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Hong Kong Student Exchange Experience

Introduction

Apart from touring all the major tourist attractions Hong Kong has to offer, unexpectedly, I gained a more deep interest in hiking. One of my first impressions of Hong Kong is how attractive the cityscape is with all the bright lights and tall buildings but I had no idea that I would appreciate all that and be able to hike 5 km all in one day. With Hong Kong having such great public transportation, you can get anywhere in the region in hardly any time. One memorable experience is hiking the Maclehoose Trail that stretches in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Another exchange student and I found ourselves rushing to get to our camp site before the sun came down because we had no flashlight and had nothing to eat or sleep until we met with our other friends. We lost signals on our mobile phones and we were really losing daylight quickly. So we picked up our pace, had a banana and peanut butter to hold our stomachs up and ran through an entire 2 km stage of the hike to reach our friends before sundown. Along our path, we came across a giant bull in the middle of the road. We took a picture with it hoping it wouldn't scoop us with his horns and zipped past it. We finally made it to a small community on a beach and purchased a small flashlight. We eventually found our friends very late in the evening but along our trail we took a break to see the beach. The waves broke on the shore glistened with light that looked like untamed electricity. It was the phosphorous in the ocean that gleamed when the waves crashed. We were both amazed and also disappointed that we couldn't capture it on our cameras. Nonetheless, I remember how nice it looked and how crazy that experience turned out to be.

This has also been the biggest and most enjoyable food adventure I've had since I traveled to the Philippines. Before having left, I've watched episodes that emphasize how great the roasted duck and roasted goose is. As soon as I arrived, I committed myself to having roasted goose as my first meal in Hong Kong. Surely, it didn't go quite as planned but for dinner, I met with two other exchange students from San Francisco and I had the most succulent and delicious goose I've ever had.

Preparing to Leave

Preparing to leave was much more challenging than I thought. I had to prepare my departure with the military and all the documents required by the host university in roughly a couple of weeks before my departure to Hong Kong. I suggest taking care of the student visa and medical insurance and early as possible but in my case, everything processed a bit slower than most exchange student being that I'm the first to leave for Hong Kong Polytechnic University from San Francisco State University. I would also suggest carrying copies of all your documents in a separate luggage in case any mishap would occur.

Having accessible cash without having to carry so many cashier's checks for the whole travel would have made it less stressful. To avoid having to do this, I suggest finding an affiliate banking company to your

bank that is in your host country so that you may withdraw cash from there without having to continuously pay for international transaction fees.

Climate

For the 4 months I've been here from January through April, the weather has been nice. The sun was normally shining with a temperature range of 21 degrees to 26 degrees Celsius and relatively low humidity. The weather would occasionally be cloudy and rainy but there's no need to bring more than two jackets for the trip. You may want to bring an umbrella but you may also purchase it here for around US \$2. If you plan to go hiking, I would suggest bringing comfortable boots and deet to deter all the bugs including mosquitoes.

Packing

I was told to pack all the things I think I need and take only half. It's true because shopping for necessities is quite inexpensive and easily accessible from the host university. I would suggest buying your hygiene stuff here and bring half the clothes you think you need. I suggest taking your phone if it is compatible to use with a SIM card because almost everyone in Hong Kong has a mobile phone. Hong Kong PolyU student housing doesn't provide sheets, pillows or cover so you might want to bring something light and easy to manage. Haircuts are more affordable here but if you cut your own hair like I do, I suggest bringing your own clippers and you can purchase an AC power converter at an electronic store to hook up your laptop or any other electrical devices from the U.S. You will need to buy the AC 220 V to AC 110 V step down power converter.

Flight Information

I was fortunate to fly Cathay Pacific because it was quite enjoyable. I had only brought two luggages that were half full plus carry on. I suggest knowing the policy for baggage from the airline company but I had no difficulty flying there. I just had to be aware and accountable of all my belongings especially my passport and travel itinerary.

Arrival/Rules and Regulations

I was fully independent on my arrival to Hong Kong because my assigned buddy was busy the weekend I arrived. In fact, my buddy had not contacted me since I arrived and I like to say I was adopted by another exchange student's buddy. I suggest having some small cash when you arrive to exchange for transportation to the host university. I took the A21 bus that took me directly from the airport to the footbridge only walking distance to the student halls. Also, Luggage with wheels would help but I don't think it is so necessary. There was a comprehensive orientation and the staff in the Office of International Programs is very helpful. They are very proficient in English and they will accommodate to all of your administrative needs. Hong Kong is much like the States regarding regulations so there is not much to worry about in that respect. The most important document to have before starting classes is the student visa. I was worried before that I would not receive it before my departure and I would have to take a ferry to Macau to have it approved but luckily it was expedited. Instructions from the Office of

International Programs are very thorough and it will lead you to everything you must do to have a smooth and enjoyable experience. I suggest setting up a bank account with Hang Seng Bank or HSBC because they are accessible almost everywhere in Hong Kong and the service is free for students.

Housing

There are 2 opportunities to stay in the students at Hong Kong PolyU. I suggest checking the preference for the Student Halls of Residence instead of the YWCA for several reasons. The Halls is more accessible to the campus, less than a 10 minute walk rather than a short train ride from the YWCA. The Student Halls are much more active in hall activities and you can interact and build relationships with local students and international students. Lastly, the halls offer much more facilities and amenities such as the gym, dance rooms, computer room, reading room, organized classes and functions and it's conveniently located around many stores and banks, many of which are 24 hours. The advantage to staying at the YWCA is that the security is less strict; therefore, you may bring guests over more easily. In my opinion, most students enjoy living in the student halls and because we see each other more, we share more of a tighter community within the exchange students. I've heard students prefer the Student Halls because of the organized events and classes such as a high table dinner, inter-hall sport competitions and dance classes only offered in the halls. I've met a few students outside of the halls, and their living cost is much higher. If you want to bring a student guest to stay of the same sex, the price is only HK \$40(US \$5.50) per night.

Academics

In comparison to SFSU study requirements are different for each department. Having taken two courses in the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) and attempted two courses in the Accounting and Finance (AF) department, I've understood the different study requirements. In my opinion, the courses of SHTM are relatively similar to the course subject in the HM department at SFSU. I believe those classes are instructed by American educated professors, at least the two that I have taken, so understanding them is no challenge. The continuous assessment for SHTM courses were both 60% and the final being worth 40%. In comparison, both Financial Accounting and Business Finance have a cumulative final of 50% and the midterms had English language proficiency counting for roughly 6% of our overall grade. I'm not in favor of the final being counted for so much but unlike SFSU, there is a study week after the end of classes before the beginning of finals week. I believe the SHTM courses emphasize more attendance and participation like group projects and AF emphasizes more tests and knowledge.

Campus Life

The campus of Hong Kong Polytechnic University is relatively larger in area compared with SFSU. There are more study areas indoor and outdoor seating and each core building is organized by alphabet making it easy to find the lecture hall or study room or canteen. There is a local Hang Seng Bank branch in center of campus, 3 canteens that I know of, 2 dim sum restaurants that are priced very reasonable, and a 7 eleven for convenient snacks and beverages. I really enjoy the campus, being somewhat spacious in the congested region of Hong Kong. Students travel everywhere by walking and the

footbridge that connects campus to the halls can be quite busy at times such as 630PM. Computers are readily available in many building but most students commonly use the ones in the library. It's convenient to photo copy, print, rent books and media.

Social Life

It's very easy to make friends and carry on healthy friendships living in the student halls. Many exchange students become friends easily because this semester there are around 250 of us and at least 200 are living in the student halls. I'm very lucky to have gotten along with my roommate being that we are both respectful and we share a few interest especially having local food. Within the first few weeks, the Associated Students organize trips and tours that you will hear of involving touring and sightseeing. Once you travel with them, they just might become your close friends. The local students are great. There are about 3,000 students living in the student halls and we're broken into 11 halls. Each hall has a committee of students that organize hall activities and promote healthy living and a space for community. I enjoy being involved in almost everything they plan such as paintball events, international buffets, hiking trips, inter-hall basketball competitions and dinners. Being an exchange student, you really have a lot to share to the local students and they appreciate the company. Learning Cantonese is quite easy if you're willing to learn and usually it is acceptable. I've developed some good friendships with locals and I would suggest being open to many activities they enjoy doing such as having sushi and singing karaoke. Making new friends in the classroom is also easy being an exchange student. Locals are curious to know where you come from and you are also sometimes situated to do a group projects together.

Religion

There isn't much of a predominant religion in the region but more of a diverse mix of traditional Chinese practices including Buddhism and the western religion of Christianity. Finding and Christian Church is not difficult and neither are the traditional Chinese temples. They say that one of every ten locals belong to a Christian Church. Many temples in the downtown area of Hong Kong have tourism coming in and out, taking photos of Buddhists practicing their religion by burning incense. The temples are nominally Buddhist, but various other gods and goddesses are enshrined in the. There is also a strong Taoist element. In Hong Kong, the goddess Tin Hau, goddess of the sea, is a special favorite, with a protective responsibility toward all mariners and fishermen in particular. The people's view on religion is respectful and they won't normally give offense.

Leisure

Hong Kong is filled with attractions and sightseeing opportunities throughout the territory. Like I said before, Hong Kong has stunning countryside close to the city and perfect for nature tours and hiking. I really didn't expect to enjoy the hiking tours and green side of Hong Kong. A few popular things to do in Hong Kong is to visit The Peak to appreciate the famous view, attend a horse race meeting at the Happy Valley Racecourse, celebrate Chinese Lunar New Year (January/February) parade and party at the many bars of Lan Kwai Fong. I would say the number one place to hang out for exchange students is Lan Kwai Fong for its small strip of bars and nightclubs. Another popular place on Wednesday nights is the bar

called Swindler's in the Wan Chai district of Hong Kong. I would suggest visiting the Giant Buddha and at least of the outlying islands of Hong Kong such as Cheung Chau Island where they have a Bun Festival held during the fourth moon in the Lunar New Year (April/May). The celebration culminates in a unique and colorful street parade. The Hong Kong PolyU host many events including Cantonese Opera shows, famous singing concerts and orchestra concerts as well. They also offer many art exhibits for students to participate in some areas of campus. One of the most famous sport events in Hong Kong is the Hong Kong Sevens, which is a sport very similar to rugby. It is a 3 day weekend event that brings in different European, American and Asian countries tourist to watch the intense sport. You can find all the events and attractions of Hong Kong at www.DiscoverHongKong.com.

Shopping

Hong Kong has a variety of products and brands in all price ranges. You can find many affordable items in the area of Mong Kok, infamous for its exciting markets stalls and congested streets of bargaining shoppers. I suggest visiting the Temple Street Market and having dinner for Bo Tsai Fan if you want to get a true local experience. Ladies Market and the Jade Market are also street markets where you can find local fruit stands to knock off accessories and bags. Be aware that if you are buying electronics, make sure it works and that they seller does not replace the item than what you decide to buy from the display. The shopping districts are not so popular among students but they may be for the wine and dine experience. I suggest buying more valuable items from the shopping malls if you want reliability and a guarantee of quality. Sizes for clothes are relatively the same as U.S. but may be slightly smaller.

Travel

Traveling within Hong Kong, it is a must to have an Octopus Card. It's a card that stores value and can be used for most modes of public transportation, convenient stores like 7 Eleven and Circle K, and some popular chain restaurants. It is rechargeable and I suggest you purchase a Student Octopus Card because the transportation is discounted to nearly half the regular price. The process takes a few weeks but it is worth it if you will still for even one semester. Many exchange students travel to nearby Southeast countries such as Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand if they find a cheap roundtrip ticket online. It is common for them to leave for a long holiday weekend or even during study week to explore and experience the outlying countries. It is safe to travel Hong Kong even for woman. It is normally safe in any part and I have not felt threatened in any way since I've been here. Because I'm a foreigner, I hear that locals are more willing to help you out in the case that you're lost. Almost 90% of locals commute via Mass Transit Railway (MTR). You will find that is easy to use and easy to find your way underground in case you get lost in the city.

Closing

My last thought or suggestion to students is to work hard to play hard. I suggest focusing on academics because it is very easy to take for granted because there is more emphasis on tests. I've seen too many students fail a test counted for so much of their grade. I've also experience losing my focus and getting caught up with the party and nightlife of Hong Kong that it's easy to slip on my responsibilities. I suggest that if you work hard, you will have a fulfilling time in Hong Kong. There are so many things to do, day

and night. Also, get to know and understand the local people and culture. It is inspiring to travel and immerse yourself in a whole new environment. I know that when I leave here, I'll miss the times spent with my local roommate and friends, visiting new territories of Hong Kong, conveniently eating very late at night and having much free time to get lost in the city. I'm excited to travel to the Philippines for the second time since I've been here in Hong Kong but I know that I would come back, if not for business than for leisure.