Exchange Report

My exchange semester from Jan/2015 to April/2015 was at the Institut d’Études Politiques (IEP) in Aix en Provence, France. As a student in the French Cohort Program in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at SFU, this exchange was a requirement of my degree.

A lot of things were more expensive than they are in Vancouver but food could be more affordable if you put in the effort. If I shopped at Dia, for example, rather than the more convenient Monoprix I could get by spending 20 euros a week on food. Residence was relatively inexpensive too, at about 250 euros per month with the French government organisation that runs the student accommodation program for the universities in Aix. The biggest expenses during my semester were nights out and any additional travel. I often found that flying (especially with Ryan Air) was much cheaper than taking the train. From Marseille airport to Paris-Beauvais, for example, it would have been about 30 euros cheaper to fly than it was to train.

In France it was generally expected that you pay in cash at most places. This was made particularly difficult by the fact that ATM’s consistently distributed 50 euros bills as soon as the amount became high enough to do so. If you’re stuck with a 50 euros bill only a few (bigger) places are going to break it for you. Smaller businesses, curiously, would rather refuse the sale than break a large bill.

I packed a lot less than I think most of my friends had. My friends who were already in France and I had made plans to meet up in Grenoble upon my arrival, meaning I would miss the opportunity to leave my luggage behind in Aix and would have to haul it around with us for a few days. I don’t regret packing less at all and it was definitely necessary at the time. The only thing I went without that I wish I had brought is a swimsuit. It gets warm and sunny in the south starting as soon as March and we started going on trips to the beach very early in the year. As much as it is important to plan for the weather for where you’re going, I’d still bring a heavier jacket even if you’re expecting to be somewhere warm. Half way through the semester my friends and I planned a trip that put us in Poland in the middle of February. A warm coat was definitely needed. You never know where you’ll end up, and you don’t want to have to limit your travel options according to your wardrobe, so plan for a variety of climates.

We had orientation on the first day that lasted a few hours and went over the basics of how IEP courses and registration would work. This was the same day that we took our French placement tests and had our first language classes. The orientation that I received, although comprehensive, was much shorter than what the students who had arrived in September had received. They had enjoyed a week of social events and daytrips that let them explore the city and get to know each other before the semester started. I think I would have benefited from that but, in terms of covering all the administrative details involved in attending school at IEP, the orientation I received was enough.
My arrival in France was a little rocky. Apparently IEP had been having trouble receiving applications before I was accepted to the school. My application was never really processed, they just approved me and sent off my admission letter without really registering me. My request for accommodation had never been sent on to CROUS (the government organization running student residence) and I hadn’t been added to their list of incoming international students. The only assurances I had were my acceptance letter and the fact that the international secretary knew who I was. Since I didn’t have housing when I arrived in Aix, I stayed on the floor of my friend’s dorm room in the les Gazelles residence for about three weeks until accommodation was finally arranged for me in the Cuques residence. The was an unpleasant experience I would not want to repeat. Course registration wasn’t until week three so thankfully by then I had figured out my situation with the international secretary and she had assigned me a student number. It could have all been much more difficult and I’m glad it all worked out but it was very stressful. I wish that my enrolment in the university had been more confirmed before I’d left.

Lectures were similar to what they are at SFU. Class sizes were much smaller but that didn’t make much of a difference because it didn’t allow for any more one on one time with the professors and it didn’t mean any more class participation. It was still just lectures, even in a class of 15 people. Grading for most courses involved a 10-15 minute oral exam at the end of the semester which determined our entire grade. I found this stressful especially since they were in French. However, I know that they do this to help out the international students. In an oral exam, the professor has the opportunity to interrupt you if you’re going off course (which they wouldn’t if it were a written exam) and many profs will continue asking questions until they feel you have recited enough information to pass their class. Most of the profs I took exams with were patient and understanding of the different levels of French there were among the international students in the class.

My friends and I had a lot of fun travelling around. It was great to be able to take the opportunity to travel around Europe while it was so easy to get from place to place. I had worked out my course schedule to give myself a long weekend so it was easy to take quick trips to other countries. The bus system, if you had applied for a free card (Car Treize), allowed us to travel to a couple towns and beaches close to Aix for cheap (2 euros gets you 24 hours of using the bus to anywhere). The international association with the school also organized day trips (we went to Nice) and longer weekend trips (to Florence). If you send a friend request to “Aix ForFun” on Facebook you can get invites and notifications about events going on in the area with IEP and the Aix-Marseille university (which is a much bigger university also in the area).

I don’t think my French improved as much as I would have liked it to. The friends I made were all English speakers. IEP has a lot of international students so it’s easy to only ever interact with them. Because of this, I wasn’t speaking French in social situations as much as I expected. What was different was the material we were studying. Most of my courses so far at SFU have looked exclusively at Canadian
examples and case studies so it was interesting to be looking at different countries for a change. I took
courses, for instance, about French external relations and about European integration.

The best advice I could give to student going to IEP in Aix en Provence about dealing with any
problems that come up is to talk to the secretary in the international office. She’ll be much more helpful
than anyone higher up. In my time at IEP, I never once talked to the academic coordinator for
international students, the secretary was able to solve anything I brought to her.