This Spring 2017 semester I had an amazing experience studying abroad at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic as a part of their ECES program. Since the semester at Charles University begins in late February I departed January 30th to arrive January 31st for our three-week pre-semester language course and orientation. Charles University was paradise for a World Literature major like me, and as I’m going into my senior year at SFU I can say that my literary background has definitely been expanded. If you are a student of the arts, humanities or social sciences Prague and Charles University is the place for you. There is live music every night, gallery openings with new exhibits every week and a museum on every corner.

One thing I can recommend during the pre-departure stages is having sufficient time to do your visa application. The ECES program did offer a step-by-step guide in how to fill out the application, however as a Canadian citizen the visa application process is vastly different. As a Canadian citizen I applied for a Youth Mobility Visa, not a student visa which the American citizens applied for and that the ECES instructions catered to. I used the example application provided by ECES as a template, however that is where the similarities end. Use the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Ottawa’s website for the guidelines and email them with any questions you have as they are quick to reply. I highly recommend that you prepare all that you can in your visa application before you receive your letter of acceptance from Charles University so that you may send in your application as soon as you receive it. When I applied the processing times were up to 60 days and they required my physical passport (not a photocopy) as a part of the application, which is why you should send the application before 60 days to departure.

As for packing it was tricky with the spring semester since it was freezing with snow upon arrival and by the end of the semester it was in the mid-20s. If you are packing for the spring I suggest packing 2/3rd for the winter and 1/3rd for warmer weather, alternatively if you are going to pack clothes for warmer weather at least make sure that you can layer them for the colder months. I knew that I wanted to pack fairly light since I was going to be travelling after my exchange ended so keep that in mind, whether you want to go directly home after or travel for some time on your own after exchange.

While many places in Prague do accept credit cards it is cash that is the preferred method of payment. If you decide to leave Prague and venture to the smaller but interesting cities in the Czech Republic (Pilsen, Karlovy Vary, South Moravia etc.) you will need cash unless it is a “tourist” destination. Comparatively to Vancouver with its exceedingly high cost of living the Czech Republic was a welcome change. It is extremely affordable to live in Prague. If you decide to eat out a decent meal including a drink (beer, soda etc.) will generally cost you between 8$ to 15$ (including tip). At average places the entrée should range from 160kc to 200kc. While eating out was inexpensive compared to Vancouver I chose to eat in and cook for myself most nights. I also chose to cook my own food for health purposes since Czech food is very heavy, consisting of meat (generally pork or chicken) and potatoes. On average I would spend between 25$ to 30$ on a week’s worth of groceries (fresh meat, vegetables and fruit) and that even included little unnecessary treats such as ice cream or chips.
Arriving in Prague was a bit of an ordeal for me since I was arriving so late at night and did not have anyone from ECES to greet and help me get set up with my room. Speaking broken English with a Czech woman and trying to check in after 16 hours of travel was not ideal. If you are able to, I suggest booking your flight so that you are able to attend the (non-mandatory) meet-and-greet on the official arrival day. However, the second day we were given a dorm orientation by Suzanna (our dorm mom and a wealth of information, she knows everyone who is anyone in Prague) which was straightforward. All of our three-week orientation was extremely straightforward. You are given schedules and guidebooks and manuals with endless amounts of tips and information, and if you can’t bother to read through all of your resources then you can ask Suzanna, Eva or Katie (or any of the ECES staff) any questions you may have.

The dorm is not pretty but I was never expecting it to be. However, it has its own kind of charm. Plus, it’s in a great location, a 10-minute walk from the castle and just out of reach from the hordes of tourists. There is a lovely community vibe in the place and it was extremely easy to make friends. You always had company if you wanted it. The suites have between 2 to 4 rooms, some double and some single (you can request which you would prefer). There’s a mini fridge and a hotplate to cook on. I was in a suite with 4 single rooms, which meant living with 3 other girls, 2 of which became some of my life-long best friends.

As for classes, they follow a similar structure to SFU’s FASS classes. They are a standard lecture and discussion. The classes are either held twice a week for 90 minutes or once a week for 180 minutes. I was in class for 6 straight hours for 3 days of the week and I do not recommend that even if the classes are interesting. The add/drop period is a good time to try out classes and I recommend taking advantage of that. However, if you are certain on the classes you would like to take be sure to sign up as soon as enrollment is open. For literature I recommend taking anything with Ondrej Galuska or David Vichnar (who is also a fantastic film professor).

Once you’ve learned the history of the Czech Republic and everything that it has gone through you’ll better understand its culture and why the people may seem cold or rude. Honestly, there are plenty of kind Czech people who are willing to help you or make conversation. The Americans (which make up 98% of the ECES program) had a particularly difficult time adjusting to this. Understand that the Czechs have been ruled by oppressive regimes (Austro-Hungarian Empire, Third Reich, and the USSR/communism) and trusting foreigners does not come easily to them. Every part of the city is packed with history and I recommend getting the big tourist attractions out of the way in the beginning (Prague Castle, Charles Bridge and Old Town Square) so you can enjoy places like Novy Svet (Kavarna Novy Svet was my favourite place to study and only a 10-minute walk from the dorm), the Metronome or Prague 7. If you like alternative head to Vzorkovna (The Dog Bar) which has live music every night and is one of the coolest bars I’ve ever been to. If you want something classier go to JazzDock which sits on the Vltava and has jazz/jazz-fusion every night. Three things you must do: 1) enjoy all the live music; 2) go to a few of the many galleries and museums to see art, especially on exhibitions’ opening nights (Kafka House is great for that); 3) enjoy the café culture, sitting and enjoying a latté in one of the many cute cafés in Prague is a must.

Going on exchange will change you, it will force you to grow and to learn and that’s an excellent thing. All I can say is to embrace it. Don’t let the pressure to get the most out of exchange stress you out, as if you’re not using every single second to its fullest. Believe me, there are people who are counting down the days and freaking out about not having enough time to do all the things. Breathe, it’s okay to take a night off and spend it eating chips and candy and watching a rom-com with your roommate. However, don’t sit around and do nothing all the time either. Do go out, do go on adventures around the city and try new places and things. You’ll never know what you’ll fall in love with. One of the most important lessons I learned was during my first week at Charles University. A professor spoke to our group and explained that there were three zones in life:
your comfort zone, the danger zone, and the learning zone which sat comfortably between the two. What he said was that if you were able to push yourself just far enough out of your comfort zone that you would really start to learn things, about yourself and the world around you. I can’t tell you how true that is and that is what I recommend to future students as well. Push your boundaries and step out of your comfort zone because you’ll be certain to learn something.

*Entrance to Charles Bridge*

*Old Town Square in winter*

*View of Prague from Prague Castle*
Wallenstein Garden

Hiking through the Bohemian Paradise