Preparing for Exchange

It may not be the most exotic destination you can choose from, but Montréal is a fantastic place to do an exchange. One of the reasons for this is the ease and simplicity of setting yourself up there.

Because you remain in Canada, you can keep your cell phone plan, you don’t have to buy foreign currency (which, given how weak the Canadian dollar has been, is a big money saver), you don’t have to buy additional health insurance, you don’t have to worry about visas and immigration—the transition is quite smooth. Living costs are also notably lower than Vancouver (particularly rent) and the vacancy rate is higher so you shouldn’t have much trouble finding an apartment.

Be sure to pack clothing for all weather. The summer is quite hot, and the winter gets very cold. If you intend on going to the gala at the end of the semester, you may want to bring something a bit more formal too. Don’t feel the need to bring everything you own, however. I managed just fine with what fit into one suitcase, a backpack, and a small satchel.

Getting around Montréal on the bus and métro is easy. When you arrive, you’ll have to go to station Berri-UQAM (downtown) and walk to the gare d’autocars where you can get a registered student OPUS card, which is a lot like the Compass card. I found the best deal was the four-month pass, which was about $190. If you choose to buy the four-month, be sure to wait until September 1st to purchase it. The way their system works is that the pass is good for four months as of the first of the current month, so if you buy it in August it will expire at the end of November.

As a final note, Montréal is more cash-based than Vancouver. Your credit and debit cards should still work most places, but I found there were more businesses that were cash only than in Vancouver so be sure to keep some on you in case.

During Exchange

HÉC offers a good orientation that introduces you to the city, the culture, the school, etc. This is the school’s official orientation and is a one day event. There is also a welcome week put on by HEChange (one of the on-campus student organizations) which is a lot of fun. I didn’t register for the full week, but did attend a few of the events and had a blast. I met a lot of people then with whom I became good friends over the semester.
As mentioned above, you shouldn’t have much difficulty finding an apartment. Most of the exchange students live in Le Plateau: a fun neighbourhood full of great cafés and bars just east of Mont-Royal, 30-40 minutes from campus.

Academically, HÉC is similar to SFU in terms of grading and expectations. The biggest differences I noticed were:

1. Lectures. Each course has a three-hour lecture once per week.
2. Amount of group work. You can expect at the very least one group project per course, but almost certainly more than that.

While HÉC is primarily a French university, they do offer some courses in English that tend to be filled mostly with exchange students. If your French is good enough, I think studying in French is a great idea – alas mine was not.

Culturally, Montréal is a very vibrant city. There is a lot of great theatre (the Centaur is good for English plays), street art, comedy, and fabulous festivals at the end of the summer. Speaking French is an asset, but nearly everyone in Montréal speaks English. That said, some people are annoyed when you don’t speak French, but you shouldn’t have any problems.

Montréal is quite an old city by North American standards (2016 being its 375th anniversary) and there is a lot of interesting architecture to explore. If you find yourself feeling bored and you don’t want to spend money, wander through the streets of a neighbourhood you don’t usually go to and check out the buildings— you’ll usually find something interesting. There are also an incredible number of churches, and the ones I saw were all beautiful.

If you like live music, I recommend L’escalier; a fun Brooklyn-esque venue on St. Catherine featuring different bands every night. If you’re a jazz lover, the ironically named Upstairs (located below street level) puts on some great shows. There are also a lot of great travel destinations nearby. You can explore the laurentian mountains, run away for a weekend to a chalet, and visit any number of nearby cities: Québec, Toronto, Chicago, New York... HEChange organized a trip to Boston, and there was also a trip to Cuba which, although I didn’t go on it, sounded like tons of fun. Whether you stay in Montréal or go travelling, there is no shortage of things to do.
Looking Back

My exchange to Montréal was a very gratifying experience. Although it is technically still Canada, Québec is very different culturally— and it’s a culture I deeply appreciate. I also think that doing an exchange, no matter where you go, is a great experience. It gets you out of your usual routines, forces you into new situations, allows you to meet new people from all over the world, and challenges your assumptions of what is “normal” and “right.”

Personally, I feel I have grown a lot because of my exchange. It was the longest period I’d spent without a job since I was 12 years old, and it forced me to reassess how I value myself. It gave me time to reflect on what I had been doing with my life, and to think about what I really want. It reminded me how much I love French, and has inspired me to find ways of maintaining my second language after returning to Vancouver.

I can’t say there’s anything I wish I had known before I left. It was all around a good experience. Montréal is a great city, HEC is a good school, and going on exchange is always a good idea.