

WHAT'S UP

Sailing through cultures

More than 300 youths will live, work and play on board a cruise ship to discover more about one another's countries. JUSTIN ZHUANG reports.



The Singaporeans have had to learn more about their own cultures before the trip. Yao Yang (extreme left) and Yi Qi (third from left) and some of the other participants show off the outfits of different ethnic groups.

[Photo: ALL PICTURES: NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL]

Since he was 16 years old, Amin Farid has heard stories about a ship from Japan that makes an annual cruise through the countries of Southeast Asia. Many of his friends from Perkumpulan Seni, a Malay arts group in Singapore, had joined this journey of discovery and told him wonderful things about it.

Later this month, Mr Amin, who is now 26, will finally get his turn on the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Programme (SSEAYP), as it is known. He is part of a group of 25 young Singaporeans who will join SSEAYP along with youths from Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Japan.

It is the 39th edition of this trip, which has been going on since 1974. “I grew up with these people who were constantly talking about SSYEAP,” said Mr Amin. “I grew up imagining myself on that ship one day.”

The Singaporean team is made up of students and working professionals who passed selection interviews. To be chosen, they had to have a record of community service and an interest in cultural exchanges. The programme is subsidised by the National Youth Council and the Japanese government.



The ship MS Fuji Maru.

Preparations

To prepare for their 53-day journey on board the MS Fuji Maru, Mr Amin and his fellow Singaporean participants have been spending the last two and a half months learning about the different countries’ cultures and attending courses about leadership and other topics.

On board the ship, the participants will discuss eight important topics, including Education, Climate Change, and International Relations. At the end of this trip, the youths will come out with a report and action plan on how to contribute to the region and their home countries in these areas.

But, it will not be all work on board. There will also be games for the youths to get to know one another as well as activities such as “National Day Presentations”, when the youths will showcase their respective national cultures.

So, in addition to attending lectures two weeknights every week, the Singaporean youths have been spending their weekends preparing dances and skits to highlight Singapore’s culture.



Amin Farid (left) leads the other participants in a dance he choreographed for the trip.

Home stays

This year, all the participants will first fly to Yokohama, Japan. From there, the ship will set sail for the cities of Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta and Muara, before cruising back to Japan in December. One part of the programme that participants are looking forward to is their home stays at the six ports-of-call.

The youths will stay in the homes of families who have volunteered to house them for two nights. This way, the youths will learn about each country through the eyes of a local.

“I feel that this is the way to get to know the county better,” said Hen Yi Qi, a 25-year-old journalist who is taking part in this year’s SSYEAP. “When I visit Thailand and Vietnam, all I look at is the scenery, I don’t really get to talk to the people and understand their way of living. By staying with them I get to eat homecooked meals and see how they live.”

She is especially looking forward to visiting Bangkok because she loves Thailand and has been learning the language for a year now. “Once I go to Thailand, I’ll finally get a chance to use it!” she said.

The ship will be making a three-day stop at Singapore in November. Several Singaporean families have volunteered to host the participants when they are here and show them around the city. As part of a SSYEAP tradition, former participants of this programme will also gather on the ship for a “Reunion On Board”.

For participant Teo Yao Yang, the short return to Singapore also means rushing back to school for an examination. The undergraduate has had to miss lectures to be part of this programme but feels it is all worth it. “I thought SSYEAP would be a great way to break away from my routine life. A 53-day cruise! That has to be awesome enough,” said the 23-year-old.

Similarly, the other participants have also had to put aside time from work and play for the program, but they have found it worthwhile. For Miss Hen, the programme has already helped her grow as a person. “It’s about trying things you’ve

never tried before. I am one of the leads in a skit and I am forced to go up on stage to act even though I have no experience in acting,” she said.

Working together with the other Singaporeans has also shown Mr Amin how multiculturalism can work here. “I gained a lot of trust in my fellow Singaporeans, seeing how sensitive and willing they are to learn about different cultures,” he said.

VOCABULARY subsidised (say “**sub**-si-dydzd”; verb, past tense) = paid partly by a supporter.

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