My experience in Montreal

A guide to Montreal: How to prepare and succeed before, during and after your exchange

By: Diana
My exchange at the Université de Montréal: September 2015 to April 2016

**Introduction:**

When I enrolled in the French Cohort Program at SFU, double majoring in Political Science and French, I knew that an exchange during my third year was mandatory; however, I did not realize to what extent it would change me. During my second year, I decided that instead of going to Europe, I wanted to experience another part of Canada and discover the Quebecois culture and how La Belle Province compares to Beautiful British Columbia. Looking back at this, I am glad that I chose Quebec and that I opted to stay for two semesters rather than one. This way, I was able to get to know the province and the people a lot more.

**Preparing for the exchange**

**Quebec administration and the application process:**

While I was deciding where I wanted to go on exchange, I heard on many occasions from past exchange students that dealing with the administration in other countries could be a challenge. I wondered how Quebec administration would compare, but I can honestly say that there wasn’t even one moment where I felt lost in the process. The Université de Montréal was extremely straight forward in regards to their expectations during the application process and were very available whenever I had questions.

**The research process prior to arriving:**

If a could redo the preparation process of the exchange, I would have done a lot more research in regards to finding out what living in Montreal is actually like. I would have also spoken to more students who had actually lived in the dormitory of the Université de Montréal. I know now that speaking to one person isn’t enough to get an accurate idea of what it’s like to live and
study in a certain place. For example, I would recommend that an SFU student speak to locals in Montreal and frequently ask them for advice. Furthermore, no matter where you decide to live during your exchange, always always **ALWAYS** have a back up plan. For example, if you arrive in Montreal on August 27th and your rental contract doesn’t start until the 1st, plan and budget accordingly. Secondly, if you arrive to the location on the 1st and it is nothing like what you saw over skype or in pictures, make sure you have the information of a hostel or a motel where you can stay while you reassess the situation and make alternate arrangements.

**Montreal compared to Vancouver:**

Students who are considering doing an exchange at the Université de Montréal should definitely consider how much of a change they want during their exchange. I say this because, in my experience, living in Montreal is very similar to living in Vancouver. After all, you’re still in Canada which means that you don’t need to get a visa, you don’t need to open a new bank account, you use the same currency, and often you can even find the same chains, grocery stores and restaurants. All of these aspects can be benefits if you want to have the safety net of still being in Canada while discovering a new part of the country. However, it could be considered a safe and even boring option for those of you who are looking to experience a completely different lifestyle for a few months. All of these factors considered, Montreal is still very different from Vancouver in the sense that it is very francophone and there are lots of new events to experience while living there.

**Packing and weather:**

If I could redo another aspect of preparing for Montreal, I would rethink the process of packing and take the weather into serious consideration. First of all, I definitely over packed and this complicates things when you are arriving to Montreal. Therefore, even if you are completing an eight-month exchange, as I did, it isn’t necessary to bring anything more than a large suitcase and a carry on. Furthermore, if you are only staying for the Fall trimester, pack even less and concentrate on bringing plenty of thick pants, hoodies and jackets. In addition, if you are staying for the Spring trimester don’t think that this is a time when it will start getting warmer in
Quebec- they don’t call it the Winter trimester for no reason. The best advice I can give in regards to packing is to bring a solid pair of boots- I’m talking waterproof boots that can withstand weathers of over -30. In addition, investing in a good winter coat is absolutely essential to surviving and enjoying Montreal.

As you can see in the above side by side pictures, the weather in Montreal changes drastically from Fall to Winter around the end of October-early November. So, even if you are just staying for the Fall trimester, it is very important to pack well and- if for some reason you don’t have enough space or you don’t want to pack winter boots and a heavy winter jacket- make sure to budget in these essential purchases in Montreal. While it rains a lot less- yay for Vancouverites!- the weather in Montreal also changes very often, even during the same day, so remember to pack a few essentials, like on-the-go jackets.

**During the exchange**

**Arrival and orientation:**

Because of a work contract, I was unable to participate in the orientation at the beginning of my exchange; however, if future students can easily avoid missing the orientation, I would strongly recommend attending it. I heard from many exchange students that the orientation is a great
opportunity to meet people- possibly friends during your exchange that will help and guide you- as well as become familiar with the school and the city and participate in fun events that will become part of your exchange memories.

Accommodation and living:

The process of arriving in Montreal was very simple and straightforward. During my eight-month exchange, I stayed at the residence of the Université de Montréal primarily with the goal of making friends and being within walking distance of school. However, as I mentioned earlier, I wish I would have done more research regarding living options. I would strongly recommend that future exchange students consider living off of residence because of better prices and the possibility of living with a few people that could become your friends during your exchange. I found that the residence, while being situated close to school, was relatively anti-social and uncomfortable primarily due to limited laundry service, a lack of a fridge, and a very busy and shared kitchen that is located in the basement of the building- making it hard to cook.
**Academic details:**

When it comes to academics, if future exchange students are looking to experience a different environment while working within a similar academic format, the Université de Montréal is a great option. Not once on my exchange did I experience a culture shock or feel lost during lectures. While almost all classes are in French, if you have a good grasp of the language, you will have no problems. Many professors even allow exchange students to write their term papers and exams in English. The lecture, schedule and grading format at the Université de Montréal is the exact same as SFU. In addition, most classes count as 3 credits, same as SFU. Therefore, if you have a high level of French and you would usually enroll in 3-4 classes at SFU, you can definitely take the same amount of classes in Montreal without fearing that there is a big difference when it comes to the academic difficulty of the courses.

**Cultural Information and activities to do:**

The culture in Quebec is very similar to the one in British Columbia in the sense that there are many activities to do at any given time and most people are very open-minded and helpful, especially towards visitors. However, it’s also very different from the rest of Canada. While English can be heard in Montreal, there is definitely a lot of emphasis placed on the importance and the preservation of French as well as Quebecois cultural activities. While on exchange, I would suggest visiting local cafes and restaurants to experience Quebecois music and food, as well as churches, given that the church played a big role in Quebec’s history. The large number of churches that are present in Quebec also give you a good idea of the values protected by Quebec during a large part of its history, as well as the roots of many words in Quebecois French that are tied to the Quiet Revolution in Quebec during the 60s. In addition, you can check out the architecture of the city and ports by going to Old Montreal and walking on the stone streets.
Saint Joseph’s Oratory of Mount Royal in Montreal

Stone streets of Old Montreal

While in Montreal, I would also highly suggest going to a lot of cafes and restaurants to really experience the diverse cuisine in Montreal. There are many locally owned cafes in the city where they serve fair-trade coffee as well as Quebecois pastries.
After the exchange

Reflections:

Overall, I really enjoyed my exchange at the Université de Montréal. I was in a new environment and it was the first time that I truly lived alone. I learned a lot in general, not only academically, but about myself as a person and how I react in various situations. I wish I would have known how much I was going to change during and after my exchange. I think it really makes you grow up a lot because of the challenges that you face, often times alone and without your regular support system. I would strongly recommend that all university students go on an exchange while completing their education: it really gives you a whole new perspective and puts you in situations that you would have never imagined yourself being in. You never look at struggles or fears the same way again and that’s the point of learning and growing. Challenge yourself!