Going on exchange to Monash University in Melbourne, Australia was the best decision I have made during my undergrad. Even though the application process is long and requires a lot of research, it was part of the fun of planning the exchange semester. I am currently studying Sustainable Business at SFU and chose Monash because there were a lot of courses available to me and it is also a highly ranked university. I studied at Monash during Semester 1 from February 27 to May 26. If possible, plan your study abroad for the first semester because there are more orientation events for exchange students and local first year students.

Preparation for Exchange

SFU offers many destinations that you can apply for so be sure to do your research. I narrowed by search down to places that I have always wanted to visit and then made a list of potential schools that have courses that I was eligible for. Once you have decided, you begin the application process. Overall, the application process was arduous but very worthwhile. The actual steps were not difficult but there is a lot of planning and waiting. Applying to get a student visa is relatively simple, but before you apply you need confirmation of enrollment from the school which can takes some time to receive. The visa application costs around $550 so start saving money as soon as you can. Once you are approved to study at Monash you must decide whether to stay on campus or not. Living on campus is a great opportunity to meet both local students and other exchange students. However, you can also choose to find a house off campus and still have a wonderful time in Australia.

The weather in Melbourne for Semester 1 changed quicker than I thought. If you arrive in February, it is the end of summer so the days are warm and sunny. Be sure to pack your summer clothes but when it turns to autumn, make sure you bring a few sweaters and a light jacket. You should also bring some clothes that can easily be layered because in Melbourne, you can experience all the seasons in one day. Be sure to pack only the necessities as you can buy everything else at the nearby shopping centres. I bought bedding, pillows, towels, cooking equipment and utensils as soon as I arrived. However, I brought a throw blanket from home which helped to have something familiar if I was a little homesick. As well, the voltage is 240 volts in Australia so be sure to bring adaptors and a converter if you need it. Personally, I brought 2 adaptors to charge my devices. Before leaving I made sure that my phone was unlocked and used a free SIM card given to us during orientation week. I chose to buy a $30 pre-paid plan each month from Vodafone which includes unlimited texts, call and 3 GBs of data.
The public transport system in Melbourne is similar to Vancouver. They use buses, trains and trams that are accessed with a Myki card which is equivalent to a Compass card. From the airport to the campus, it is about an hour drive. So, if you plan to travel during the semester, you can book a shuttle with the school, take an Uber, or use public transportation instead of taking a taxi which is very costly. If you plan on driving remember that they drive on the left side of the road in Australia and when in doubt, always get the extra insurance.

Before I left, I set up a bank account with Commonwealth bank and wired money so that when I arrived, the money was already waiting for me. It was very simple and the Commonwealth bank has a convenient branch right on campus. When I traveled to Thailand, I used their free travel money card which locks in the exchange rate and allows you to re-load it in real time. However, there are many other banks so do your research about which one best suits you. Overall, the price of most items is higher in Australia because it includes tax and tip. So be aware of the sticker shock once you arrive. If possible apply to scholarships because they are easy to apply to and it’s worth a try. As well, try to book flights as soon as possible to save money, especially if you plan on travelling within the semester.

Fieldtrip to Tasmania with the ATS 1259 Class

During Exchange

If you choose to live in a dormitory, Monash Residential Services makes your arrival very easy. There is a free shuttle that picks you up from the airport and takes you to the campus. From there, you check-in with your hall of residence and orientation begins. The orientation program was excellent, they make sure you feel comfortable and even bring you to Ikea and show you the local shopping centres so you are prepared for the semester. For the first two weeks, the orientation team provides breakfast and dinners and heaps of activities to encourage you to bond with others. The orientation program included different activities suitable for anybody. For example, we had excursions for ice skating, a scavenger hunt, dodgeball, board game nights and trips to Chadstone, the largest shopping centre in the southern hemisphere. During these two weeks, I suggest talking to as many people as possible because you may just meet your best friends for the rest of the semester.
Personally, I lived at Farrer Hall, one of the older dormitories. I chose this because it was the cheaper option compared to the new urban community. With the money I saved, I knew I could use it to travel. As well, the older halls offer more opportunities to interact with others because you share kitchens and washrooms. The slight drawbacks of communal living were overshadowed by the benefits. The people that live on your floor and in your hall soon become family and you create strong friendships and irreplaceable memories. For me, living on campus was one of the best parts of doing a semester abroad and I now have friends from across the world.

Studying at Monash is comparable to SFU with a lecture and tutorial format and a similar grading level. However, almost all Monash lectures are recorded so you can replay them at any time which is very helpful when revising. Scheduling your courses is a little more work however as there are different steps during your enrollment but you will be guided on what to do. I suggest planning your schedule so you get a Monday or Friday off which makes it easier to travel.

One of the many perks of going on exchange is experiencing a new culture. Melbourne is full of great restaurants, cafes and new events almost every week. Keep your eye out for events like White Nights, food cart festivals, the Comedy festival or Formula 1 events. If you show your student ID you can get free or discounted admission into most museums, art galleries, sporting events and other facilities. I joined a few groups (New to Melbourne and Newbies International) which take you on day trips around Melbourne such as the Grampians National Park, Wilsons Promontory, Phillip Island or the Great Ocean Road. During my exchange, I was lucky enough to visit Tasmania, Cairns, Thailand, Hamilton Island, Auckland and Sydney. I highly suggest travelling to make the most of your exchange experience, you can even travel during Swot Vac which is the week before final exams.

There are plenty of social activities to do in Melbourne. My residence hall had activities almost every week to help you meet new people such as knitting club, weekly soccer games and language lessons. As well, from Quidditch to photography, Monash offers clubs to suit any interest. To stay fit, you can purchase a membership to the gym and swimming pool on campus, join a team or even hike in the nearby Dandenong Ranges National Park.
Reflection After Exchange

Going on exchange was better than I could have ever expected. If you are doubting if you should apply, just take the plunge and you will never regret it. I have experienced so many new activities, met amazing friends and made unforgettable memories. While you are planning, I suggest keeping to a budget and adjusting it whenever possible. When you are on exchange, try to be open minded, talk to as many people as possible and leave your door open so other students can chat. As well, make a list of things you want to do because the semester is going to fly by and it will feel like there isn’t enough time for everything. If the hardest part of your exchange semester is saying goodbye to all your friends, then you know you have made the most of your experience!