This Spring 2019 semester I had the pleasure of travelling to Prague, Czech Republic to participate in the East and Central European Studies program at Charles University. I chose this university and locations for a variety of reasons: first, I knew Prague was beautiful and amazingly located in terms of its centrality to Europe. Second, being on a budget, I knew Prague’s economy would benefit me. Third, Charles University is an amazingly good school, and the ECES program offered courses not only in all the subjects I needed, but also courses that genuinely interested me. The fact that the program is separate to direct-enrollers meant that I knew my program would emphasize Czech culture and history from the beginning and would provide me an expansive of Czech history as the professors would gear lessons towards non-Czech and foreign students. As a Communications and English student, I looked forward to this new perspective. Arriving in Prague, I immediately fell in love with its narrow cobblestone streets, old architecture, and the hustle of a transit-powered city.

**Pre-Departure**

I definitely recommend spending a lot more time on your visa application than you expect. The ECES program offered an online seminar on how to fill out a visa application, but it is geared towards US students as they are the majority in the program. I completed an almost-impossibly difficult application for a long-term study visa, only to find out by a previous student that there is a cheaper, easier to fill out, and more easily acquired visa offered to Canadians called the “youth mobility visa”. The Embassy’s website in Canada is difficult to navigate and leads to some dead ends so I highly recommend allotting more time for the processing of it than expected, as even carefully completing it may lead to some errors—my visa was initially rejected and had to be re-processed.

**Packing**

Prague is also very cold, but the cold is different to the Vancouver weather. There is not a lot of wind in Prague, and so wind-repellent clothing will not be as helpful as simply sweaters and other knit and warm clothing items. Pack lots of those! Prague also experiences snow so remember to pack snow boots.

**Transit and Transportation**

The ECES program provides you a three-month transit pass for all the Prague transit systems. Transit in Prague is the best in Europe so you will spend most of your time on it. After the three months, you must buy your own transit pass for one month, but under the student discount it will only cost about five dollars.

Prague’s airport is unfortunately rather small so sometimes flights are more expensive than expected, so I recommend for weekend trips to more obscure countries or locations, to take a bus or train to a nearby large city in another country—such as Vienna or Berlin. It does not always work out, but sometimes it will save you a lot of money.

**Cost of Living**

Prague is definitely far, far cheaper than Vancouver. An average meal out in a restaurant costs around 9 dollars, and even groceries run at around 14 dollars a week. However, there are expenses that you would not normally have at home to calculate—the study abroad culture means you will probably spend more money than expected on going out, on eating out, and on other cultural experiences.
NOTE FROM ISS: As of 2019-2020 the exchange program is university-wide note with ECES.

**During Exchange**

The ECES program sets a recommended arrival date, and students that arrive on that date will receive free airport transfer to the dormitory. I arrived in Prague before this date, and while it was frustrating to figure out how to get to the dorm while over-tired from the flight, the two extra days to sort out jet lag really helped in terms of being prepped and not exhausted during orientation—which starts the day after arrival.

**Dormitories**

The dormitories are not the most glamorous of living accommodations, but they contain the bare essentials needed for a comfortable experience. The sheets, towels, and garbage are taken care of by the dorm, and students were provided with a free breakfast (at least, in the dorm called Kolej Komenskeho). Being close by to all your friends and program-mates is a definite bonus as well.

**Classes**

Classes are a far more seminar-based style of teaching than at SFU, with often a lot of lecturing and minimal interaction between students (depending on the teaching style) other than during questions. Thus, it may come as a shock to students who do not like sitting still for a while, so I recommend spacing out classes if that is an issue. Classes are intimate, averaging 5-15 students in each, which allows you to form a close relationship with other classmates and your professor. The professors are all very invested in the students’ success, which is amazing.

The class grading/grade distribution function differently than most of the arts courses I have taken at SFU. Grades primarily comprise of only 2-3 or so items that weigh into the final grade—such as a midterm, a final, and a presentation. Thus, most of the semester can feel like you are not doing work, but the course load will get heavy in the last few weeks so make sure to plan accordingly, in order to not complete all 3 of the course requirements at the same time. Additionally, some of the newer courses will have weekly reflections to prove you have completed the readings and to test comprehension (although these reflections are usually pass-fail), so be prepared to be actively engaged and doing the readings. This, while at first was a shock to the class style I am used to, I found to really help reduce stress when exams came around—for I had already completed and fully understood all the readings.

**Post-Exchange Reflection**

All in all, my experience in Prague and at the ECES program was amazing. Living in the same dorm and going to the same classes with all the same people allowed me to form close bonds with friends I will now have for a long time. Additionally, Prague and the Czech Republic are overwhelmingly beautiful, and visiting other cities and countries was eye-opening and amazing, as there are so many differences between each city, let alone country.

If there was one thing I wish I would have known before I came, is that the ECES program has incredibly advantages that I love, but it also places students in a position where you are only interacting with other US or Canada exchange students—not any local Czechs or any other Europeans. The dorms are all ECES (Canadian and American) students, and the classes (and even some of the professors) are also only with Canadian and American students. It is not a direct immersion in the Czech culture like other directly enrolled programs are.
NOTE FROM ISS: As of 2019-2020 the exchange program is university-wide note with ECES.

However, I would not change my experience in ECES for the world, as this program allowed me to learn so much about Czech culture and history from the beginning, and to form friendships with amazing people who wanted to see other parts of Europe just as much as I did.

Shots from Karlovy Vary, a neighbouring town to Prague that is gorgeous!

A photo from Petrin Hill Park!

The sunset over the Vltava River, the main river running through Prague