Exchange @ Université de Montréal
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Université de Montréal, Canada, political science,
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Preparation for exchange

The number one thing for students who end up on single-term exchanges is to look for accommodations catered towards shorter-term stays. (Most leases tend to be a minimum of 8 months, or two semesters.) I cannot stress this enough: the residences at UdeM require a minimum 5-month stay, which is beyond what is required for one semester. Understanding the transit system will help you to choose more convenient locations. I myself lived very close to the Université de Montréal métro station.

In terms of packing, pack for all seasons — I was only present during the Fall 2018 semester, but the beginning of September can be quite warm. Winter gear is obviously a necessity (boots and coats, and possibly thermal underwear), since the temperature quickly drops by November. If you plan to visit other areas of Québec, it will be even colder.

Montréal has a very thorough public transit system — you’ll likely end up taking the métro most of the time, as it is well-connected to major areas (universities, restaurants and shopping hubs, etc.). Be sure to get a fare-reduced Opus card upon your arrival — this can be done in-person at STM’s UQAM-Berri location (line-ups may be long) or you can register online and have the card sent to a mailing address. There are also many bikes available for rent. I don’t suggest driving in Montréal, since the one-way streets and lack of clear signage can be confusing; the transit system will take care of your needs.

Living costs are slightly cheaper than in Vancouver, especially taking into account housing costs; obviously, there is the convenience of not having to open a new bank account or exchanging currency.

All course information can be found on the university website; syllabi are usually available on department sites.

During exchange

I arrived in late August and was able to move in directly, having already paid the deposit for September’s rent (not all landlords may be so flexible). I did not attend orientation; I did, however, have to see a counsellor to make course selection changes (since exchange students cannot modify courses manually directly through the student portal).

I also had difficulty dealing with the bureaucracy, who mistakenly did not record my citizenship status and therefore unnecessarily charged me fees for health insurance. I was transferred from department to department, and even meeting staff in person did not help; it was only through a phone call that they ultimately confirmed my status. They demanded a copy of my birth certificate, but seeing as this is part of the pre-exchange documentation that will be sent to the university, I am not sure that it is necessary to have one on hand.

Classes are similar to those at SFU, in terms of structure and size — 3 hour lectures, once per week, and class sizes varying from midsize (~50) to large (~100). The grading scales are also similar, though they vary from department to department. The work is standard: midterm and final exams, and papers.

The weather is famously tempestuous: snow and ice (beware the black ice!) in December, and quite possibly 30-degree weather in September (as was the case when I was present during a heat wave).
In terms of places to visit, I went to many different boroughs of Montréal; le Plateau-Mont-Royal, in particular, is a pleasant shopping and restaurant district popular with locals. For the caffeine-addicted, there are plenty of charming independent cafés, especially near certain métro stations (e.g. Beaubien, Côte-des-Neiges). The city is full of parks, even in more residential neighbourhoods (e.g. in Outremont, near where I lived), ranging from small to significant (walking up Mont Royal is a good pastime in the slightly warmer months). Many tourist landmarks can be found near the Old Port area.

As a music lover, Montréal was a god-send for me: it’s full of venues (especially in the Quartier des Spectacles) and frequently hosts tours. The local scene is diverse and full of interesting bands; the smaller-scale shows can be a great opportunity for socializing! I also learned that UdeM actually has an associated gamelan ensemble, as well as occasional free performances by its faculty of music.
I took the train up to Québec City (more pleasant than bus, in my opinion), which took a bit more than three hours to reach. I strongly recommend visiting there if you can, since it’ll be a rather different experience from Montréal; Vieux Québec features lovely decorations during the winter.

**Reflection after exchange**

For those who’ve never really lived on their own before, there may be an adjustment period, where you get used to the routines (figuring out groceries, cooking, etc.). Of course, homesickness may happen in the first few weeks; needless to say, keeping in touch with family and friends will help. It won’t necessarily be easy to make new friends in class, but if you have specific interests, becoming engaged in the relevant local scenes will help.

Something that may be unexpected is the barrage of emotions that you may feel after having left the city — there’s always the chance of getting attached. It can be an uncomfortable feeling, being split between two places; you’ll be leaving people and places behind, after all, no matter where you are.

*Vieux Québec*