Candidates write about their experience on our annual International Business Consulting Project and Trip in a series of blogs

Team Arcturus reflects on the week of doing business in Kuala Lumpur.

Ten months ago we made the thrilling decision as a cohort to focus on Kuala Lumpur as our destination market because of the potential opportunity it offers to Canadian organizations. It did not take too long for us to be captivated by the excitement that we felt had 10 months ago as we began to explore Kuala Lumpur this week.

The contrasts are what stand out for us this week. The historic contrasting the modern as well as the Malayan business culture compared to our Canadian way of working are the key features that our team reflects upon as our time in Kuala Lumpur comes to a close.

Appreciating the blend of the old and the new
Kuala Lumpur is a diverse city threading together the old and the new. At first glance the population seems to have maintained their time-old traditions and cultural ways in the city of over 71 million. But, we then saw the signs of the emerging economy and one that is on the move up, from the influx of luxury trademark items like the Bentley and Rolls Royce dealerships to the high-end designer shopping malls in the City Centre.

Kuala Lumpur’s building landscape is also a blend of the old and the new - a city of architectural contrasts. Our tour guide boasted about the Malayan’s ability to construct buildings and infrastructure at a fast pace resulting in many new and modern buildings in various stages of completion. Among the cityscape in downtown corridor stands the iconic Petronas Towers surrounded by luxury hotels and huge shopping centres while edged by colonial buildings that still stand in excellent condition.

Understanding a different way of doing business
One of the first things that caught our attention was the level of politeness from Malayan people. Each person greeted us with a smile and a warm welcome, whether it was in our hotel room, at a restaurant or our meetings. We are known for our politeness as Canadians and the Malayans are certainly consistent with this aspect of our culture. This was an easy adoption for us.

The contrasts, while subtle, began to surface during the scheduling and within our meetings. Much like other Asian countries, it was also confirmed to us that business is built on personal relationships and on trust. Our team had to identify and leverage this fact to the best of our ability and in a small window of time to arrange meetings that would benefit our client. An example of this is how we utilized the time right after the Opening Banquet for informal discussions. We were able to leverage our guests at the Opening Banquet, who were knowledgeable about our industry within Malaysia, to secure some valuable meetings later in the week. Our team even scheduled a last minute day trip to Singapore to meet with key players in the industry. This trip turned into a great learning experience and valuable relationship-building exercise.

We realized too that direct word is less important and that we had to pay greater attention to the more subtle forms of communication like voice tone, body language and facial expressions. It was slightly different than our usual exchanges within Canada where we drive value in the direct verbal and written context and pay less attention to these subtle forms.

Overcoming our own challenges
Our biggest challenges in the project however did not relate to the culture at all but it was within our own team. Our first challenge was to get over the jet-lag and help our bodies adapt to time difference of 12 hours. Some of us were up early to take advantage of the yoga sessions offered at the hotel to help us begin the day. Our next biggest challenge was then to prioritize our short amount of time within market to provide the most value to our client. It was an intensive week for our team to determine the division of tasks in order to manage the flow of information as well as attend all of our meetings with the overall goal of culminating our findings into a thorough set of recommendations for our client.

Overall, we have been pleasantly surprised about our week of events. We departed from Ottawa with only two meetings on our schedule for the week. We then hit the ground running, managing each aspect of the Malayan business culture, leveraging each contact and our own logistical challenges to land a total of 12 meetings while in the country.

We made it happen!
Our team is very proud of our accomplishments and the information that we have gathered for our clients. In a very short time we have paved a way forward for our client to have a strong roadmap for entering the Malaysian market and expanding to surrounding Southeast Asian markets.

We are more appreciative of Kuala Lumpur and the value it offers to the global economy as we saw it unfold for us first hand with our client. We couldn’t be happier that in the cohort’s decision ten months ago to discover this emerging economy.