University College London – London, England

My name is Jerold and I’m a fourth year student in the Faculty of Environment working on a major in Environmental Science and a minor in Environmental Chemistry. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to travel to London to do an exchange semester at University College London (UCL) in the Spring of 2016.

Figuring out all the steps to take before leaving for exchange was somewhat of a challenge since I had never been to England before, or anywhere in Europe for that matter. Luckily, there was lots of information available on the UCL website for incoming exchange students. Getting a visa was not a problem since I’m a Canadian citizen, and all I needed to do get a six-month student visa was to show my UCL acceptance letter to the UK border officers upon landing. When it came to accommodation, applying for a UCL hall and paying my deposit was all done online. With a place to live and a way to enter the country, I was all set to pack my stuff!

My suitcase was fairly minimalistic, only including the essentials. The weather in London is very similar to Vancouver, so I was very comfortable with just a couple sweaters and a trusty rain jacket. The fact that my suitcase wasn’t too full also helped me on the way home, when I needed the space for souvenirs and gifts. A few key items that I brought include an outlet adapter, a mug for tea (very important), and of course, snacks and things to do on my nine-hour flight to Gatwick Airport.

Let me tell you, landing completely alone in a country you’ve never visited can be pretty a pretty jarring experience. However, it was fairly straightforward getting from Gatwick Airport to Central London. I took the Gatwick Express to Victoria Station, where I took the London Underground to King’s Cross Station. The Underground is really intuitive and easy to learn, especially if you’re experience with Vancouver’s Skytrain system. The only real difference is that there are more lines. From King’s Cross, I walked to my hostel, where I stayed my first night in London. If, like me, you arrive at night and the UCL residence office is closed for check in, then I would highly recommend Clink 261 along Gray’s Inn Road. It’s a cheap backpacker hostel in a convenient location, and is great if you don’t mind sharing a room with other people.

The next morning, I checked into what would be my home for the next five months, Langton Close. This hall was un-catered, and a 15-minute walk away from the main UCL campus, and came for the low, low price of £157 per week. Yes, that was sarcasm, and yes, you will pay an arm and a leg to stay in Central London. However, exorbitant rent prices aside, I dropped my stuff off in my new room and headed straight to the International Students Orientation Programme (ISOP). The ISOP events are held for all incoming international students, and include a number of talks to help guide you through registering for courses, campus life, and living in London.

The system at UCL is somewhat different from SFU. One particular difference is that the term dates don’t match up. At UCL, there is a fall term from September to December, and a spring term from January to March. These are followed by a third term from April to June, when students take exams for both the fall and spring terms. For this reason, exchange students coming in for the fall term stay until December and just do their exams early, while those coming in for the spring term stay for both terms two and three, from January all the way to June.
Another thing that struck me as strange was the marking scheme of the courses at UCL. Although it varies by department, I found that the marks in my courses only came from one or two exams and/or papers. For one of my classes, the final exam was worth 100% of my grade. As you might expect, this is somewhat stressful, but not entirely unfeasible if you keep up with readings throughout the term.

Logistics aside, I found that I settled in to life in London fairly quickly. Going to lecture, doing readings, going grocery shopping, and cooking for myself took up a lot of my time. Of course, in my spare time, I went out to explore the city. London has so many things to offer, and I found that I could always find little corners of the city that I’d never seen before. One of my favourite things to do was to walk along Regent’s Canal, which runs through King’s Cross and Camden Town. There are boats along the canal, most doubling as living space, and some were even converted into quaint cafes and bookshops!

During reading break (in February), and Easter break (in April), many exchange students choose to travel around Europe, since it’s easy and relatively cheap to fly around via EasyJet and RyanAir. Due to budget constraints, I wasn’t able to travel outside of the UK; however, I did manage to go on a week-long trip in the Scottish Highlands with some newly made friends. We travelled from Glasgow to Inverness, passing by Loch Lomond, Oban, and of course, the Isle of Skye. I had seen pictures of Skye before, but nothing could prepare me for seeing the place in person. It was simply breathtaking! The rolling hills and mountainous terrain right next to the sea were just so incredible.

Before long, I realized that I only had a few weeks left until I left London and returned to my normal life. I asked myself if the whole experience had been worth it. After all, I had flown halfway around the world, spent upwards of $15,000, and experienced many bouts of homesickness and missing my friends and family back home. I had put myself through the difficulty of planning groceries and meals under a budget, sometimes enduring hunger for the sake of saving money. And I have to say, it was all worth it. I learned so much about myself and the world around me during my exchange. I gained confidence in my ability to be independent and to take on the world. I can now say that I have friends in Singapore, Finland, Amsterdam, and Malaysia. Because of my exchange, I have had so many once-in-a-lifetime experiences that I would have never gotten the chance to have had I not taken the leap out of my comfort zone. I can’t tell you what experiences you will have if you go on exchange. I only know that the memories that you do make will be ones you will fondly remember forever.
Regent’s Canal, featuring some house boats. A great place to jog.

Busy streets of Camden, close to the Camden Market.

Me and some friends climbing mountains on the magical Isle of Skye.
Stonehenge! The greatest henge of all.