



The Ship for South East Asian Youth Programme

When I was told to write this article about my trip, I was in a real quandary – WHERE do I begin? Most importantly HOW should I start? The 46 days on board the *Nippon Maru* have left me with many beautiful and unforgettable memories. The people I met, especially, left me with deep impressions. The programme, known as "The Ship for South East Asian Youth Programme" or "SSEAYP" for short, is an annual programme sponsored by the Japanese government and supported by member countries of ASEAN.

The participants were kept busy by a series of activities: discussions on social and political issues, cultural introductions, sports, recreational and club activities, etc. There were also programmes at each port of call which included interaction with local youths, courtesy calls on dignitaries, institutional visits as well as home-stays. The countries we visited were Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Japan.

It was on board the *Nippon Maru* that I witnessed for the very first time the vast ocean, the clear, blue sea and even dolphins leaping into the air. I will also remember experiences such as sharing cabins with participants of other cultures, suffering from seasickness on the journey from the Philippines to Japan, feeling the Tender Loving Care (TLC) and concern from each individual and enjoying the exhilaration of waking up every morning with many programmes and activities to look forward to.

Indeed, I have learnt a lot from this programme. As representatives of our country, it is no longer about "me" or "I" but the collective "WE" and "US". Like what our National Leader has always reminded us – we have to carry our flag high! That was also how we built up

our team spirit. I have also learnt "international tolerance and mutual understanding." Imagine staying on board in a confined cabin with two other cabin mates from different countries, not to mention different backgrounds, cultures and lifestyles. Communication was always an issue. A few participants could not speak English well but this was never a barrier, as everyone made an effort to overcome this through all ways and means available. It was the effort of accommodating personal differences that helped us to "survive" the entire trip.

Everyone had a three-day home-stay with their foster family at each port of call. This was the opportunity for us to get a deeper understanding of each country, its culture and its people. My foster families not only brought me to see the tourist attractions, but also to places where they go everyday. We were always made to feel welcomed by the people. There were always lots of stories and experiences to exchange and share with each other.

I recall one ex-participant telling me about the rush of emotions experienced during parting – how it felt to say good-bye to all those friends who have come to mean so much to you. I did not really understand what he meant then, but I finally understood when tears flowed freely during the moments of our farewell.

Today, we have all returned to our own world and hectic life. Even so, the SSEAYP passion is still burning. The number of emails we have received so far can attest to that. The bond we have built is indeed inspiring. The memories I have from this programme will always remain with me. I hope that Japan and all the ASEAN countries will work together hand in hand to maintain this peace and harmony for the benefit of our future generations.

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