It seems appropriate that German train station announcements keep interrupting my phone conversation with James Toy, MGB ’16—it speaks to an international setting befitting a globetrotting Master of Global Business (MGB) grad.

Toy, who lived and worked in six cities during his two years in and immediately after UVic’s MGB program, remains modest about his language skills. “I’ll confess I don’t understand what they’re saying,” he laughs from his seat on Essen’s commuter train. But the culture shock isn’t a problem for Toy (who’s studying up on his German diligently). In fact, it’s this curiosity for new experiences in new places that’s driven him to country-hop so extensively throughout his education and career.

Today, he’s on his way home from his job in change management communications at Evonik, a world leader in specialty chemistry. Toy’s been in Essen since November 2020, transferring from the company’s New Jersey headquarters mid-pandemic. But prior to that, you might have found him in Taiwan, Singapore or Austria—each location far from his previous career in his hometown of San Francisco.

“I was in the non-profit sector, and while my work had some international impact, I never really got to leave San Francisco,” says Toy. “My tasks touched on international and cultural perspectives, but I wanted to dig deeper and broaden my horizons.” Feeling stuck, he started looking at a pivot, and soon found UVic’s MGB program. Relocating to Canada’s West Coast, as it turns out, would be the first global jaunt of many in the years to come.

The program’s focus on experiential learning appealed deeply to the hands-on Toy. “There’s so much you can’t learn from a book,” he says. “The opportunity to really go to another country, study, work with local companies, work with students from other companies...It was special.”

He spent his first term in Victoria and then headed to Kaohsiung, Taiwan for a semester. Next, it was off to Linz, Austria to begin his first internship abroad. In order to complete his degree, Toy secured an internship with Evonik’s Singapore team, helping with HR operations on the Asian and Australian continents. A second Evonik internship followed, this time with the corporate HR compensation and benefits team, before he landed a full-time role in the US for the corporation. (Funnily enough, his stint in Parsippany, New Jersey would wind up offering a culture shock of its own for the California native: “It’s really a totally different world on the east coast,” he says.)

“Living in all these places and having to adjust every three months really tests you, and makes you figure out if you’ve got what it takes,” he says. “You learn if it’s the lifestyle for you.”

Each place gave him a chance to explore his interest in cultural work.
attitudes, a personal passion that grew out of his upbringing as an Asian American and second-generation Chinese American. “I was interested in investigating my own assumptions about how people in Asia work,” he says. “What I’ve learned is to transition between being objective and using my own experience and own feelings to be a moderator and a mediator.” The variety of locales has also proved to Toy that global business is as appealing as he thought it would be.

Wherever he’s working, his international experience has helped challenge and strengthen Evonik’s global policies and attitudes toward performance, compensation and benefits. “Sometimes I think I’m a translator: not in terms of language, but customs,” he says. Currently, Toy’s handling internal communication for a global reorganization and technology transformation that’s about to impact Evonik’s 33,000-employee workforce. His experience working in other countries has set him up with the empathy and perspective to handle communicating concepts across more than 30 nations.

This latest move has been a unique one, given the global pandemic. Toy was all set to move back to Germany in April 2020: he’d already given up his lease and car when the borders shut down. The limbo period was a stressful one, even for the resilient and resourceful world traveller; then, when he actually arrived in Essen, adjusting to a new life in a locked-down city was a struggle. “It was sad,” Toy laughs. “I just sat in the apartment.” There was no travel around Europe on weekends, no chance to explore.

The pandemic-ified Essen offered a heightened experience of the loneliness and rootlessness that can be an unfortunate side-effect of an international career track. As much as Toy loves the learning and growth that comes with making a go of it in a new place, he acknowledges that being a foreigner can have its challenges: it can be hard to make connections or form relationships when you’re new in town or just passing through.

Luckily, Germany has since opened up again—hence Toy’s train commute. He’s happy to be building a new life and putting down some roots in this most recent city he’s calling home (at least for now). And he’s been hard at work applying all that he’s learned, both in and out of the lecture hall.

All these years later, Toy thinks back to his time in grad school and is a little shocked by all that he has accomplished in such a short amount of time. “I don’t even know where this drive to travel came from…maybe a Seventeen magazine quiz?” he laughs, as the train pulls up to his home station. “How crazy is it that I signed up for a one-year grad school program and ended up traveling to all these countries? That’s what an MGB can do.”