

## **The ASEAN Odyssey: A Surgeon's Travelogue through the Heart of Southeast Asia**

In the world of orthopaedic surgery, we often look to the West for the "latest and greatest." Having completed my own sports orthopaedic fellowship training in Europe, I found myself increasingly curious about the pulse of practice in my own backyard. When I was selected as the Singapore representative for the 2025 ASEAN Orthopaedic Travelling Fellowship, I stepped onto that first flight expecting a clinical exchange. I didn't realize I was embarking on a journey that would reshape my perspective on medicine, resilience, and friendship.

The Route: Philippines → Brunei → Malaysia → Indonesia

The Crew: Fellows from across 6 ASEAN nations (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Phillipines, Vietnam)

Tu Thai Bao Ngyuen : Orthopaedic General Surgeon

Clint Guitarte: Orthopaedic Spine Surgeon

Ardanariswara Wikantayasa: Orthopaedic General Surgeon

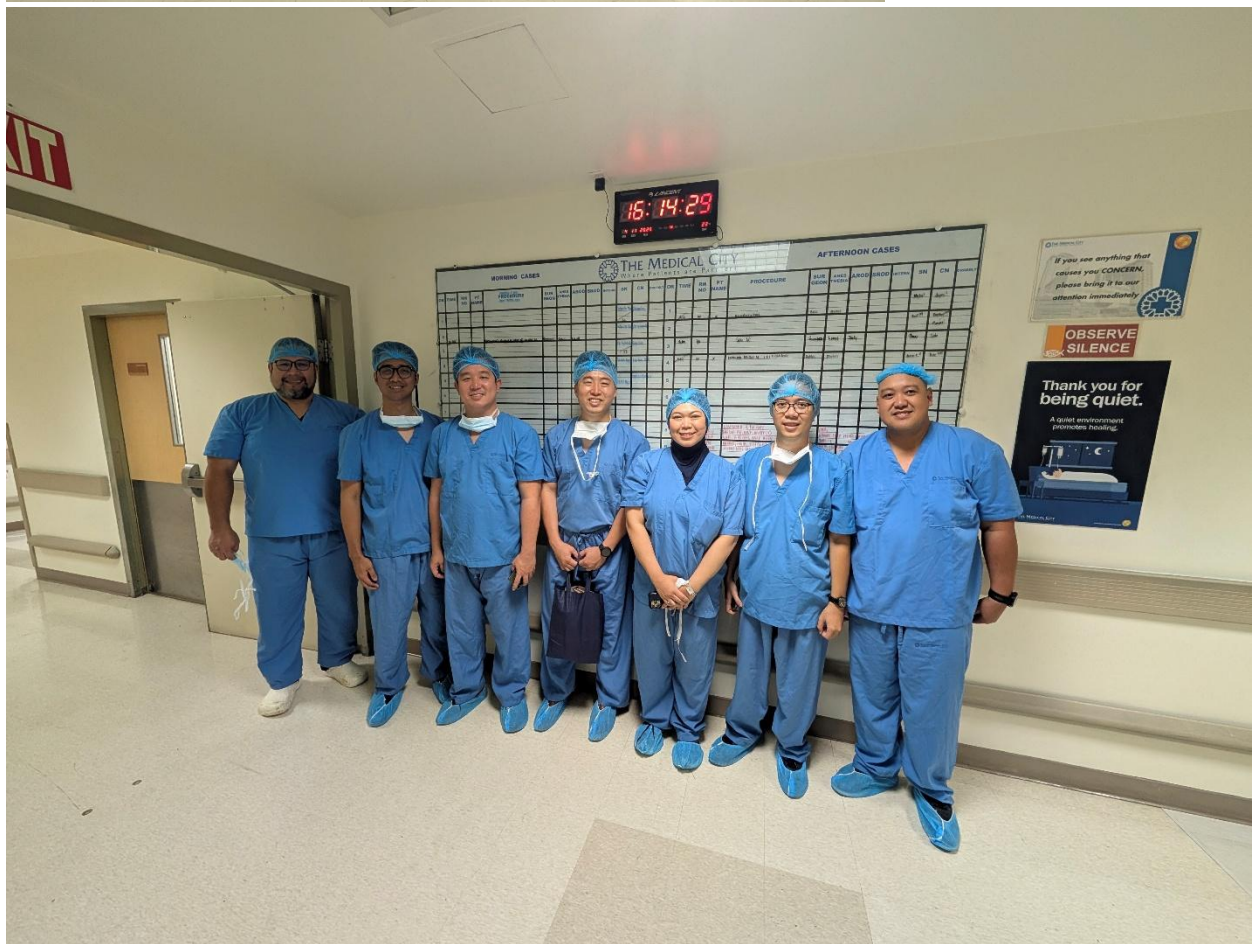
Norsaidatul Nadriah Binti Ahmad Shuhiamy (Orthopaedic Paediatric Surgeon)

Naruebade Rungrattanawilai (Orthopaedic Military Sports Surgeon)

### **Manila: A Study in Contrasts and Shared Roots**

Our journey began in the vibrant, humid energy of the Philippines. In Manila, we walked the halls of the Philippine General Hospital, a bustling public institution where the volume of trauma and pathology is matched only by the ingenuity of the surgeons. Later, at the Medical City, we saw the flip side of private healthcare in Phillipines.

It was here, during a post-scrub coffee, that a fascinating discussion arose regarding our operating theater practices. I shared how, in Singapore, strict regulatory laws and a focus on infection control mean that the vast majority of our tools—from saw blades to drill bits—are strictly one-time use. My co-fellows were visibly shocked. To them, the sheer volume of "waste" seemed unimaginable. In their centers, re-sterilizing and carefully maintaining high-quality tools like drill bits is the standard, ensuring sustainability in a resource-conscious environment. It was a humbling reminder that "best practice" is often a balance between gold-standard sterility and the pragmatic reality of global health.





Beyond the hospital, we walked through the stone gates of Intramuros. Standing amidst the Spanish colonial architecture, learning about the centuries of struggle and the resilience of the Filipino people, it struck a deep chord. Despite our different healthcare systems today, our region shares a profound history of navigating colonialism. Those shared roots of struggle and eventual independence are what bind us together as a Southeast Asian community.

### **Brunei: From Cadet to Consultant**

Touching down in Brunei felt like a trip through time. The last time I had set foot here was nearly 20 years ago—not as a surgeon, but as a young military officer cadet, mud-caked and navigating the dense, unforgiving primary forests during my training.





Returning as a fellow, the view was very different. At RIPAS Hospital and the Jerudong Park Medical Centre, I was struck by the sophistication of their facilities. The medical centre is truly state-of-the-art, boasting aquatic therapy pools and an expansive prosthetic department that would be the envy of many global centers. Yet, a quiet conversation revealed a sobering reality: Brunei couldn't send a fellow this year simply because they are too short-handed. It was a poignant reminder of the weight our colleagues carry in smaller nations and the importance of regional solidarity.



## **Kuala Lumpur: The Hospital That Never Stops Learning**

In Malaysia, we were welcomed by the gracious Norsaidatul Nadriah Binti Ahmad Shuhiamy, a paediatric orthopaedic surgeon who showed us the heart of Malaysian healthcare. We visited UKM and HKL and had the opportunity to present the medical students, resident and the entire department and I got to share our practices and healthcare systems here in Singapore.







The standout was the HPKK UKM Paediatric Centre—famously known as the “Lego Hospital.” More than just colorful architecture, the facility houses an actual school. Seeing children attending classes while admitted, ensuring that their education isn't a casualty of their illness, was a masterclass in holistic care. It challenged me to think about what "recovery" truly means for our youngest patients.

### **Jakarta: The Power of Scale**

Our final stop was Jakarta, for the 23rd IOA-45th AOA-APOA Young Surgeons Forum. If the previous stops were about individual stories, Jakarta was about the "Big Picture." The sheer scale of the Indonesian orthopaedic community is staggering. Watching hundreds of surgeons from across the archipelago come together to share knowledge and discuss advancing surgical practice was a testament to the immense potential of our region.

As the fellowship concludes, I find myself reflecting less on the surgeries and more on the people. We are living in an era where ASEAN is growing at an unprecedented pace. Through this journey, I've realized that the most valuable tool in my bag isn't a new surgical technique—it's the phone number of a "brother or sister in scrubs" just a short flight away. This network of connected care is the future.

My deepest thanks to the Singapore Orthopaedic Association for this incredible opportunity. I return to Singapore not just as a better surgeon, but as a more humble student of the world, grateful for every mile traveled and every friendship forged.





