I'm not quite sure how to sum up the enormous amount of personal growth that I've experienced this summer, but let me start by saying this: Singapore has been a key player in my understanding of who I am as a person and how I view the world.

My friends have all been asking me how my summer went, and I find it difficult to encapsulate everything I've learned. It takes a solid 2-hour conversation to even brush the basics. What do I tell them about – the funny stories? the scary moments? the insane adventures? the interesting people I met? the cool places I traveled to?

More often than not, I end up attempting to describe Singapore's singular culture.

“Clean” is what most people seem to blurt out when I say that I spent the summer in Singapore. And sure, seeing how “perfectly” Singapore functions definitely makes me wish that New York had super clean streets and a reliable, clean, and ridiculously efficient MRT system. But there are so many personal freedoms in the United States that simply don't exist in Singapore. Western cultures often expect so many liberties as givens, even though the majority of countries in the world have far fewer civil rights than we do in the USA. Singapore may be technologically advanced and wealthier by GDP per capita than the States, but there have been many instances in Singapore that have made me extremely grateful to be a citizen of the United States of America.
Singapore seems bent on drawing successful businesses into the country; so much so that oftentimes the country's laws seem to far benefit corporations rather than people. Though some may disagree with such a style of economic policy, Singapore's policies are also hard to criticize because clearly, their approach has worked wonders for the country, whose economy has skyrocketed in recent decades despite the country being so young. It's hard to judge or criticize any other culture in the world without knowing the factors that went into making such decisions or being able to predict the consequences that such decisions lead to.

I definitely found it very refreshing to see so many expats in Singapore. I've traveled to many countries in Asia, but never have I seen as many foreigners in an Asian city as I did in Singapore. The cultural blend there truly is one of a kind and quite incredible, and this is in large part due to Singapore's business-oriented policies that transformed Singapore into an international hub.

The company that I worked at, Covetella, was a fashion-tech startup. Working at a start-up can be a nuisance at times (like when your boss changes her mind every few minutes and you have to keep undoing and redoing work that you just did), but I got an incredible example of how fashion can meld with tech. The fashion industry is definitely not as glamorous as it seems, but working at a company consisting entirely of females was a new and empowering experience.

In addition, interning in Singapore for 8 weeks gave me the opportunity to travel around before, during, and after the internship: I visited Malaysia, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, and Taiwan, in addition to exploring Singapore quite thoroughly. Every single culture, no matter how similar, has such distinct
characteristics, that I marvel at how different the world can be and how different my life is from any other given person's life. If you were to randomly pick another human in this world, his/her life would most likely be drastically, unfathomably different from mine. In Siem Reap, Cambodia, I visited a killing field-turned-memorial of the Khmer Rouge era. A monk who spoke English told me that he had been orphaned by Pol Pot's soldiers, and hence sent to Siem Reap and the monastery there since there was no one else to take him in. And yet he didn't even hate Pol Pot – I believe his words were, “Pol Pot was a great leader and a very smart man with good intentions, just bad ideas.”

But despite all the differences, exchanging stories with so many people of so many other cultures made me realize that there are baseline similarities among most humans. At the end of the day, many people just seem to want happiness – a concept that seems to be, to most people, a combination of love, companionship, and money. And though that may be a very baseline similarity, it explains and justifies most people's actions, good or bad, and makes the world feel a lot smaller.

Visiting several countries by myself added an even crazier element to my summer. Being a woman in Brunei, for example, was something that I didn't think would be a major issue. I knew that Brunei was a majority Muslim country, but Malaysia is also heavily Muslim, and Malaysia seemed quite “normal” by Western or Asian standards. What I didn't know (and didn't find in my research, since Brunei is one of the least-visited countries in the world with very little tourist information available), was that the country enacted sharia law in May 2014 – aka, I, as a female, couldn't sit next to a man on the public bus unless we were related or married,
which I quickly found out through trial and error on my first day in Bandar Seri Begawan. Women couldn’t walk with men unless they were related or married, they couldn’t shake hands with men unless they were related or married, karaoke was banned from the country because it interferes with prayers, the concept of Christmas is completely banned, the entire country shuts down from noon to 2 PM on Fridays because everyone is required by law to publicly pray at a mosque.

I’ve traveled by myself before, but I’ve never felt truly on my own until this summer. I don’t mean that statement in a pitiful, lonely way. I did feel lonely at times, but I felt so purely independent in a way that made me feel like I could do anything I wanted. This summer was empowering, because of both my internship and the countries I lived in and traveled to.

Some of my favorite moments in life occurred this summer. Sitting on an ancient ruin of a temple in a deserted grassy area of Angkor Wat at 7 AM and hearing the birds and crickets, and then watching a monk walk out from a ruin 100m away. Understanding and appreciating Singaporean culture. Trying to find a balance between respect for other religions and human rights criticism (women aren’t allowed to play most sports in Brunei? Really?). Breaking down the stereotypes surrounding Bangkok. Fulfilling a dream of solo traveling.

Also, the other CEO Singapore interns on this trip were gems. Truly, truly gems; I couldn’t have asked for anything more. Never have I traveled with such a sizeable group of people that have all been so genuinely caring, open and accepting, willing to consider other people’s ideas no matter how drastically different their backgrounds and opinions were (we had an hours-long debate on race and
on the lookout for each other, interested in each other’s ideas and personalities and interests, and drama-free. I’m sure I’ll stay friends with many of them for a long time to come, and we’re already planning a kaya toast reunion!

My reflection project was initially just my Instagram account. I love taking photographs (as well as handling social media, which was a significant part of my internship), so photojournalism/photo blogging seemed to be the obvious media outlet for my reflection project.

https://www.instagram.com/mabel.luo/

Those are the highlights; the most “OMG”-worthy shots, the beautifully picturesque moments with short and sweet captions that show to others how awesome my summer was. But I guess I needed ~1300 more words to even vaguely explain the thoughts that occurred behind those photos.

Thank you Columbia, CEO, Covetella, Singapore, and the other 7 countries I visited this summer for giving me a better understanding of how the world works. Here’s to a lifetime of more travels and cultural experiences. 😊