During the Exchange

The International Summer University (ISU) program at Vienna School of Economics and Business, or Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien (WU) in German, lasted for three weeks. There were two sessions that applicants could pick from – one in July and another one in August. I decided to go to the July session (July 4 to 22) as it allowed me to travel to other places in Europe before and after my exchange. However, there were some students that decided to stay for both sessions to get the same amount of credits as a whole semester in their home universities. Out of the approximately 120 students, around 50% were from the United States, China, Australia, and Indonesia. During the short program, the school’s International Office organized countless of after-lecture social activities – some of these include: beer tasting; a tour of the city, the city hall, and the UN headquarters; a visit to the Schönbrunn Palace and multiple museums; and an afternoon spent at their ‘fake beaches’ next to the Danube River. My friend and I also ventured to the Opera House to listen to a Mozart concert. To ensure that this is budget-friendly, make sure to book seats held for students. I initially wanted to go watch an opera, however, they do not have any showings in the month of July and August.

After backpacking for two weeks in Spain and Italy, my friend, another student from SFU, and I arrived at Vienna in the early morning of Sunday, July 3rd on a sleeper train from Venice. We immediately got lost as the main train station is quite big and has different types of trains there (they have the S-bahn, the U-bahn, and regional trains) – definitely something we do not have in Vancouver. We mistakenly got on a train that was headed towards Bratislava. As tickets are rarely checked in Vienna, we would have continued all the way to Slovakia if we did not ask someone where the train was headed. Also, one thing
of note is that Google Maps does not take the U-bahns (similar to our Skytrain) into consideration when providing directions. (If possible, download the local transit app to get a more accurate guide.) When we finally arrived at our residence, located on Simmeringer Haupstrasse, we had to pick our keys up from a Graduate student. After obtaining our keys, my friend and I were then greeted by a spacious and fully furnished apartment that had a stove, microwave, fridge, cooking supplies, and big rooms for each occupant.

As our apartment building was quite far from WU, the school decided to hire a coach to come drive us to the beautiful and newly constructed WU campus every morning at 8 am. This helped immensely as we were then still able to eat breakfast at the school’s Mensa (cafeteria) before lecture started at 9 am. After lectures ended at 1 pm, we would then proceed to eat lunch (included in the meal plan along with breakfast). This schedule is quite consistent except for the first day as orientation happened in the morning. Aside from a fancier catered breakfast, welcome speeches, and a tour, we were also provided with a ‘care package’ that included (thankfully) a map of the new campus and the U-bahn system, a month pass that we did not have to show as proof once in the three weeks, and a local SIM card.

Some random observations to note about Vienna:

- The weather is very irregular to say the least. It would be very sunny one moment and just start pouring rain the next. Make sure to be prepared for that!
- The locals are very, very friendly and would go out of their way to help you.
- Most people understand, if not speak, English quite frequently. Of course, it does not hurt to learn a few commonly used German phrases to build rapport
- Smoking is less taboo in Europe and as such, a lot more people engage in that activity so be prepared to inhale a lot of second-hand smoke!

**Preparation**

Since the exchange program was less than 6 months, I did not have to apply for a student visa. As for financial details, most places accept cash and cards, but the former seems to be used a bit more frequently. Furthermore, tipping is around 10% of the total bill – one thing that I really liked there is that Value Added Tax (VAT) is already included in the prices listed; this saves a bit
of time as one would not need to see if certain good are taxable or not. Similarly, the cost of living in Vienna is similar, if not a bit less than, Vancouver.

Moreover, as it was the summer, I did not have to pack too much except for a couple of business casual clothes – for the opening & closing ceremonies long with one/two presentations for the classes.

Another aspect that students could look into before heading to Austria would be to plan trips to neighboring countries. For my friend and I, we went to Budapest, Hungary during second week. Other destinations like Bratislava, Prague, and other places are definitely possibilities since travelling to all these cities is so convenient and affordable. The only issue is having enough time to visit so many cities/countries. Also, a month or so before the program is set to start, email the International Coordinator if there is someone you would like to room with as that can be arranged.

**Reflection**

I immensely enjoyed my time in Vienna and I wish I spent more time there to learn more about the Austrian culture and meet locals. If you find yourself to be on the fence about going on exchange, I urge you to go as the experience of being immersed in an entirely new culture, meeting people from all over the world, and having the opportunity to explore new countries is very beneficial for personal development as well as building international networks.