This report details the experience I had during my Spring 2016 exchange at Charles University in Prague, one of the most picturesque cities in Europe. The exchange took place during Charles University’s Spring semester – from February 1st to May 21st – during the fourth year of my Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Political Science. It was, by far, the most incredible experience I’ve had with SFU.

Arrival

This semester abroad – though not my first time traveling overseas – was my first time in Europe. To a certain degree, I knew what to expect in terms of potential for culture shock or homesickness, but because I was able to prepare for it, it didn’t affect me very much. The few things I did worry about were learning basic phrases in Czech, orienting myself in what became my neighbourhood for the semester, and meeting people. It’s safe to say that problem-solving any one of those issues will help you solve the others. The best thing I did for myself was keep my expectations high while being open-minded. From day one, that mindset allowed me to make the most of every day in Prague, every trip I planned while I was in Europe, and it eventually helped in my return to Vancouver.

Charles University

The university is incredibly accommodating to international students. They offer a shuttle service on arrival day for students to get from the airport to the dorms, the school, or a requested destination (within reason, I’m sure). Although Prague’s public transit is phenomenal, the shuttle service gives students a stress-free entry into the city. Charles University also provides an amazingly well-structured welcome orientation, designed to help you navigate the city, take advantage of school services, and meet other students, both local and international. The diversity of the available classes was surprising, though very Euro-centric; there was everything from Central European economics to classes on local architecture. Overall, the “study” portion of my study abroad semester was engaging and, in my opinion, definitely extended my SFU education.

Food

Open-mindedness will continue to help you on your search for cheap eats, fine dining, or both in the culinary collage that is Prague. Because the dollar was quite strong against the Czech crown, eating out was fairly affordable – buying groceries was even more so. The low cost of food allowed me to try much of the local food at restaurants and cook some pretty fancy meals at my apartment. If you do live in
the dorms, the kitchen is fully equipped, although you’ll probably have to haggle for cooking time. Prague’s food scene accommodates for all tastes, but if you want to check out the local food, there are countless pubs and restaurants off the beaten path that offer schnitzel, goulash, hot wine or Pilsner. My personal recommendation would be, without question, Bukowski’s in Praha 3, where on some nights you can buy a pitcher – and I mean a proper full pitcher – of good beer for 35Kč, which was just under two dollars when I was abroad. The beauty about Prague is that you can try a lot of new foods or stick with the old comfort foods from home; either way, both options are accessible and inexpensive.

Accommodations

I found my humble abode on Airbnb, which is more commonly used as a way to find short-term accommodations for vacations. It really saved me during my apartment-hunting because I couldn’t find affordable or reliable listings before someone recommended Airbnb. Of course, you can skip all that trouble and live at the dorms. All of your new friends will be there, it’s a short walk to Prague Castle, and there was free breakfast every morning. I chose apartment living for more introspective reasons. I’m not introverted or antisocial by any means, and it was a bit of a pain having to take the tram to the dorms to hang out with friends, but I really developed a strong sense of independence and a renewed confidence living on my own. SFU is a commuter school, so I’ve never had to move out; renting an apartment in Prague really allowed me a new experience and I am absolutely satisfied with my choice.

Another key note is that the “centre” of Prague is really everything from the Castle to Old Town. The city map is a little misleading because it makes Old Town look like the absolute centre; geographically, it is, but the life of the city, especially during tourist season, extents up to the castle. Whereever you decide to live, take that into account.

Social Life in Prague

Have no doubts about making friends at Charles University because you will. There are plenty of international students at Charles University if you’re interested in meeting people from around the world. Most of the people in the Eastern and Central European Studies program are from the United States, which may be a disappointment for those of you who are looking to make those international connections, but the Americans aren’t half bad, you know. Once they stop asking you to say ‘aboot’ and ‘eh,’ you might actually take a liking to them. Seriously though, the friends I made in Prague were absolutely amazing people. And there are plenty of opportunities to meet new people and create lasting friendships in Prague. The city is home to countless pubs, clubs, teahouses, parks, festivals, concerts and parties. If you’re a total hipster like my friends, head over to A Maze in Tchaiovna in Praha 6. That place had the best tea I’ve ever had, live music, free Czech language lessons for beginners, and a bookshelf that was actually a hidden passage to another room. It was the best. Needless to say, Prague is overflowing with fun.
Traveling

Prague is also conveniently placed in the geographical centre of Europe, so travelling is a breeze. Flights to any major city in Europe is relatively inexpensive, depending on the deals you find, the airlines you fly with, and the airports you choose to land at. If you travel on a budget, you can visit countless places during your semester. Not literally countless; I travelled through 17 countries during my time in Europe. If you have friends that are comfortable with driving, road trips are great. One of my favourite memories of my trip was a three-day road trip from Prague down to Monaco. On a Wednesday, we were discussing what we wanted to do on the upcoming weekend, and by Friday we left on a thirteen-hour drive down to the French Riviera, taking us through the German Autobahn, the Swiss Alps, Lake Como and Milan. The next weekend I left with another group on a nine-hour drive to Croatia. I cannot express how amazing Prague’s location is within Europe.

Local travel was just as amazing. The program takes students on two separate trips through the Czech Republic in the initial weeks. The countryside is beautiful but the country’s history is genuinely fascinating. There is an incredible Jewish history in Central Europe, particularly in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. You’ll see a lot of it in those trips, one of which is themed around Czech history and culture, and the second one on the country’s rich history. Although these first two day-trips are mandatory, there were optional destinations for each trip, giving students a more diverse experience. There is also an optional, though highly recommended, program-led trip to Auschwitz and Krakow, Poland. It was a three-day trip which included an intense tour of the Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II – Birkenau led by an incredible tour guide that worked with Charles University. Without her, I cannot image a more complete experience in Poland. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Returning Home

The very last thing I’d like to add to this report simply repeats much of what I’ve already said, or at least sticks to the same themes – keep an open mind. The beautiful thing about having to come home is that, barring some crazy circumstance, you’ll have to come home. So embrace it. Most of the people I studied with were very anxious towards the end of our semester. I think a lot of fun memories could’ve been made in time we sometimes took worrying about coming home. Luckily, well before our semester ended, I was able to truly mentally prepare for my return home and enjoy what was left of my semester abroad. I saved the anxiety, nostalgia, and the sadness of leaving Prague until the very last day, the day I boarded my flight home. My flight took off and I knew, as did everyone, that it’d be some time before I’d get to see Prague again, this amazing city that I got to call home for four months. I’ll admit, it was a little emotional, but lucky for me, Lufthansa serves beer on their flights.

Western Europe is way too Americanized, and Eastern Europe is too close to Putin, but Prague will never disappoint you. To the prospective student abroad, Hodně štěstí v Praze!