

# Scaling new heights

Our 'First Person' for August 8, 2005 edition, Pushpendra Sharma, has been studying in Columbia University, New York, for almost six months now. Pushpendra talks about his experience so far

I reached New York on August 15, two weeks before my Master's in Real Estate and Development (MSRED) programme officially began. Every international student is required to get his or her I-20 form attested from the International Students Scholars Office (ISSO) within the first week of reaching the US. After getting the I-20 signed and stamped, I went straight to the university's housing office to sign the lease agreement for my studio apartment.

The first few weeks were spent hunting for furniture. There are many stores from where you can buy furniture, for example, Wal-Mart, Target and Ikea, all offer good discounts and special prices under the promotion campaign 'back to school'. You can also buy furniture online from these stores at discounted rates.

For me, Columbia is like a little world in itself. My class is very diverse, comprising 85 students from different backgrounds — investment bankers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, architects and devel-



Pushpendra Sharma in Columbia University

opers, each with his or her own unique skill-set and experience. The average age is 28 years. The main value to be derived from studying in an international institution is the exposure to people from varied educational, social and cultural backgrounds. The class discussions are intellectually stimulating and there is an opportunity to learn something new every day.

When I started my course at Columbia, I had

two goals for the first semester. First, I wanted to get the job of a teaching assistant (TA) to supplement my pocket money and secondly, I wanted to be involved in student activities.

I had applied to be a TA before the start of the course. After a gruelling interview, I was chosen to be a TA to my programme director. TAs are paid \$15 per hour, and they are entitled to work 20 hours a week, on campus. The

work involves setting up a class before a lecture, collecting assignments and being a bridge of communication between students and a professor. The role was time-consuming but the additional income helped me pay for my food and local travel.

The MSRED programme has five class officers who are elected representatives of the class. I set myself the ambitious task to become president of the class. I prepared for it by getting to know most people personally and establishing a rapport, within the first month itself. Before the elections, I made a multimedia presentation on why I should be chosen as the class president. The preparation paid off and I was elected. I am the first Indian to be elected as the class president of the MSRED programme at Columbia. This position has given me an opportunity to enhance my network and has added to my resume.

I have learnt much more in these six months than I thought was possible, not only in terms of academics, but also interpersonal skills, negotiation and international work culture. My stint at Columbia has helped me appreciate the relevance and implication of globalisation in the context of business across the world and specifically in India. India will be the flavour for US corporations for the next few years and I hope to make the most of it, while being at Columbia.

## Handy Tips

- Lease for a studio apartment - one month deposit and one month advance rent
- Furniture - \$1200 including a bed for \$300 and \$60 for delivery charges
- Insurance cover through Columbia University is recommended - although there are a few firms in India which may offer comparable insurance cover
- It is important to submit health documents at the time of registration such as MMR and meningitis vaccination documentation
- Exams are both case study-based as well as in-class papers
- After the end of a course, students are required to submit a thesis on a chosen subject
- Once you get a teacher assistantship you need to sign and submit a tax form and apply for your social security number from the Social Security Office.