This Fall 2018 semester I travelled to Prague, Czech Republic, to study at Charles University. The East and Central European Studies (ECES) Program I participated in at Charles University began on September 3rd and ended on December 15th. I chose to study at Charles University because of their courses offerings. As a third year student in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences majoring in International Studies, I was drawn to Charles University because they offered courses related to my International Studies Major such as comparative politics. I was also drawn to Prague due to the city’s historical charm being the ‘heart’ of Central Europe.

Where to Study

In my initial stages of deciding where to study abroad, I found it very useful to talk to my International Studies Advisor to learn about which universities offered courses equivalent to my major. This saved me a lot of time rather than going through each university and reviewing exchange credit history. Reading through past exchange reports also allowed me to understand the degree of difficulty of the courses and how many courses I should enroll in. Once I shortlisted schools with courses I liked, I looked at the cost of living to help make the decision as well.

Expenses

Prague is an ideal city for students. The cost of living in Prague is much cheaper than Vancouver. An average meal out costs $6-8 CAD. A very good dinner including beverages can be $10-15 CAD. I created a monthly budget of $400 for groceries and activities within Prague and found I was able to stay within it since I cooked in the dormitory frequently. I withdrew my monthly budget in cash so it was easier to keep track of my spending. Also, while most places accept debit or credit cards, cash is the preferred payment method. My largest expense for study abroad was the flight to Europe, I recommend booking your flight around three months in advance. When I was travelling within Europe, I mostly travelled by bus or train. Sites such as goEuro and Skyscanner were very useful. Since Prague is in such a central location within Europe, it is very easy and affordable to travel to nearby major cities like Berlin, Vienna, and Bratislava.

Visa

The Visa application process was a bit difficult as the ECES Program is mostly American students so Visa instructions are more thorough for American students. I applied for a Youth Mobility Visa. The Czech Republic Embassy is in Ottawa so I had to send my application there. An unexpected cost I encountered during this process was the translation fees to have a few Visa documents translated to Czech. I highly recommend beginning your VISA application early so you have plenty of time to carefully review the instructions and contact the Charles University exchange office and the Czech Republic Embassy with questions and clarifications you have. I found calling the Czech Republic Embassy was most efficient, but be aware of the time difference so you call during the correct hours listed on the website.
Arrival & the Dormitory

I recommend arriving on the official arrival day so you can receive transport to the dormitory. I stayed at one of the Charles University dorms. It was located in Prague 6 and only a 10 minute walk from the Prague Castle. The neighbourhood was pretty quiet and calm. There was a park and a mini-mart only 1-2 minutes from the dormitory and the grocery store Billa was a 5 minute tram ride away. When I arrived at the dormitory I had to fill out some paperwork and then I received an orientation package which contained a lot of useful information such as contact information but also recommended cafes, restaurants, stores, and more. I lived in a suite with three other roommates. The suite consisted of two small double bedrooms, one bathroom, a small fridge, two hotplates, and a large kitchen sink. The dormitory also had a larger community kitchen and a study room that students in the ECES Program shared.

Charles University

Shortly after arriving we received a school orientation. In the meeting we were informed about school policies and shown how to travel between the two building we had classes in: Main Building and Jindřišská. In terms of lecture format, I found it to be similar to SFU FASS courses. There were two 90 minute classes a week per class and I had one class that was with 3 hours long. The sizes of my classes varied from 8 to 12 students, mostly from the ECES Program but some joined from other international exchange programs in the USA. Overall, I found the classes to be much less demanding than SFU courses and the grading to be easier. For example, my comparative politics class had half the readings that I would normally receive at SFU. However, I found we studied these readings more closely and as a result, I retained the information better. I was very fortunate to have fantastic professors who had a lot of experience teaching international students too.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is a small country both in terms of population and geography. The population is only 10.5 million residents with 1.2 million residents residing in Prague. I found the weather in Prague to be a bit warmer than Vancouver and there was much less rain. Over the course of the semester, it rained only a handful of times. The weather in September was quite hot before it started to cool off in October. I was not expecting this so I do recommend packing a 1/4 or 1/3 of your clothes for summer and the rest winter. I highly recommend taking advantage of the weather and doing seasonal activities. In September, I went peddle-boating in the Vltava River with my roommates and in December a group of us went ice skating at Letna Park. There are many interesting cities to explore within the Czech Republic as well. Most nearby tourist cities are only 1-2 hours away via bus or train. You can choose to travel to some of these cities, like Pilsen or Kutná Hora, during the free orientation trips in September.

Challenges

During my exchange one unexpected challenge I faced was the feeling of missing out on things happening in Canada such as school events with my friends or family gatherings like Thanksgiving. For the first two weeks I struggled with this, however, as I began to make an abundance of new friends and become familiar with Prague, this feeling quickly dissipated. By the end of my exchange, I found myself not wanting to leave! Upon returning back to Canada
and reflecting on my study abroad experience, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn in an immersed environment. I was able to learn about the politics of Poland and Hungary, for example, and then visit those countries and explore their culture. This was the main highlight of my exchange as an International Studies Major. I believe Prague was the perfect study abroad destination for me. I made lifelong friends and got to travel to nine countries while working towards my degree at SFU.

This is a view of the Vltava River in Prague in September from Letna Park near the Metronome statue.

This photo was taken at the temporary ice rink at Letna Park in December. We were all in the ECES program and lived in the same dormitory.
This is a photo of the main cathedral in Český Krumlov from the city’s castle walls. I came here for a day trip in October with my family when they visited me.

This photo was taken in Karlovy Vary, a famous spa town in the Czech Republic. I visited here with my roommates on a day trip as the bus ride was just under two hours one way.