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A home away from home

By RICHARD LIM

Greenhorns and seasoned students talk about their experiences and their future plans.

FOR many Malaysian undergrads, arriving Down Under marks the first time they've been on their own.

And while some delight in singing a "song of freedom" others pine for their parents back home.

And then again, there are those who are caught in two minds.

"I've always wanted to live on my own but I started crying on the plane and couldn't stop for a week," says a blushing undergraduate in Perth who prefers to remain anonymous.

"Although I managed to get myself together, I missed home terribly. I still do."



Mira Izzati and Mira Izzanis, can't wait to start working in Australia.

Initiation rites

Identical twins Mira Izzati Mazlan and Mira Izzanis Maslan, 20, can identify with the student – minus the tears.

Coming to Australia was a case of all they couldn't leave behind and the duo decided to stick together for a semblance of their close-knit family environment.

"We're at the University of Tasmania because its the only varsity which accepted both of us," admits Mira Izzanis who adds that they're in the same Finance programme.

Living under the same roof off-campus, the second-year undergraduates feel that although they were initially looking for convenience – as demonstrated by them staying near a supermarket – living Down Under has changed their perspective.

"We've become more mature as we look out for each other," says Mira



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Izzati. "We were nervous at first but living on our own is part of growing up."

"Handling our own affairs has made us appreciate our parents more."

The "growing up" process shows no indication of stopping for the twins and they're now hoping to obtain work experience as fruit pickers or supermarket attendants.



State-of-the-art: Accommodation like Murdoch University's student houses are a major pull factor in Australian universities.

Their cultural exposure has also been fruitful albeit a little costly at times.

"We've learned a lot about Australian society," continues Mira Izzanis. "Although many Aussies are laidback, they can be sticky when regulations are concerned."

"Of course, not everything is enforced, but when it comes to traffic regulations, one must observe the rules."

And the sisters speak from experience as they picked up four traffic summonses in a month for parking illegally.



ALL SMILES: Murdoch university students Aaron Choo, Razeen Amran, Caryn Leong and Eman Azrin Azhar, are all enjoying themselves Down Under.

Palatial estates

As for those who prefer the simple life, options abound on-campus.

Many Australian universities provide state-of-the-art accommodation and students enjoy the luxury of having a replica of their own rooms, five minutes away from their lecture halls.

And at times, things could even be an upgrade.

More modern universities are shedding Bauhaus undertones for futuristic designs and this has been popular with the students.

"I was very surprised to discover the quality of accommodation here," enthuses Murdoch University Communications students Caryn Leong, 20.

"We enjoy all sorts of facilities and I love the posh feel of the campus."

Campus dorms also pack a party feel and the décor some students attach to their doors is a clear giveaway of their favourite past times.

For the less adventurous and parents who are concerned about their children being home alone – and far away – opting for a home stay programme could be an alternative.



Meng, Norfadila Mahrom and Sia, chatting at the University of Adelaide.

Pairing students with Australian families, home stay provides a more homely feel and a greater sense of security.

And security is a virtual guarantee as families who opt to open up their homes must go through a screening process which includes an interview, a house visit by university staff and an examination of employment and criminal records.

Apart from the obvious benefits, home stay enables foreign students to master English and adapt quicker to the Aussie way of life as a considerable amount of time will be spent with their hosts.

Caught offside

But not everyone is fortunate when it comes to lodging and University of Tasmania (UTAS) Business student cum footballer aspirant Raymond Deou Yee Ken, 19, for one, could do with a rabbit's foot.

Having stayed Down Under since last February, Deou's Aussie hiatus has all the elements of a soap opera.

His only difference with a movie star or a football galactico – in his opinion – is that he "isn't famous yet."

Originally signing up to study at another institution, Deou arrived to find out that he had been assigned the wrong accommodation and that he would stay off-campus – on his own.

"I was scared at first but I just dismissed it as bad luck," he admits.

However, his fortune did not change fast and Deou was assaulted after a late-night shopping spree.

According to Deou, three Aussie youths tailed him and a friend while an accomplice circled the area with a getaway car.

"I noticed the trio following us and I told my friend to run," he recalls.

"However, they caught him, threw some groceries at us, and made off with the shopping bags."



Not everything is strictly followed Down Under as evidenced by these anglers at Fremantle, Western Australia.

"I know it was late. But bread goes for half-price or less around that time. And that's very good bread!"

"Although the thought of getting a big loaf for A\$0.90 (RM2.50) is still tempting, I try not to go out if it's too late now."

Band of brothers

Although Deou is a statistical outlier in the bell curve of Malaysian students who have no trouble whatsoever in Australia, the same cannot be said for every foreign student.

Indian students recently staged protests in Sydney and Melbourne against "curry bashing" – the targeting of Indian students in crimes.

The ten-point Universities Australia Action Plan for Student Safety was launched in response to the imbroglio and Aussie universities will now cooperate closely with law enforcement authorities to beef up student security.

Despite the fracas, Malaysian students Down Under are largely unperturbed.



Ahmad Fareed: Student associations overseas provide a platform for Malaysians to network.

Deou points out that no dominant trend is apparent in the ethnic background of the attackers and racism is not the primary motivation.

"If you're walking back alone and meet a drunk man who happens to be aggressive, you're going to get hit," he says simply.

"It doesn't matter what colour you are. You'll still get hit. What we should do is play smart

and update each other on any ongoings."

Other Malaysian students agree and many student groups are set up Down Under for this purpose.

"Such associations function to look after the Malaysian student community," explains Universiti Putra Malaysia researcher Ahmad Fareed Ismail who is pursuing his PhD in Business at the University of Western Australia.

"One of our members got involved in a motor accident and we took turns looking after him. Apart from that, we provide financial assistance and make sure new students in Australia feel welcome."

The president of the Malaysian Postgraduate Students' Association in Western Australia, Ahmad Fareed keeps in touch with the Higher Education Ministry, reporting the problems faced by Malaysian students on scholarship.

Greener pastures

Despite the apparent togetherness, Malaysian students are not unanimous when it comes to returning home.

"Although staying in Australia would give me more opportunities in science, I'm going to return home," says Nadia Mohd Fadzli who is pursuing a Masters in Biotechnology at Flinders University.

"Home is where the heart is and I'll take back what I've learnt when it comes to fusing business development and biotechnology."

Unlike Nadia, the strong links between academia and industry proved too strong for University of Adelaide postgraduate students Sia Tze Haw, 23, and Meng Nan Chong, 22.

"We're refining water treatment using titanium dioxide photocatalysis combined with ultraviolet light," says Sia.

"We hope that this method can replace chlorination as a potential disinfection method in the future. I wouldn't mind going back to Malaysia but the Australian academic scene is more conducive for my research."

Meng, who is an Australian government scholar, agrees and cites the strong link between his university and the South Australian Water Corporation.

However, they stop short of discounting a return to Malaysia after an Australian stint.

Greater opportunities are not the only temptation and with a landscape bearing more than a hint of Salvadore Dalli, the Australian outback is enough to give some Malaysians ideas.

"I wouldn't mind staying in Tasmania," admits UTAS Geology student Ahmad Nabil Taff Shariffudin, 22. "Yes, the pace of things is a little slow at times but the quality of life is good.

"Tasmania is one place where I can enjoy four seasons and really cold, fresh air. The scenery is great and I'm close to nature."

And there are other less noble motivations. "There are many beautiful blondes and brunettes," he enthuses.

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