

Where Aotearoa Connects with Asia

Research Insights from New Zealanders Living, Working and doing Business in Southeast Asia.



Abridged version written in-conjunction with;



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Introduction

Touch down....take off



When our researchers interviewed a diverse group of New Zealanders with experience in Southeast Asia, their excitement was palpable.

Many interviewees had developed skillsets that would be impossible to nurture at home. They had leveraged their Asian experiences to progress their careers and unlock new business opportunities. Their world had expanded – and they were the better for it.

Many interviewees were pleasantly surprised to find cultural touchpoints that sparked new connections. The Māori and Pacific emphasis on relationship building, for instance, was cited by many as an advantage when entering Asian markets.

Our interviewees also shared their challenges and gave tips for making the most of the experience. A common theme is the way exposure to diverse cultures and different ways of doing things enlarged their cultural toolkit.

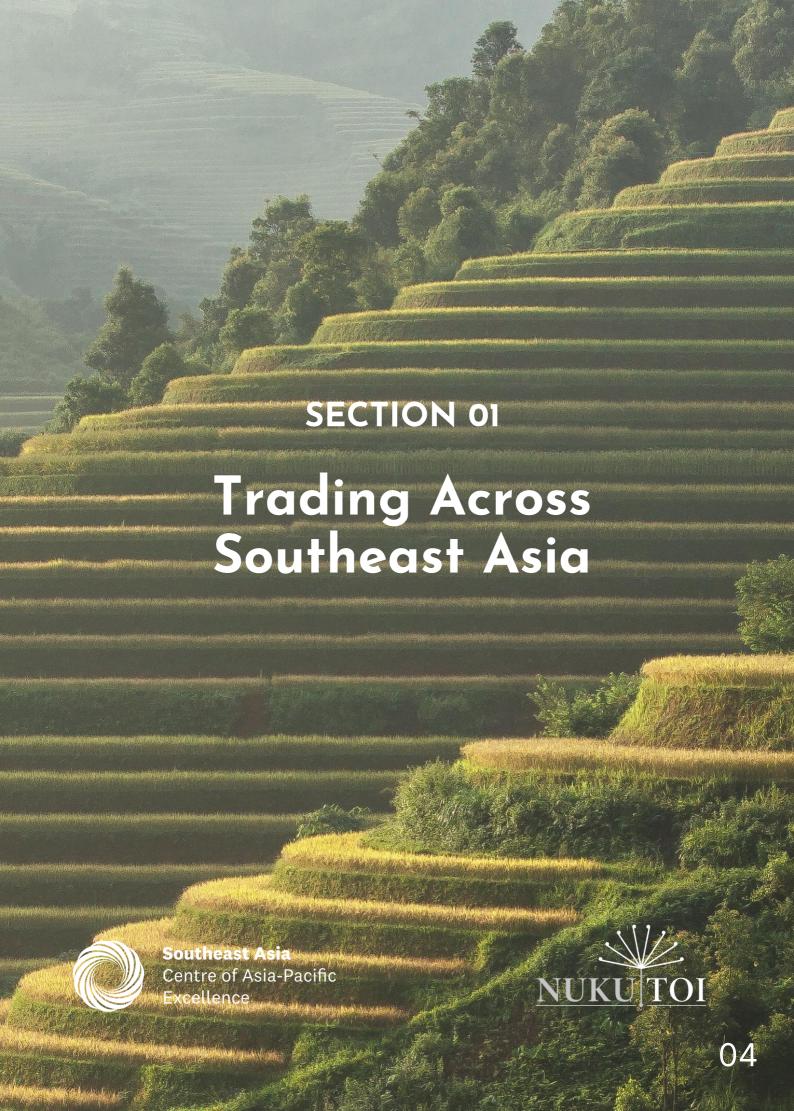
These short profiles showcase the opportunities that can be found one long-haul flight away from Aotearoa. For a fuller discussion, see the detailed report here.

You are also welcome to get in touch for a one-on-one conversation.

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Interviews





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Korero about trading in Southeast Asia

Paul Morgan

Paul's background:

Paul Te Poa Karoro Morgan, CNZM, QSO has served for more than 30 years on the boards of Wakatū Incorporation and Kono NZ. For 22 years he has been the Chair of Nelson-based Wakatū Incorporation. Paul lived and worked across Southeast Asia from the 1970s.

Experience in Asia:

Paul's involvement in companies supplying seafood includes Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. Thailand became the primary market, driven by a demand gap in the Green Lip Mussel Shellfish market.

Key out-takes:

- New Zealand companies have opportunities in traditional foods, beverages, and high-value health and nutritional products.
- Sustainability is key, guided by the Māori principle of kaitiakitanga (guardianship).
- Future business leaders should communicate their stories and reinforce the New Zealand brand, with a focus on sustainable practices.
- Time must be invested in building relationships before transactions, especially in relationship-oriented Southeast Asia.

In his own words:

"Our business community needs to get closer to consumers and understand behavioural insights, and what's driving the market segment you are targeting... It is only when you get the big data numbers that you really see what is happening with consumer purchasing trends."





<u>Trading in Thailand</u>

Nikora Ngaropo

Nikora's background:

Nikora Ngaropo has a background in 3D animation and technology. He is the founder of NNMD Ltd, which has a portfolio of projects that contribute to the growth and development of motion and design technology-based initiatives within education.

Experience in Asia:

Nikora's connection to the region is through his Thai business partner and colleagues. He emphasises the importance of cultural understanding, language, and using local business knowledge to support projects.

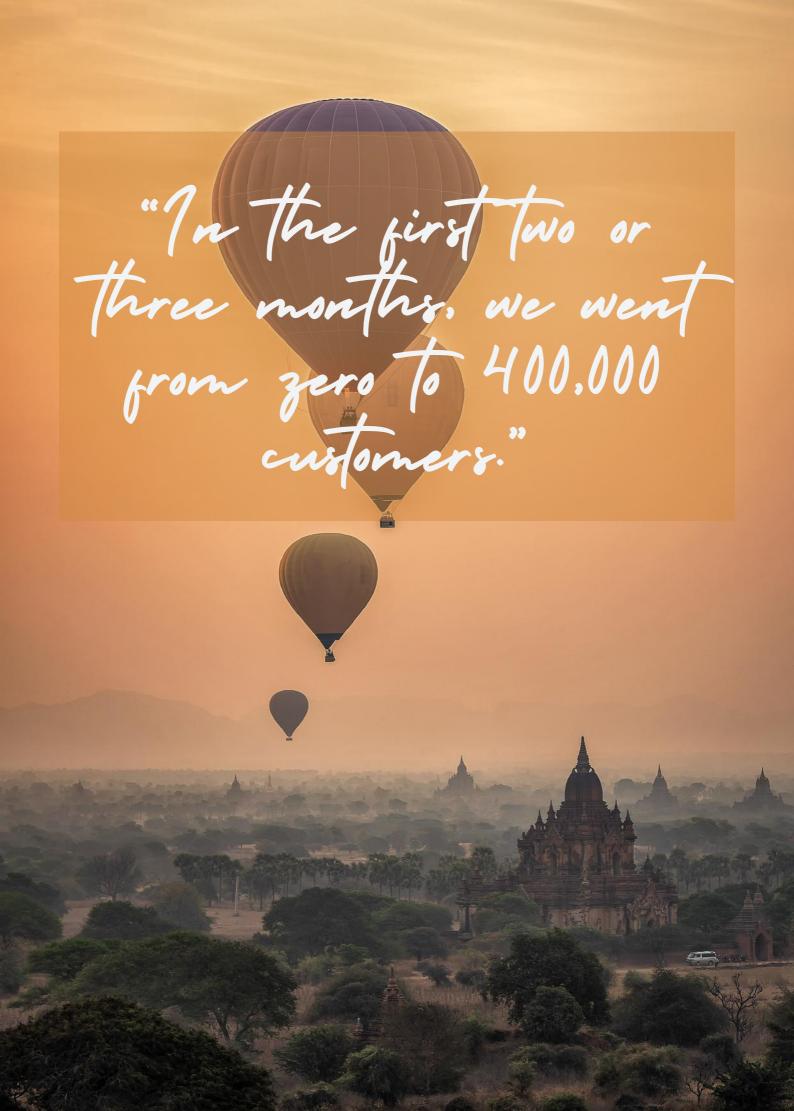
Key out-takes:

- Due diligence is crucial, including understanding the education system and disparities among institutions.
- To overcome language and cultural barriers you need the right people on the ground and connections with local knowledge.
- Scale and preparation are essential because of the size of the population and consumer demand in Southeast Asia.
- Māori businesses can look offshore for partners who can bring smart capital, expertise and connections, as well as access to markets.

In his own words:

"It is important to have a strategy that aligns with what a company or country is planning to do now or in the near future. You need enough foresight to be able to lock onto those opportunities."

"Thailand Today is quite different to the Thailand of 10 years ago"





Myanmar, a land of opportunity

Bryan Lilley

Bryan's background:

Bryan Lilley is from Taranaki; his iwi is Te Atiawa. Bryan studied commerce, accounting and business management at Victoria University in Wellington and has had a varied career in finance and information communications technology.

Experience in Asia:

Bryan spent six years in Myanmar setting up a telco logistics business and a mobile banking network. He managed a team of about 400-500 staff, including expats and repats.

Key out-takes:

- Leasing property and getting business licenses were challenging, so Bryan's company obtained an overseas investment license.
- Need to research banking, business licensing, property leases and customs processes.
- Understanding rules for employing locals, minimum wage and tariff arrangements.
- While the level of poverty can be confronting, Myanmar people are creative and agile, and they often see opportunities where others see obstacles.

In his own words:

"As a Māori I found I could connect with the local people in Myanmar. We have a lot in common in terms of where we've come from with our shared experience of British colonialism."

Read the full interview here



Life in Indonesia

Brian Thorrington

Brian's background:

Brian Rhodes Thorrington was appointed Honorary Consul of the Republic of Indonesia in 2020. He has lived in Indonesia for over four decades, working in apparel, property development, manufacturing, and now on research initiatives to improve farming practices and nutrition for Indonesian children.

Experience in Asia:

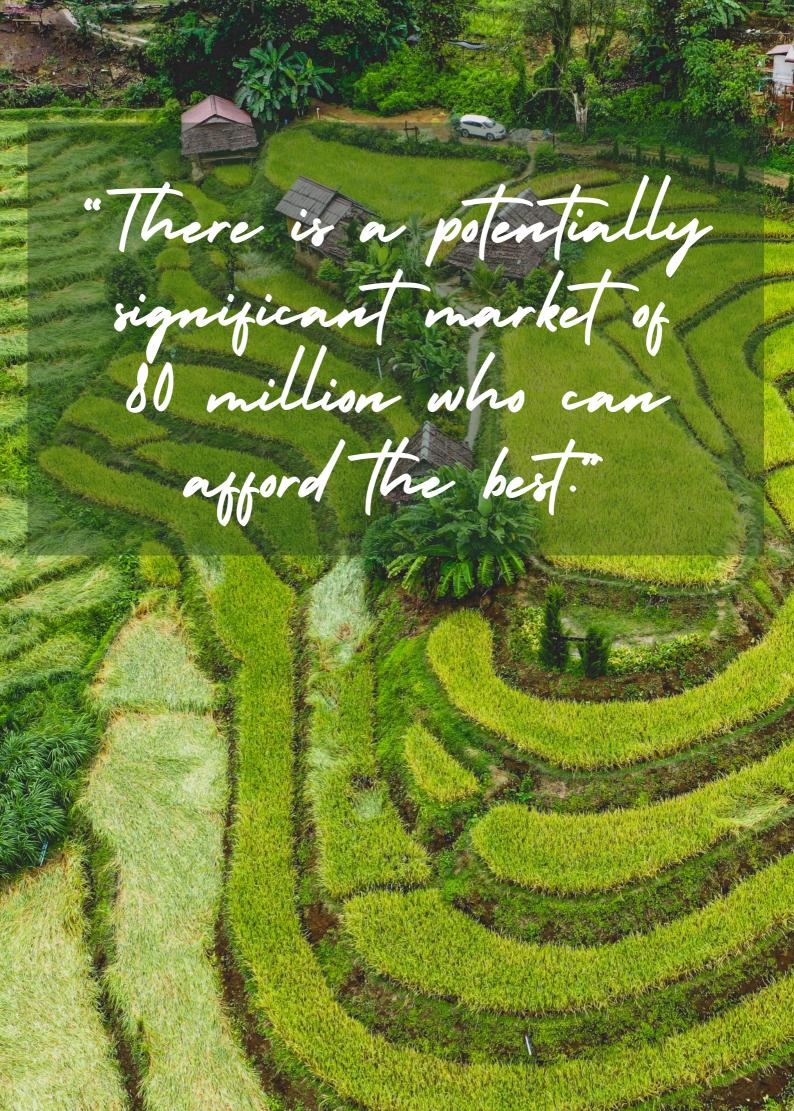
Brian arrived in Indonesia in 1979 initially for business. He fell in love with the culture and lifestyle, leading to a four-decade-long connection with the country. Now based in Yogyakarta, he is collaborating with the University of Gadjah Mada to improve farming practices and nutritional outcomes. He is currently involved in a project with a New Zealand company to introduce crop cultivars and adapt local farming practice to improve nutrition, boost productivity and incomes for farmers.

Key out-takes:

- There is limited awareness of New Zealand in Indonesia but the emerging middle-class economy is a potential market for high-value products.
- Be aware of challenges in communication and timelines in Indonesia, as well as the need for patience and understanding cultural contexts.
- Be curious about the Indonesian market and build relationships based on trust and likability.
- Māori often have an advantage in Indonesia due to their relationshipdriven approach.

In his own words:

"Some New Zealanders come here thinking the world knows about them, but I have seen that many of them need to take time to learn more about this market. When you come to Indonesia you need to listen. You should defer to the oldest person in the room because it's respectful."



SECTION 02

Working in Finance, Services and Education in Singapore





Interviews



Rob Borrough



Working in banking in Southeast Asia

Tania O'Brien

Tania's background:

Tania is a New Zealander of Fijian heritage. She is a Chartered Accountant, with an MBA (Distinction) and a B Comm (Accounting and Finance). In 2008, she moved to Singapore to help support ANZ's growth agenda. Tania is currently the CFO of Westpac New Zealand.

Experience in Asia:

In 2008, Tania took on a CFO role in Singapore to build the finance team and capability to support ANZ's growth agenda for the region. Her role expanded significantly, covering acquisitions, divestments, and tailoring services to different customer segments.

Key out-takes:

- The value of New Zealanders' openness to ideas, hands-on work experience, and a global perspective from our education system.
- Exposure to different people and cultures, coupled with practical work experience, contributes to success in Southeast Asia.
- Tania's Pacific Islander background was well-received, with people showing interest in New Zealand's Māori and Pacific culture.
- Respecting the process in a rules-based environment is essential.
- Cultural assimilation training should be provided to help expatriates understand different practices.

In her own words:

"My advice to Kiwis considering going offshore for their work experience or OE is go early and go to Southeast Asia."

Read the full interview here







Andrew Watene

Learning from another culture

Andrew's background:

Andrew whakapapa to Rūātoki and Tūhoe. He began his career on the killing floor at the local abattoir and was mentored by Rangi Walker before working for 20+ years in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe. He is now Head of KPMG Propagate, responsible for Agribusiness and Export Advisory Services.

Experience in Asia:

Andrew worked as the COO for Awano Food Group in Singapore for over four years. While domiciled in Singapore he frequently moved around the company's operations in Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. He appreciates the efficient and competitive environment shaped by strict laws in Singapore and commends the country's strategic approach to becoming a global leader in exports, by focusing on high-value technologies.

Key out-takes:

- Singapore's unique business networks provide opportunities to connect with global talent and industries.
- It is critical to understand and respect diverse cultures for effective communication and business success.
- Māori should explore Singapore's opportunities, emphasising its easy living, diverse culture, and strategic advantages as a great place to learn.
- Iwi and other Māori organisations can look to build networks, demystify opportunities and adopt long-term thinking for success.

In his own words:

"It is critical to adopt long-term thinking and think beyond ourselves by building satellites to connect to different networks for those who come behind us."

Read the full interview here



Working in technology in Singapore

Ursula von Keisenberg

Ursula's background:

Ursula had been working for Xero for two years in Auckland when there was a secondment opportunity at Xero Asia. This turned into a four-year role based in Singapore and managing a team with customers in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. She is currently the Australia-NZ Managing Director of Timely, based in Melbourne.

Experience in Asia:

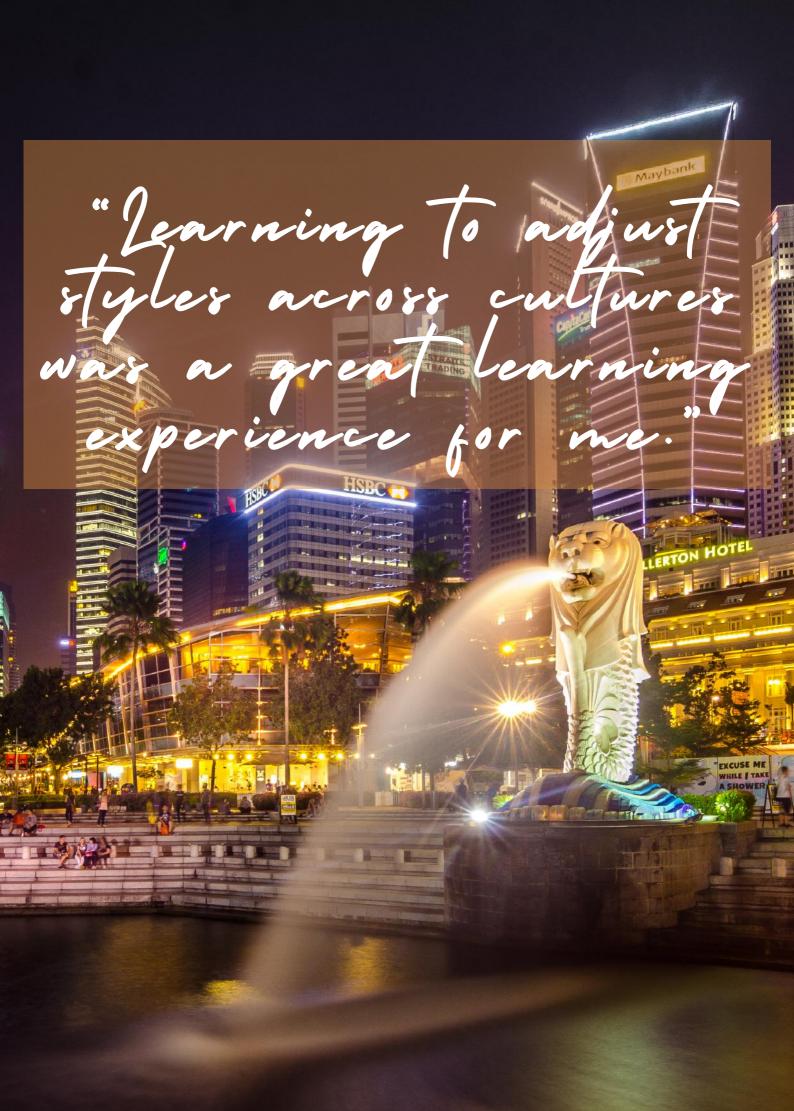
Ursula found the differences in the culture were both a highlight and challenge. In Singapore there were employees from other offices with many different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. How they worked as a team challenged the way Ursula usually managed, and this has led her to change the way she manages her New Zealand and Australian teams.

Key out-takes

- Potential for New Zealand technology companies to locate in Singapore and target SEA markets.
- Southeast Asian experience can deliver significant financial rewards, enhance job prospects and develop skills for future employment.
- The need to recognise diversity among Southeast Asian countries, with a tailored business strategy.

In her own words;

"Singapore provides a big opportunity for New Zealanders and I would love to see more New Zealand tech companies setting up their bases there as there is significant potential across Southeast Asia."





Working in HR in Southeast Asia

Wendy's background:

Wendy Baker is HR Manager for the Brosnan group in Auckland with extensive work experience in Sydney, London and Singapore. Previously she worked with American Express, JLL, and CBRE, gaining insights into Southeast Asia over 10 years. While in Singapore, Wendy was elected to the Board of the New Zealand Chamber of Commerce and was Chair of Māia, the NZ Women's Network Asia in Singapore.

Experience in Asia:

After 13 years in the UK, Wendy was given the opportunity to move to Singapore and lead a transformational project across Asia. The steps involved in the project launch included preparing each country for the transformation, doing a deep dive and due diligence on their systems, and initiating training with the country teams to adopt the common global platform. The regional role then expanded to become a global HR lead role for the project.

Key out-takes:

- The importance of adaptability and flexibility when navigating the hierarchical nature of some organisations in Southeast Asia.
- Work-life balance can be challenging when working across different time zones, so make the effort to maintain outside hobbies and build connections with local people.
- In Singapore you need to provide transcripts of your degrees and there is some form filling to complete for visa requirements before you are offered a role.

In her own words;

"Some of the key attributes I developed while working in Southeast Asia are curiosity, resourcefulness and resilience. I found I have become much more open about different ways of doing things."





Teaching in Singapore

Danny Tauroa

Danny's background:

Originally from the Waikato, Danny Tauroa has been the Director of Sport at an international school for seven years. As a young teacher, the desire to travel led him and his wife to apply for positions in Asia. Still living in Singapore after 18 years, Danny is involved in multiple sporting communities, has served on the board of the New Zealand Chamber of Commerce, and learned about entrepreneurship by starting up a clothing brand.

Experience in Asia:

Singapore offers proximity to home, safety, diversity, higher wages, low tax rates, and a highly ranked education system, plus the ability to travel easily within the region. In parallel with his teaching career, Danny started a clothing brand but decided to step away after facing challenges with time and work permits. He rates Singapore highly as a place to explore opportunities while living in a safe and family-friendly environment.

Key out-takes:

- The importance of personal and professional development while understanding discomfort to enable growth.
- The positive reputation of Māori in Singapore the open attitudes and being connected to the culture.
- Challenges include being away from home, working in a more structured environment, and sometimes being in situations with limited ability to negotiate.

In his own words;

"In the last five years I've really taken on the philosophy around our Māori proverb – He aha te mea nui o te ao, he tangata, he tangata, he tangata."





Working in international education in Singaore

Rob Borrough

Rob's background:

Rob was a secondary school principal in New Zealand before becoming Head of School at The Aga Khan Academy in Kenya. He moved to Singapore as Principal of ACS International in 2013 and worked there for seven years. In 2020 he returned to New Zealand and worked as a Senior Manager for the Ministry of Education before returning to Singapore in January 2023 to lead the opening of a new ACS International School in Indonesia.

Experience in Asia:

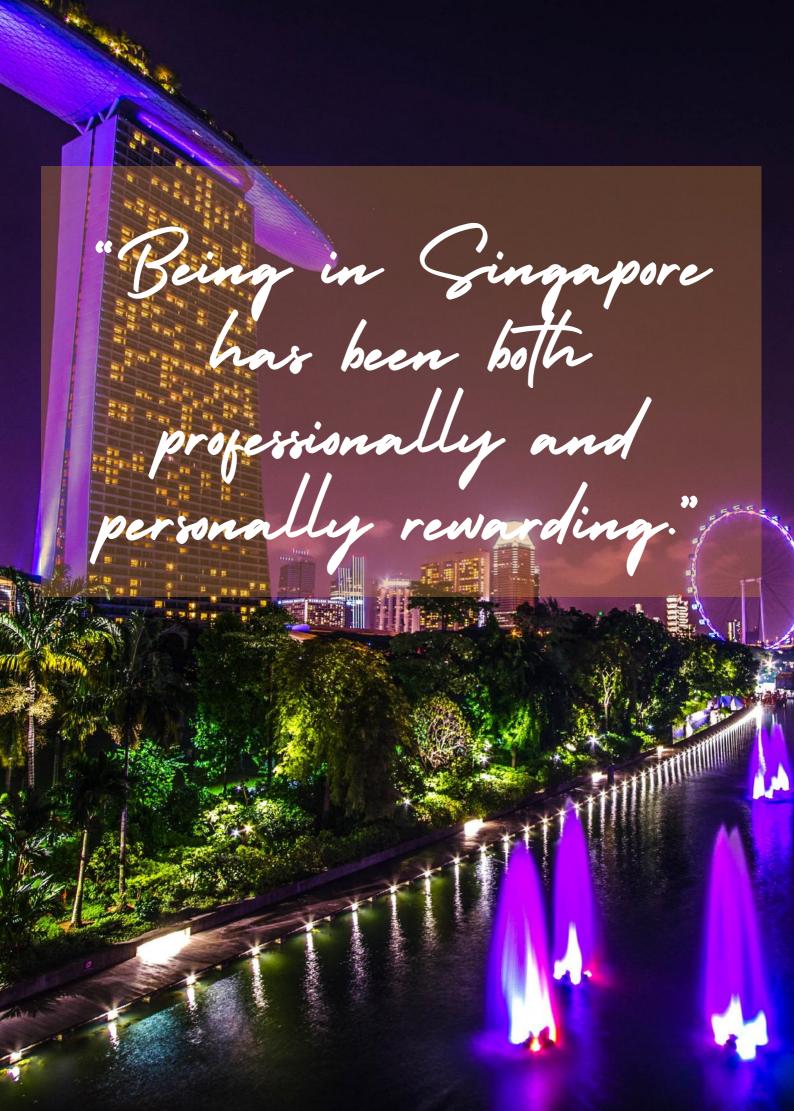
Rob and his wife moved to Singapore to take up a position with an international Christian school, which was a big change from his previous role in a New Zealand state school. He was able to develop relationships with the school's regional offices, which included offices in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan. Rob visited these countries at least once a year to support the marketing effort and meet parents. Being able to travel around Asia for his job was a major highlight of his first role in Singapore.

Key out-takes:

- The value of interacting with both locals and expats as opposed to living in an expat bubble.
- Accepting that you are the visitor, that you need to fit in, and often find there are different ways of doing things.
- Consider a transformational leadership approach, adapting to local cultures.
- Processes can be more bureaucratic than New Zealand so it is important to be patient and work with the system.

In his own words;

"A key learning I developed while in Singapore is to accept that there is always more than one way to solve the problem and that it might take more time."



SECTION 03

Family Experience of Living and Working in Singapore



Southeast AsiaCentre of Asia-Pacific
Excellence



Interviews

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Amanda Vanderkolk



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A family experience

Steve & Joanne Wilson

Steve & Joanne's background:

Steve Wilson, of Ngāti Tukorehe and Muaupoko descent, moved to Singapore in 1997 with his partner Joanne, to establish the Asian market for MRI Software. Joanne, a teacher by training, had various roles in Singapore, including parenting, personal assistant and teaching. They have moved back now to New Zealand and reflect on their time living, working and raising children in a very different environment

Experience in Asia:

Steve and Joanne raised children in Singapore, making sure to stay connected to Aotearoa by setting up a kapa haka group. Joanne faced initial challenges in Singapore due to being unmarried, which limited her rights until she married Steve three months later. The New Zealand Singapore business community was important in helping establish both social and business connections in Singapore, for instance, in advising about protocols in meetings.

Key out-takes:

- The importance of maintaining connections with grandparents and extended whānau, with regular trips home to balance the time away maintaining family and cultural identity.
- Take an open-minded approach to living in another country, respecting local rules and conducting business due diligence.
- Māori and iwi organisations can leverage New Zealand's brand and cultural values when venturing overseas, encouraging rangatahi to act as ambassadors and gain international experience.

In their own words;

"If iwi or individuals have specific values or skills that are unique to Aotearoa/Polynesia, then taking those overseas should be seriously considered."

"We thought Mandarin was a great language for our children to learn as it is a global language."





Life in Southeast Asia

Hamish Gowan

Hamish's background:

Hamish Gowans was General Manager of Fonterra Ingredients in Singapore for five years before he returned to New Zealand in 2021 after having worked in Southeast Asia for 13 years. He worked as GM Strategic Products Fonterra and is now leading Fonterra's newly launched venture Nutrition Science Solutions (NSS).

Experience in Asia:

Hamish started in New Zealand with Fonterra and moved to Singapore to be in-market in a customer-facing role. He took a management role overseeing the team across Southeast Asia, including a stint in India. His wife Michelle is a gastroenterologist who was able to get a job in her profession through university connections. Their two children were born in Singapore and the family enjoyed a vibrant social life with both local and expat friendship groups.

Key out-takes:

- Singapore's safety, education system and diverse cultural experiences contributed to personal and professional growth.
- The strategic location of Singapore facilitated a seamless operation connecting with the wider Southeast Asian market.
- Singapore and other markets in the region have changed significantly since Hamish and Michelle first arrived in 2008, with growing demand for more sophisticated nutritional products.

In their own words;

"The location of Singapore was key to being able to connect with the wider Southeast Asian market. Operating our ingredients business from there was seamless moving in and out of markets, connecting with customers, and getting exposed to new cultures."



Living in Singapore as a couple

Nick Vandervolk

Nick's background:

Nick Vanderkolk is Head of Dairy for Wilmar Trading & Goodman Fielder and has worked with them in Auckland since returning in 2021. Previously he worked for Interfood, leading their business in Singapore. While in Singapore Nick served on the Board of the New Zealand Chamber of Commerce being elected Vice President and then President in 2018.

Experience in Asia:

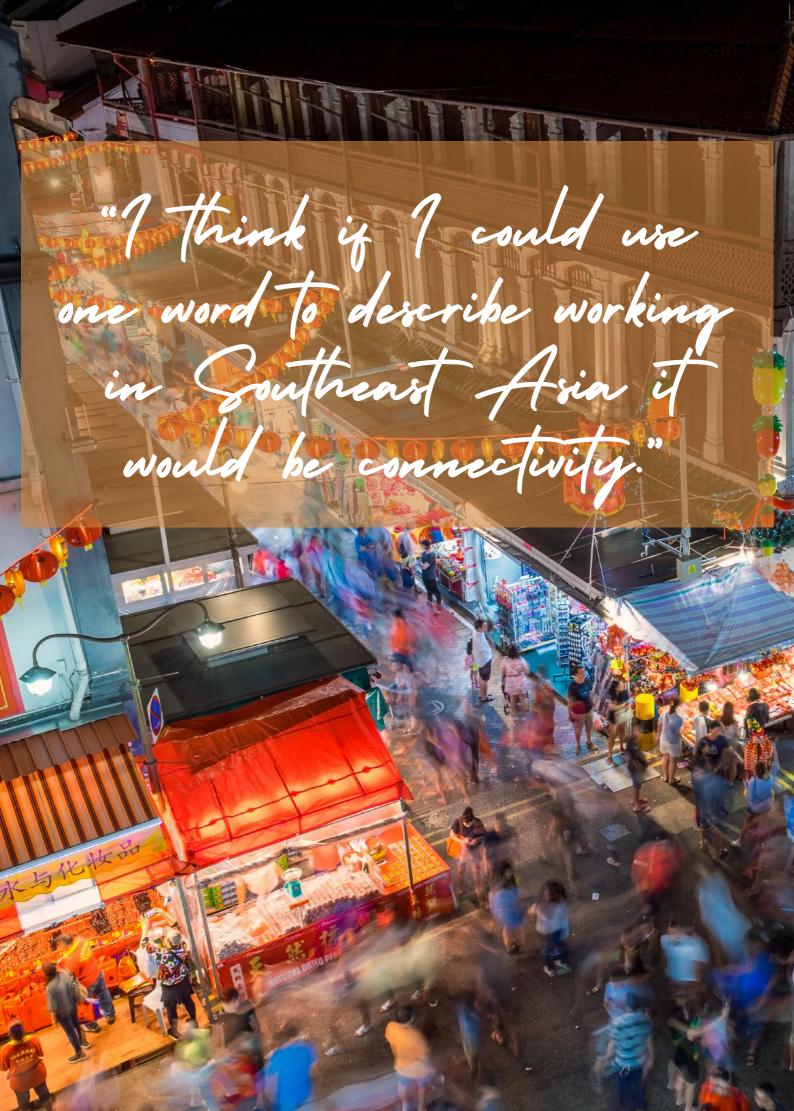
Nick moved to Singapore with his partner Amanda while employed by Fonterra. This was a two-year assignment in 2015. He transitioned to a Dutch dairy trading firm, InterFood, which had Singapore as their Asian HQ. Nick learned different work practices operating within a Dutch company while adjusting to Singaporean and other Asian cultures. Nick and Amanda, who worked there too, found the experience of having children in Singapore was well supported.

Key out-takes:

- Nick's experience in Singapore led to significant professional and personal growth and enhanced his career trajectory back in New Zealand.
- The value of staying connected with New Zealand and networking in Asia, which is closer and more accessible than other locations, such as the traditional OE in London.
- The importance of learning on the job, especially in dealing with cultural differences and varied operating models.

In his own words;

"In unfamiliar cultural environments, it can take more time to build trust which is why relationship building is so critical to success."





Singapore is exciting and easy

Amanda Vandervolk

Amanda's background:

Amanda's career has spanned New Zealand, Australia and Singapore, starting in PR and advertising before transitioning to management. Moving to Singapore in 2014 she worked initially for the Grey Group and then moved into recruitment and talent consulting. On returning to New Zealand, and after having two children in 2020 and 2021, Amanda founded Narrative Talent to build on the experience she gained working in Southeast Asia.

Experience in Asia:

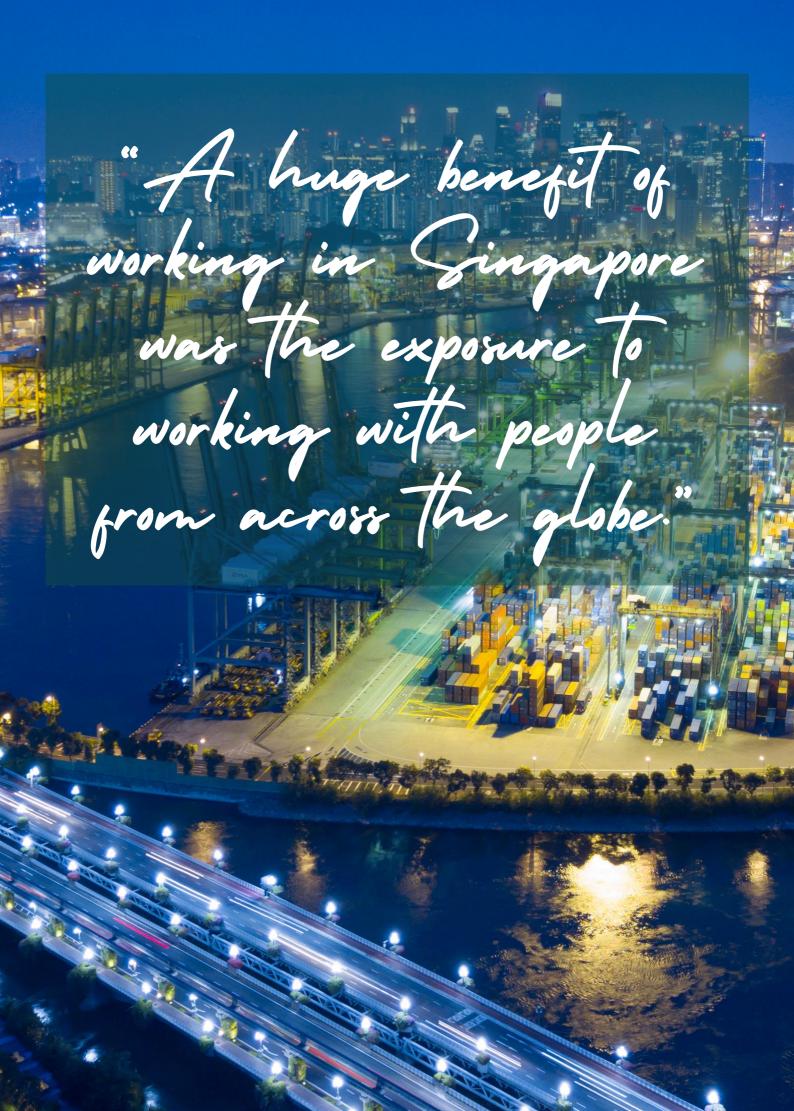
Amanda moved to Singapore with her partner Nick who was transferred to work for Fonterra. She was initially dependent on a partner visa but soon secured a role at Grey Group, transitioning from advertising to recruitment and talent consulting. Amanda found Singapore an easy place to work with efficient transportation and opportunities to explore nearby countries. She and Nick started their family in Singapore, and they found it a positive experience.

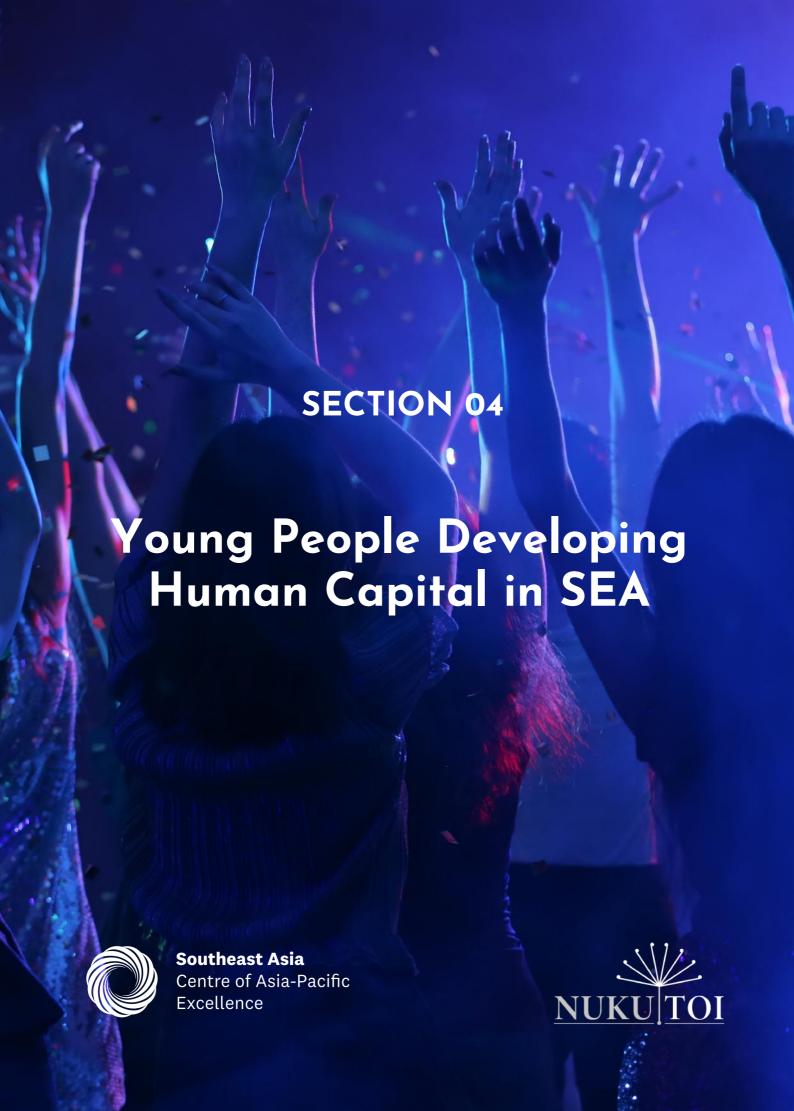
Key out-takes

- Changing career direction was a big decision but relatively easy to implement in Singapore.
- There are challenges related to recruitment rules in Singapore, so it is important to understand and navigate the processes.
- The regional scope of work in Singapore provided exposure to diverse projects and international clients.
- The value of being surrounded by a global network of open-minded individuals willing to take risks.

In her own words

"Assimilating the various cultural nuances was a key learning for me. It was so different to my work experiences in both Australia and New Zealand."





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Carl Meyer



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Sara Smeath



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A Singapore internship

Lucy Manahi

Lucy's background:

Lucy has Ngai Tahu whakapapa and has lived in Hawkes Bay for 20 years. She recently completed a Bachelor of Food Technology with Honours specialising in Product Development at Massey University. She also received the Silver Fern Farms Plate to Pasture Youth Scholarship in 2022, and the Prime Minister's Scholarship for Asia in 2023. This profile covers the threemonth internship Lucy completed with Shiok Meats in Singapore.

Experience in Asia:

Lucy's role was Business Analyst in the Shiok Meats Operations team, researching innovation and sustainability initiatives and developing a strategic roadmap. This, along with her experiences outside work, exposed her to Singapore's vibrant food culture. She was impressed by Singapore's approach to innovation, which is future-oriented with rapid adoption and testing of innovations. Among her highlights were presenting research findings and a roadmap with recommendations for the ASEAN New Zealand Business Council.

Key out-takes:

- Professional skills developed included learning to communicate effectively and understanding more about Southeast Asian business practices.
- Singapore's openness to innovation and new ideas helps foster opportunities for new business in Southeast Asia markets.
- Māori can be encouraged to apply for international opportunities, with the Southeast Asian respect for family and reverence for elders providing cultural touchpoints.

In her own words:

"A key highlight of the internship was being in the Shiok offices and working alongside a team of incredibly passionate and dedicated people who were excited at developing the future of food."

"My mentor at Shisk was incredibly knowledgeable about running and managing a start-up.



Working in Singapore remotely

Gyllian Falute Taei

Gyllian's background:

Gyllian grew up in Samoa and is mostly based in New Zealand. She works in project management, digital marketing and communications in the fields of conservation, climate and carbon and feminism. Gillian has collaborated on projects in America, Samoa, Rarotonga, Australia and with people across Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia and Singapore.

Experience in Asia:

Gillian's interaction with Southeast Asia was while working for a Carbon MRV Technology company based in Singapore with employees in Singapore, India, New Zealand and Australia. She was based in Aotearoa and worked with colleagues who were travelling back and forth from Singapore once the COVID restrictions eased. The company was in a start-up phase so there was a lot of collaboration and multi-tasking.

Key out-takes:

- Developing cultural understanding in return for social capital and network connections.
- Opportunity to build trusted relationships from professional connections and develop a sense of 'aiga' (whānau or family).
- Coming from Samoa and being mostly educated in New Zealand helped develop the awareness of cultural barriers, along with the skills to navigate them.

In her own words

"It's a privilege to be able to work remotely and feel competent and confident enough to travel and work."

Read the full interview here

"I definitely did make some new connections and the work allowed me to strengthen my connections in the Pacific.



Surprised by Singapore

Carl Meyer

Carl's background:

Born in Auckland, Carl grew up in Wellington with connections to Ngāti Kahungungu (Wairoa/Nuhaka). After attending Victoria University, where he founded the online trading platform Vic Deals, he travelled overseas and was accepted into a Singapore-based scheme that allowed him to live and start a business there. Carl has recently set up a pine pollen business in Whakatāne and is planning his expansion into Asian markets.

Experience in Asia:

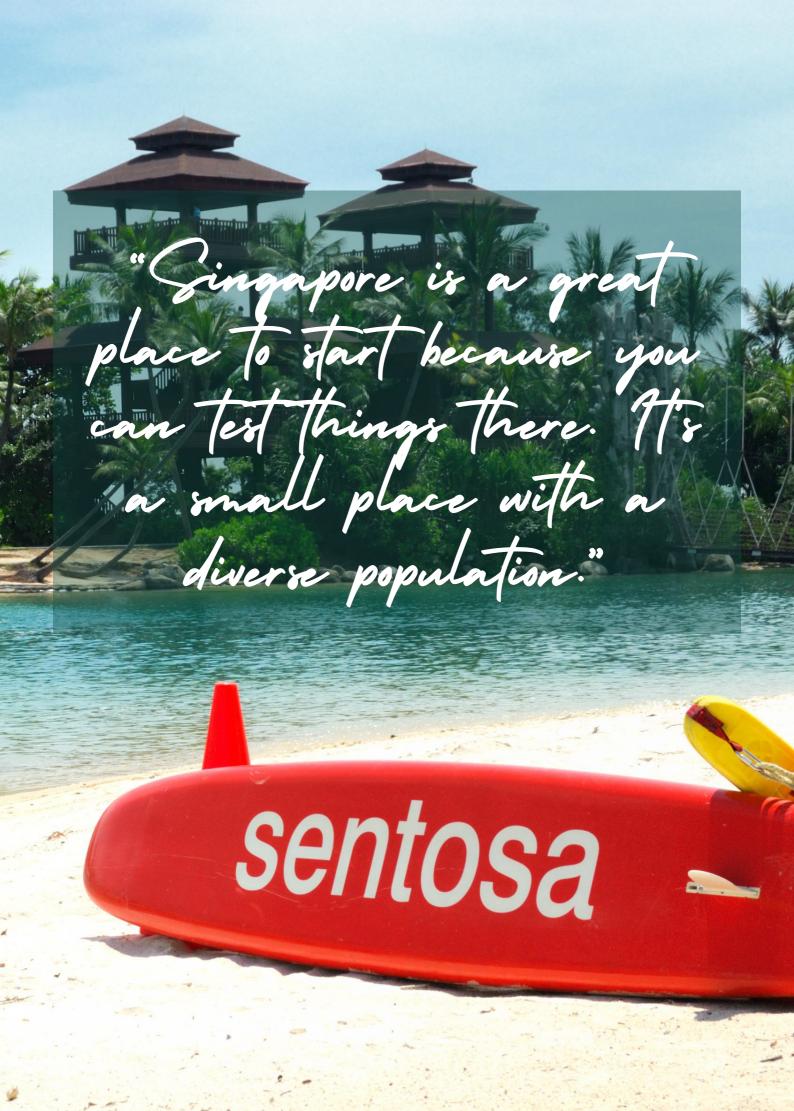
Having been accepted into the Entrepreneur First programme, Carl moved to Singapore and began the process of collaboration and networking to build a new business. He found great value in learning about the distinctions between Chinese and Indian cultures, and was exposed to entrepreneurs with varied skillsets, including AI, robotics and science. The diversity of Singapore was a key factor in opening his eyes to the opportunities of Asia.

Key out-takes

- Carl's Singapore experience influenced a new business plan and potential expansion in Southeast Asia.
- The value of developing interpersonal skills and building confidence, even for people without a technical background.
- Insights into cultural nuances related to business thinking in different regions, including India, China and other parts of Southeast Asia.

In his own words

"Start thinking about Asia and global market opportunities early in your business planning. It can be hard to comprehend from here in Aotearoa, the number of people in Asia who are potential customers."





Dreams are accessible in Southeast Asia

Sara Smeath

Sara's background:

Born and raised in Te Tai Tokerau, Sara is of Nga Puhi, Ngāti Wai and Ngāti Manu descent. Sara's korero outlines her career in the fashion industry in Indonesia and China. Since returning to New Zealand she has established CiRCLR a start-up software solution that connects waste resources to businesses who can reuse these products in their innovations.

Experience in Asia:

Sara worked in Indonesia and China with small-scale businesses in the fashion industry, travelling to Singapore and Hong Kong. She developed close relationships with factory workers, learned about trend development, and managed the challenges in production capacity as Southeast Asia saw significant growth. She found that once you adapt to the local differences, dreams seem more accessible in Southeast Asia because there is greater freedom to explore business and growth opportunities.

Key out-takes:

- Rapid economic growth in Asia means fast adaptation to markets, and there is an ability to copy or make changes quickly.
- Different working styles means adapting your approach in each country and emphasising partnership over expertise.
- Southeast Asia literally sits in the middle of the globe so it is a great place for New Zealanders to do business. The pace is fast and the people want to try new things.

In her own words;

"In different parts of Asia, I learnt the 'No Why' policy. Māori are curious and love to know reasons and stories behind certain ways and actions but often you just had to stop asking questions."





Next Steps - A Deeper dive

The purpose of this booklet is to inform and to inspire. We hope it has provided a taste of the opportunities that await ambitious New Zealanders in one of the world's most exciting and fast-growing regions – Southeast Asia.

Read the full report, which includes more detailed information on all interviewees and their experiences;

Read the FULL REPORT here

This research is available to access free of charge, upon registering with Nuku Toi

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