For my semester abroad, I attended the Menton campus of Sciences Po Paris. I went for the Spring 2015 semester, which starts at the end of January and finishes mid-May. At SFU, I major in International Studies and Minor in History. The school focuses on the Middle East and Mediterranean region, providing an in-depth look at a very interesting, and infamous, area. It’s the perfect school for those studying international studies, history, economics, or languages. You can learn French, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, and Hebrew. I had an amazing time on exchange, and I encourage anyone to apply to spend a semester at Sciences Po Menton!

Once I was accepted to Sciences Po, there were a few things I had to do before I left for exchange. You have to have a visa to study in France. If you’re Canadian, then the process is very simple. Canada and France have a partnership agreement, meaning the student visa is free! The process is very simple, but you do have to collect quite a few forms, so don’t leave it to the last minute. That being said, once you book your appointment with the visa office, you end up receiving your visa the same week.

Accommodation is one thing that you definitely have to plan in advance. The school has three small residences (2 female, one male). I decided to rent a studio, but friends of mine lived in the residences, which were only a five-minute walk to the school, and you get to cook your own food, while they have cleaners. The WIFI in the residences wasn’t very good, but it is a less expensive option if you don’t want to rent something yourself. I decided to rent myself because I like a bit of space. The Menton website for Sciences Po has a page that shows apartment listing in Menton. Most of the ads are in French, but there are a lot of options. The studio I ended up staying in was great; Menton is very small, so anywhere you stay would be a short walk to school. Renting yourself is more expensive than the residences, so it’s really a personal preference.

However, if you do live in the residences, you have to open a French bank account to pay your rent. I didn’t open a French account, because I bank with HSBC, and there is an HSBC in Menton. Menton isn’t too expensive, but the surrounding area is, so you have to be careful how much you spend. Overall, it’s similar to Vancouver cost-wise.

I would suggest Free Mobile for your phone plan, which is 20 euros a month. It includes free calling to Canada and the US, and free calls and texts in Europe. You can buy a phone from them, or bring an unlocked phone. You buy the SIM card online and they mail it to you. Almost everyone I knew was on a Free Mobile plan, because it really is the best choice.

Menton is in the south of France, wedged between the Italian border and Monaco. It is right on the Mediterranean, with the mountains behind you. It’s a forty-five minute train ride from Nice and the Nice Cote-d’Azur airport. It’s very warm most of the time, but when you first arrive it’s a little cold, so pack mostly lighter clothes, but don’t forget to bring a warm jacket and sweater. The weather is very similar to Vancouver, just a little milder, and it gets very warm by mid-April. Menton has a lot of stores, so you should be able to find everything you need.

It is very easy to get to Menton from Nice, which is where you would be flying. You can take the Monaco-Menton bus straight from the airport for 15 euros. It takes about an
hour, and is a good choice for when you first arrive with your luggage. But your main form of transportation is going to be the train. You can take the train from the two different stops in Menton to both Italy and West along the coast to Monaco, Nice, and Cannes. There is a train stop about a ten minutes walk from the airport, which I always used whenever I traveled. I recommend buying a Carte Zu, which gives you a 50-75% discount off your train tickets. For example, the train from Nice Saint-Augustin (Nice airport) to Menton usually costs 6.40 euros. With the Carte Zu, it costs 3.20 euros. You can buy the card at the Menton train station. The trains do not go very late though, so at night you have to take the buses, which cost 1.50 euro, but is much slower. There is public transit in Menton, but the town is so small I never used it. Overall, it is very easy to get around Menton and the surrounding area, and because you are so close to the airport, it’s easy to travel around Europe.

Now that I’ve discussed all the practical information, I’ll talk about the school itself. The exchange students who came in the fall had an orientation with the first year students, but there was none for second term exchange. The campus is largely student-driven, meaning the administration is not involved in any of the student associations, clubs, or student activities. I would suggest you join the Sciences Po Menton Facebook group, which is where you’ll receive most of your school-related information. At Sciences Po, classes are either 5 or 10 ECTS, with one ECTS being equivalent to 0.5 SFU units. You can take a maximum of 30 credits. I took four classes, because I wanted to travel a lot while I was studying. Other exchange students took five, while the regular students take between 7 and 8 classes! All classes except languages are in a lecture format, meaning there are no tutorials. Classes are either three or four hours, for a total of 24 hours per class. This means that, with the exception of language classes, classes do not run every week. Two of my classes met six times during the semester, while another met eight times. I was not aware of this before I went, so it came as a bit of a surprise. The classes are also very light on readings, with one of my classes not having any. There are generally no class participation marks, with the grading being comprised of essays, exams, and sometimes a presentation. Because of this set-up, it makes it very easy to travel. Some weeks I would have five-day weekends, and this allowed me to do a lot of traveling that I had planned on doing after I finished the term. However, you do have to be careful, because they have a two-absence policy, meaning if you miss two sections, you automatically fail the course. But some classes technically have two sections per day, meaning if you missed the whole day, you would have already met your limit, and couldn’t miss anymore. For example, I had a four-hour lecture, which was split into a two-hour lecture, followed by an hour lunch, followed by a two-hour lecture. They take attendance at the beginning of both lectures.

The school has a lot of clubs and sports teams, which are easy to join. If you’re there for the spring semester, I recommend participating in their Model UN conference (MEDMUN). They have delegates from all over Europe and the US come, and it’s a really fun weekend. They also bring in notable speakers. For instance, a former Israeli ambassador to the UN spoke to the delegates in my committee.

I had an amazing time studying at Sciences Po Menton, and I would recommend it. However, before you pick where you want to study, it’s important that you decide what you want your exchange to be about. I picked Sciences Po because I thought it would be a really academically challenging and informative university. While I did learn a lot, the school itself was not what I was expecting. Because of this, I spent most of my time abroad traveling. I visited 12 countries and 16 cities, and this was only possible because of my
school schedule. So, if you want to travel a lot and learn about the Middle East, then Sciences Po Menton is the perfect choice. If you want a more campus-based experience with less travel, than perhaps this is not the school for you.

I wouldn’t change anything about my semester abroad, because it allowed me to meet and become close friends with people from all over the world; travel all around Europe; and live in an amazing part of the world. While choosing where you want to study is important, the quality of your experience will ultimately be decided by what you make of your situation, good times and bad. Good luck!