Preparation for Exchange:

Academic details –
I found it helpful to pick out classes in advance, but there is no way to sign up in advance, so don’t worry too much about it pre-departure as long as you find enough classes that you’d be interested in so you can be flexible.

Packing –
Pack for a variety of weathers. The capital city is much warmer than other areas, so until late December/January if you go to beach towns, which is a popular thing to, you’ll need clothes similar to Vancouver’s October weather. Santiago is quite warm overall, so be prepared for the heat. You can buy sunscreen and aloe vera in big shopping centres (such as Lider, which is the Chilean Wal-Mart), but it’s more common to purchase those items at pharmacies. Don’t bother bringing too much that you can buy there, such as shampoos, since you will need a variety of clothes and it’s not hard to find basic items.

Travel and transportation –
Transporting from the airport in Chile is very do-able especially if you can carry your luggage. There are busses that take you directly to the metro line, and the metro line will take you most places. Don’t be too worried about taking the metro. Try to study your route in advance so it looks like you know where you’re going. Most people will be very happy to help you with directions. The metro can get very crowded, be careful with your things, as pick pocketing is fairly common. People are also likely to grab your backpack/bag when it would be hard to run after them, for example just as the bus door closes, so be aware of that. Hold firmly onto your things since they will likely get scared and run off without it as the door shuts anyway (violent robberies are very rare), but be prepared to lose your things because your items are not worth your life. Don’t carry around your passport or excessive amounts of cash. If you only have one card make sure to leave a fair amount of cash in a safe space where you’re staying in case you lose your card or have it stolen you’ll want money that can support you while you figure out how to get a new card. People who are obviously foreigners are more likely to be targeted for pick pocketing, I know several people who had their phones stolen – so I wouldn’t recommend having an expensive phone with you and definitely be careful with it.

Financial details –
I personally stayed with people that I knew, but from friends I learnt rent is roughly $500CAD a month. It’s easy to find something more expensive, probably hard to find something much cheaper. Food is roughly the same price as in Vancouver, especially fast food or at grocery stores. Some items will be cheaper and some more expensive so budget for what you would spend on food in Vancouver. Take extra money to travel. Busses between cities are cheaper than in BC, but it adds up, so best to have a financial cushion. The plane ticket was around $1,600 – and that’s if you book it at the right time. It’s common to find trips from Vancouver – Santiago for around $2,000 if you’re picky about the exact timing.
Orientation –
Orientation was great but didn’t prepare me for my classes or school life! If it’s your first time in Santiago definitely don’t miss it as it will mention some important things about the city. Orientation is a nice time to meet other exchange students. Getting around the school will be a balancing act of trying to meet Chilean students who are generally cold at first, and trying to not to appear as a click with other foreign students because it will be even harder to meet Chileans that way. So be open to making friends with other exchange students – but also be prepared to be the outgoing on when it comes to meeting your classmates.

Academic details –
The first week of classes are called “semana zero” or “week zero.” For Chilean students this a time when professors hand out the syllabi and students can still swap courses, so nothing starts. For you however, this will be the time that you walk around to various departments old school style and sign up in person for courses. I was unaware of this and Chilean students told me to go to class and see if I like them first – in fact some advisors and professors may tell you that as well. Don’t listen to them! There are very limited seats for foreign students in classes so you need to be on the ball and sign up Monday morning bright and early in person. Some departments’ office hours will be at different times – all of that information is available to you in a course package you’ll receive at orientation. What isn’t in the package is that not every course is available for exchange students and that there are limited seats.

Some professors are very old school and will teach without visual aid, sitting at the front of the room. Probably best to avoid those professors. Many of them will have powerpoints and will have interactive presentations that will make learning in Spanish much easier. All of the courses are in Spanish. Online it appears that three or four are taught routinely in English, but that is actually quite rare so don’t expect that.

I mostly took sociology courses to learn about Chilean and Latin American culture, since my major at SFU is sociology. That was a really great experience for me.
SFU insists on calling the August – end of November semester a ‘summer’ semester, but essentially it is the same as fall.

Country details
Chile is beautiful! Take time to travel! It is easy to get caught up in schoolwork, but prioritize the time you have there. Definitely visit Valparaiso and other beach towns a lot. Go north and go south! Go to Mendoza in Argentina over a long weekend. There is so much to see! Honestly Chileans don’t travel much, so they may give odd travel advice. Make sure to clarify with them if they’ve been there before you take their advice too seriously. Culturally, Chileans are unlikely to say no to anything – for example, if you ask for directions, they are more likely to give you random directions than someone here who will admit they’re unsure. So they repeat a lot of hearsay. Other exchange students are more likely to provide travel advice. Having said that, trust Chileans to know where is safe to go. They are often over cautious about foreigners going to some sketchier areas, because people have the perception that more crime happens than it does due to how crime is portrayed in the news, but some areas are unsafe. Be wary about meeting people while drinking regardless of your or their gender (women are just as likely to lace men’s drinks in order to rob them). Santiago is very safe to go out clubbing, but in party areas it may
become unsafe if you don’t appear to be in control of yourself, and you may become a target. Overall a very safe place though!
Chile has a very distinct culture from other Latin American countries (as they all do). Learn about it! September 18 is their independence day – make sure to find friends to celebrate it with and try to go where locals would go. The fondas, which are set up tents for the celebrations, at la playa – such as El Quisco, Algarrobo – are much more fun than in Santiago.

This is a traditional Chilean dance called la cueca – which is performed a lot around the time of “el dieciocho” (Sept 18th). This is danced in fondas and around the school as lunch time performances. Ask people to teach you if you like dancing – the basics aren’t too hard!

Chile is quite culturally stratified. The ‘type’ of Chilean you meet will depend on where you stay. Most people who attend PUC are very privileged, so I would recommend getting out of your neighbourhood and going to less touristy parts of the city to get a better feel for what it’s like for the majority of people who live in Santiago.
Southern Chile has a very different topography compared to central Chile – I highly recommend going to Osorno and Chiloe (which is quite far). If you have time I recommend busses there and making various stops along the way, or Chiloe is far enough to fly to if you only have a long weekend.
Santiago has quite a few fun tourist attractions. This is a pool at the top of San Cristobal. You can bring lunch and make it a day trip.

Chile has quite a few beautiful large parks! Get to know the plazas and the parks, as they are wonderful places to hang out and have a very different feel than places in Vancouver. Parks can also help you feel like you’re ‘getting out of the city’ without going too far.
Social and extra-curricular activities
There are a lot of extra-curricular sports. Gym class is also offered – those credits won’t transfer, but if you’re interested it’s a free way to get exercise and it’s easier to meet people than in other classes. It’s hard to be on track of clubs. It’s unclear when they start, so ask Chilean students or the exchange office and don’t rely on notifications or posters to find out.

Reflection after Exchange:
I wish I had taken advantage of my time there to go out more. It can be easy to get into the groove of school and stress about it. Go to the activities that are offered for exchange students and meet people. Be open with Chilean students about wanting to meet people – they are often shy and think you don’t want to be friends with them, so be open about that and it will really help. There is something called “Talk and Lunch” (starts about a month into the semester) for native English speakers to meet weekly with Chilean students to practice English – that was a great way for me to meet people! Chile is a beautiful place so make sure you see it!