Their international adventure starts here

Recall your time in high school searching for colleges, trying to decide on a major of study, distance from home, whether you’ll like the school culture and financing. Imagine completing this process, then submersing yourself in an entirely different culture.

Each year, thousands of international students attend Iowa State University for an education, but to also experience a new culture. These students are on their own in finding that right fit.

“I wouldn’t spend $2,000 to visit a college,” said Sanj Ravi, a senior in economics. “It was more going online and looking at pictures.”

Ravi is from Sri Lanka, approximately 9,000 miles from Ames. She said she had never heard of Iowa before coming to school.

“When I was applying for colleges, my biggest thing was financing,” Ravi said. “From my culture, typically how it works is our parents support us educationally throughout.”

Ravi has an older sister and a younger brother, who also are supported financially by their parents. Ravi wanted to ease the financial burden on her parents when earning her degree.

Her college search was almost entirely online.

“I saw the Iowa State catalog and campus looked so beautiful,” she said. “I did more research on Iowa and found it’s going to be really cold and didn’t know how to handle it, but at the time I had never seen winter so I thought it would be really cool.”

The college search was extremely similar for Vincent Kaw, a sophomore studying mechanical engineering.

“When I was searching in Google for the top 50 engineering schools, I saw Iowa State,” Kaw said. “The tuition and fees here are not that expensive, so my mom doesn’t have to pay a lot of money.”

Kaw is from the Philippines, about 8,000 miles from Ames. Like Ravi, Kaw did not have the financial means to visit ISU prior to starting classes, nor had he heard of Iowa.

“I went with my gut, basically,” Kaw said. “I know it’s nice in the U.S. It’s a first-world country. So, what can you expect from the schools, also first-world, right?”

Kaw also wanted a safe campus, where people would be friendly and welcoming, having come from a dangerous city environment.

“I wanted an area where it is safe so I can study and focus,” Kaw said. “The people here are really friendly. People understand me for who I am.”

Both Ravi and Kaw come from cultures with strong family ties. Both said that their parents would do anything for their children.

But once they arrived at ISU, Ravi and Kaw both felt the culture shock.

“For starters, the portion sizes in the U.S. are huge,” Ravi said. “It’s a lot of food.”

She recalls going to the dining center for the first time and being blown away at the all-you-can-eat offerings.

The clothing restrictions are also much more liberal in the U.S. than in Sri Lanka, Ravi said.

“Back home, I don’t get the option to wear shorts outside because I know I’m going to be catcalled,” she said.

Kaw just knew he wanted to try a different culture, he said.

“I’m very open to making friends with people from different countries as well as learning different cultures,” Kaw said.

Having experience as international students on campus, both Ravi and Kaw have taken on leadership roles in helping other international students feel comfortable on ISU’s campus. Ravi is a community adviser, and Kaw worked as an orientation leader for the International Students and Scholars Office.

“I have a little more insight because I can relate myself to them,” Ravi said about residents. “I’m a minority in this country, but I can still talk to them because I’ve been in their spot.”

Kaw’s role mainly helped new international students adjust to Iowa and the culture. Kaw wanted those he helped to not make the same mistakes culturally that he made and was called out on, he said.

“I showed them what Iowa looks like, shared tips, advice, and some of the things they should do and should not do based on my experiences, culture-wise.”

Throughout their time at ISU, both Ravi and Kaw have gained new perspectives and have adapted to call Iowa and the U.S. their home.

“I’m one of those people who adapts super-fast and I never had an issue,” Ravi said. “I have no regrets.”

Ravi will graduate in December with an economics and international studies double major and a minor in women and gender studies. She has a published paper that she co-authored, and is currently working on her own independent research.

Kaw has time left at ISU, but feels he made the right decision.

“I consider myself Iowan now even though my passport says Philippines,” he said.