Mr Guo Sam Nan has travelled to more than 50 countries, setting foot on every continent in the world except Antarctica. His final destination? “the last travel goal in my bucket list”, as he jokingly puts it – is to visit the Earth’s southernmost Continent.

But before he explores Antarctica, NTU’s newly-appointed Chief Alumni Officer hopes to explore and win the hearts of the University’s more than 200,000 alumni in 149 countries across the globe.

He says: “In this Information Age, we must explore and develop new ways to engage our alumni more effectively. My top priority is to broaden our communication channels in order to better understand various needs of our diverse alumni community.”

“Based on the information and understanding, we can formulate sound strategies and work out new ways to serve our alumni, nurture their loyalty and strengthen their affinity with their alma mater, and gradually cultivate a giving culture for the alma mater.”

Sam is excited about the opportunity to contribute to NTU’s new initiatives to better connect with and engage alumni both locally and overseas. These include the recently set-up NTU Alumni Council that comprises mostly presidents of alumni associations, associations based on schools, interests and halls, as well as active leaders representing NTU and its two predecessor institutions – Nanyang University and Nanyang Technological Institute.

Looking back, Sam mentioned that he appreciated the efforts Mr Soon Min Yam, the former Director of NTU Alumni Affairs has put in for alumni engagement.

“Over the past 11 years, Min Yam has laid a solid foundation for NTU alumni relations. I am glad that he has been appointed Director of International Alumni Network to continue the good work,” shares Sam.

To engage in alumni affairs is a new area of responsibility for Sam, whose previous role at NTU was related to developing and managing training programmes for senior government officials from Asian countries at the Nanyang Centre for Public Administration. Prior to that, he managed and developed international programmes for University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), while adjunct teaching for MBA programmes at UC Berkeley, UCLA and Pepperdine University in the US.

To fully prepare himself for the challenge of “jumping onto a running train as a new captain”, Sam spent three months, prior to taking up the position, doing research on how American and European universities
manage alumni affairs while gathering information on NTU alumni’s landscape and how alumni affairs are handled.

Sam has learned about three key takeaways from studying the approach of American universities for alumni relationships. First, alumni relationships must be nurtured and cultivated from a very early stage, that is, when freshmen enter a university. A happy university experience is the fundamental basis for lifelong alumni relationship. Second, the starting point of alumni engagement is a thorough understanding of the needs of alumni. And thirdly, the purpose of alumni engagement is to satisfy the diverse and segmented needs based on different demographic, psychographic, professions or interests, and so on.

Compared to Asian universities, Sam continued, most American and European universities have had more success and experience in the area of alumni relationships, which result in a strong culture of giving back to alma maters. “But don’t forget”, he emphasised, “that they have a long history of alumni relationship. The history of alumni relationship can be traced back to 1792 when Yale University graduates started an organised group”.

But he believes that alumni of Asian universities are not much different than their American counterparts in terms of compassionately and supportively giving back to their alma mater for a good cause.

“The words ‘alma mater’ and ‘alumni’ are Latin words, meaning ‘nurturing mother’ and ‘foster son’ respectively,” shares Sam, “So if we look at it from this perspective, it’s not unattainable to convince Asian alumni to give back to their alma mater just as most of Asian cultures emphasise on respecting and supporting parents as a lifelong commitment. In fact, it’s not difficult to list a few well-known examples, such as Mr Gordon Wu, a Princeton alumnus from Hong Kong, who donated US$100 million to Princeton University in 1995; Mr Gerald Chan, a Harvard alumnus from Hong Kong, who donated US$350 million to Harvard University in 2014.”

He adds that alma mater-alumni relations should be a “two-way street” – for instance, graduates should be able to reap the benefits of the university’s resources and global alumni network after they join the workforce. “NTU alumni can seek out career advancement and business opportunities through our vast network, and lifelong education from their alma mater.”

On a personal note, Sam is certainly passionate when it comes to the topic of lifelong learning. He describes himself as being naturally curious from a young age, saying: “I like to read about all sorts of subjects including astronomy, geography, science, philosophy, psychology, literature and arts, languages, cooking, and wine.”

But the avid reader concedes that he is less adept than his wife and son when it comes to the art of writing in English. His wife, Professor Zhou Min, an academic with NTU’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences, is “famed for her productivity in writing books and academic papers”;

meanwhile, his son Philip has already published two well-received books, the first of these a chronicle of his unique childhood.

“He had lived in different countries with us, and it was challenging for him to move around with us because he would lose his friends each time we moved,” explains Sam, “Philip was born in China and followed me to Europe when I migrated to Switzerland for work. After that, we moved to the United States: first to Louisiana in the South, then New York in the East, and finally Los Angeles in the West.”

While he and his family are certainly well-travelled, Sam says he has not seen enough of the world just yet. “Honestly, I have enjoyed every country I’ve been to because each one has its own unique culture, scenery, as well as good food and wines. There are nearly 200 countries in the world, so there are still a lot of places I hope to visit.”

“It’s difficult for me to say which country is my favourite. I believe in my own motto: the next one is always the best one.”

Reading and travelling aside, Sam’s other passion is hiking. Since picking up the hobby 13 years ago, he and his wife have hiked at several famous locations including the Himalayas in Nepal, Machu Picchu in Peru, across the Alps in France, Italy and Switzerland, and to the peak of Mount Kinabalu in Eastern Malaysia.

He shares: “When I lived in Los Angeles, my house was located at the foot of a hill. I used to hike there often after I got home from work. During weekends, we usually hiked with a team of comrades in different trails in the mountainous area around Los Angeles.”

“This hill is about 200m tall, so I was a bit disheartened when I first moved to Singapore and discovered that the highest “mountain” here is Bukit Timah Hill, which is 164m high!” he adds with a laugh.