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Poised for life in a whole new world

Leong Shen-Min

HOW time passes. Gone are the days of Class 2.5 in Taylor's College where examinations begin at seven in the morning, where we figure out the economics of selling kangaroo scrotum pouches as a tourist commodity... It is now a new year and I have been branded an Aussie "returnee".

I landed at our international airport which I soon discovered is no longer called Subang International Airport. The heat and humidity hit me as soon as I inched my way out of the arrival gate with my life's possessions stuffed into a backpack and two boxes. Three years of my life in three bundles weighing 50kg (and about RM300 worth in excess baggage!).

Leaving Australia was not easy at all. It wasn't just leaving Sydney, my friends, my laidback lifestyle - I was leaving behind what everyone calls the "The Best Years of Your Life", my student life. It was just strange being so unfamiliar in this yet so familiar country.

I insisted on going to the mamak stall that night. As I sat there sipping my teh tarik, it finally hit me hard that I was back home, right here in Malaysia, for good! I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. How was I supposed to feel? Just 10 hours ago, I had been having a cappuccino in Sydney.

They tell me I should be pleased to return home to family and friends with a degree. "So what?" would have been my usual retort but frankly, I wasn't at all mentally prepared to leave all that, become part of the work force and move into the next phase of my life. The transition period is always the worst. Every returnee goes through that. Many survive and so will I (I hope).

I did a lot more growing up while I was away at university. I guess that is the norm as age creeps along and hopefully, I've matured in the process. It is different when the people you depended on previously (family and friends here) are 6,600 away.

Although I was financially dependent, I was on my own so it was up to me to take care of things. You learn this quickly when you take on the role of Mum and Dad and housekeeper and banker...

I was inflexible back then (perhaps because I was young and immature). I knew that my books were my first priority and the main reason why I was in Sydney in the first place. I didn't really restrict myself where fun was concerned but it was not possible to go all out when you had studies to take care of. That ended after three years.

I decided to stay in Sydney for six months after that, just to do what I didn't manage to do and to see what I didn't get to see. To put it nicely, I was there to discover myself and to blend in with the people there as much as I could. The truth? I was really there to avoid the looming career decisions I would have to make once I got home.

Those six months worked out better than I could hope for.

I picked up my first job near a place where my friend lived. I became a waitress in the heart of the bohemian gay community in Sydney. That job took care of my expenses (which I thought was my responsibility since Mum and Dad would rather have me sitting in an office dealing with other people's taxes).

In between serving portions of Indonesian and Malaysian cuisine to customers (there were also many heterosexual people!) ranging from friends on a mission to give me a hard time to the Lord Mayor himself, there was the extra pleasure of casual chats with fellow customers on how beautiful

Malaysia is and what a wonderful job Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is doing for it and us Malaysians.

My other job with the Faculty of Economics took care of the three-week-long backpacking trip I did on my own from an island off Adelaide, through the Australian outback right up to tropical Darwin.

I fell in love with the desert along the way... sleeping under the clear skies and walking barefoot in the scorching desert sands. I returned to Sydney triumphant as I had conquered the outback, and had travelled more than 5,000km.

As much as work had enhanced the enjoyment of my stay there, friends played an even more crucial role. It feels rather odd not having their familiar faces around now. I made many wonderful friends and strengthened old friendships in those few years in Australia.

As you grow older, friendship takes on a new meaning and I am finding it increasingly important to keep up with everyone I know - my old school friends, fellow Taylorians and my mates over in Australia. (Buddies, if you happen to read this, my telephone number has changed to 06-3152346).

I can't help but feel lost, afraid and depressed in this seemingly whole new world now. I have grown older and cannot adapt as well to changes as I did when I was a bit younger (like three years ago!). I still cannot get used to the way things function around here or the way people are and I have yet to step into a public toilet.

Don't get me wrong, I am not one of those snobbish returnees. I just haven't given myself enough time to adjust.

The step into my next phase of life is impacting too greatly on me but I know time ticks on and I cannot remain 21 forever.

Now that my feet are firmly on Malaysian soil again, I have to charge on and take each day that comes as a challenge.

I apologise especially to my folks for being "Ms Complaining and Negativity of the Year" (before they decide to kick me out of the house!).

All I seem to do these days is browse through the job vacancy pages in the newspaper.

Sigh! Welcome to the real world...

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