weekends and public holidays.

In addition to traveling, I focused on learning Japanese in my free time, often studying after work with books and apps. However, my greatest passion during this period became Muay Thai, which I practiced at Evolve MMA under the guidance of world champions from Thailand. I trained 4-5 times a week and progressed from a beginner to an intermediate level. I greatly enjoyed this activity, made great friends, and found it to be a physical outlet that kept me fit and healthy. I plan to continue Muay Thai back in Germany, incorporating the discipline and respect I learned into my life.

Costs and Funding of the Stay Abroad

Monthly costs in Singapore depend heavily on housing and can range from 1,000 to 2,000 SGD. Housing is the largest part of living expenses, followed by food, which typically costs around 300-500 SGD per month due to the prevalence of cheap meals at "hawker centers" (food courts) where locals often eat instead of cooking. Public transportation is simple and affordable, but recreational activities tend to be expensive.

Skills and Learning Outcomes

I believe that I have grown significantly as an individual during this experience. Living abroad and working in a highly dynamic startup environment has made me more independent, confident, and organized. I've learned to stay calm and analytical when faced with setbacks or complications. Additionally, I've gained practical knowledge of various economic concepts, terminologies, and practices through my daily work at the startup.

I made many valuable friendships and connections in Singapore and throughout Southeast Asia, which could serve as catalysts for an international career. Furthermore, I've deepened my understanding of different cultures and histories in the region, and even learned a bit of Japanese. I now feel that I am a better candidate for international roles and can work more effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. These skills are indispensable for modern managers.

Intercultural Experience

We were warned early on that Singapore's work environment would be very challenging, with long working hours, high demands, and a more hierarchical structure than what we were used to. It was said that Singaporeans work harder than Europeans, leaving us with little free time on weekends. For me, none of these predictions came true.

It is essential to maintain a professional attitude towards your work, respect working hours, and not hesitate to voice your opinions when you disagree with your boss. I found my work performance and productivity on par with my Singaporean colleagues, and I was glad to have weekends to travel and spend time with friends. The biggest cultural difference lies in Singapore's strict regulations, with laws covering almost every possible scenario and penalties that would seem overly harsh by German standards. Initially, this can create anxiety about accidentally breaking the law, but once you adapt to it, you realize that law-abiding citizens can enjoy a safe, clean, and reliable Singapore, albeit under constant surveillance by numerous cameras.

Conclusion

If you are still hesitant – do it. I could never regret my participation in the EEP. Looking back, the time in Singapore and beyond has probably been the best time of my life. I have developed tremendously as a person and was lucky enough see amazing places and meet some of my best friends today. I wish everyone who applies to the program a lot of luck. Enjoy the exchange!