On the weekend of 5-7th September, I followed the International Military Student Office (IMSO) on a field trip to the Smokey Mountains. These trips are organized once a month to introduce us international students to America and show us what a great country it is. It is also a great excuse to get out of class on the Friday, and PT most of all.

The trip started almost immediately on the wrong foot. Cher Chye was unable to come because he had an exam, so I was going to room with another friend Peter (aka Petropoulos in Greek). But when the bus left, Peter still had not shown up apparently; he’d failed a test the day before and couldn’t come. So now I was alone on the trip, and everyone else seemed to know each other. They had all met on previous trips or were on the same course. I had Gil, my course mate from Poland, but we seldom talk and still don’t. To make matters worse, it was difficult to sleep on the bus because they were showing Jurassic Park II and the screams kept waking me up. Whine.

Our first stop was the Oconaluftee Indian Village, which is a preservation of the Cherokee way of life. The Cherokee Indians were once the largest tribe, occupying parts of five states, and they led a primarily agricultural lifestyle. It was also one of the few tribes that held women in high esteem, involving them in major decisions such as war.

We saw demonstrations of weaving, arrowhead and blowpipe-making, and the construction of canoes using fire, before they had metal. We also saw miniaturized constructions of dwellings, the dancing grounds and the council house. Nobody actually lives out the Cherokee way of life today, so I wonder how many more generations this can last.

It takes 6-8 months to burn a canoe; 3 weeks with an axe.
After the Indian village, we also made a quick stop at a viewing point overlooking the Smokey Mountains. It was labeled as "A view worth preserving", but judging from the direction some of the cameras were pointed, some of my companions will have fonder memories of the bikini-clad babes across the road. Unfortunately, by the time I had taken my photo with course-mate Gil (left), the babes were gone. The view was not particularly spectacular as the hills were shrouded in mist (or smoke), much like my previous trips to Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway. I'll probably never catch a scenic mountain view.

Our final destination of the day was Gatlinburg, where we would spend the next two nights. My roommate Romiere (from the Phillipines) and I took a walk around before dinner, and I concluded that the entire town consisted of souvenir shops, restaurants, arcades and a series of Ripley's museums that we would see on the second day. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this town was the vast number of vintage cars on the streets. The combined effect was that I had the sensation of walking around in a tourist trap. I was even more convinced of this after I had seen the rare white bats that were hanging outside one of the shops.
We took dinner with the other Asians in our party at TGIF using the generous $25 vouchers provided by IMSO. It was quite a strange experience, spending dinner as an equal with all these people that are old enough to be my parents. My roommate has a son in college, and the two Koreans had their wives (and one set of kids) with them. The other Filipino, Vivian, is also in her forties. It wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't exactly thrilling either.

After dinner we took a slow walk back to the hotel and I spent the rest of the night on the phone. I went to bed around eleven, only to be awaked shortly after by the sound of distant thunder. The snoring continues all night long and in the morning I was quite irritable as I crawled to breakfast.

There was a river with ducks in it flowing by the restaurant, and someone had installed one of those feed machine that you put in a quarter for duck food. I was quite amused when two of the Korean kids figured out how to hack the machine, and happily gorged the ducks with their ill-gotten gains. After breakfast, I requested a room change, and was fortunate that there was a vacancy in the room of Sergi, from Estonia.

I spent the second day with the Eastern Europeans, and it was a much more enjoyable experience! Sergi is very quiet by nature (like most Estonians, apparently), but once he gets going he has a lot of interesting things to say. We went first to Ripley’s Aquarium and I learned a lot about fish, various other animals and Estonia. Our other companion was Dimitri, a 26-year old captain from Ukraine.
I learned quite a few interesting things at the aquarium. Did you know that Tetras (e.g. the brightly colored Neon Tetra that people like to keep) are actually related to Piranhas? I also saw a lot of food. Groupers are huge! And so are spider crabs. Somehow I always think they're small, but they are a lot bigger than a spider roll! More like the size of my head, maybe even bigger. And sea horses aren't the only male animals that get pregnant, male sea dragons give birth too!

After the aquarium, we went to Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum. This museum showcases the craziest parts of human history, such as two-headed cows, contortionists and the gruesome handwork of various tribal cultures. It was quite a disappointment, I felt, because most of the exhibits were actually pictures, models, or even just words. Anyway, I had read about most of them before, so it wasn't really that big a deal.

After lunch, some of the other continued to walk around the shops, or check out the Horror Museum or the Stars' Cars Museum. For me, I went to bed. About an hour later, Romiere also apparently decided to come back for a nap and his snoring ended my sleep again. Damn I should have just moved to my new room. I really hope I never snore like that or I'll never be able to get married with a clear conscience.

The last event of the day was the highlight of our trip. We went to watch Dolly Parton's Dixieland Stampede, a cross between dinner and a rodeo. The show started off with a country music performance which was really quite good. Then we were moved to the arena where troops from the Union and Confederate armies performed various cultural items and held competitions on horseback while we ate. There were horseback races, ostrich-back races and pig races. They also got members of the audience to chase chickens and do a hobby horse race. The cultural items were pretty good, but the mock competitions were just way too contrived. I was also severely annoyed by the boor from Kazakhstan on my right who would spit in my food every time he shouted something and was generally impolite and uncivilized. Interesting experience, but I wouldn’t really recommend it. Despite cameras being prohibited and the prohibitive lighting conditions, I still took a few crappy pictures to remind me not to go back.
And then we came back again. Sergi went to walk some more, Dmitri went to watch nude women at the swimming pool, I went to bed. And on the third day, we headed home! It was a long and horrible journey, and the winding mountain rounds are quite conducive for motion sickness. Thankfully a little tryptophan at lunch put me out of my misery for an hour or two.