Exchange Report Sciences Po Bordeaux (Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Bordeaux)

My exchange experience was most definitely a unique experience with many ups and downs! I went to Sciences Po Bordeaux for one semester during the fall. If I could give one piece of advice to anyone considering going on exchange it would be to keep an open mind and embrace all the novelties of being in a new place and experiencing a new lifestyle.

I am the last person in the world who should be giving anybody tips on packing efficiently because overpacking is something I do quite well. However, I will say try your best not to do this. For the most part you will pick up trinkets and clothing items whilst you’re away- at least I certainly did- and packing to come back home will be incredibly stressful. Keep the weather in mind when you pack. When I arrived in Bordeaux, summer was very much still present and stuck around for the first couple of weeks. It was not until my last month or so that I really needed my winter jackets and even then it was not that cold. You definitely don’t need more than two warm sweaters and one actual winter coat. A light jumper for the windier days is what I would recommend. Other than that, standard packing rules apply. A good pair of walking shoes is essential. I took all toiletries with me from home, but I do know some people who opted to simply purchase these things when they arrived in France. The choice is yours.

My travel experience was not the best, but that really was just bad luck on my part. I flew from Vancouver to Paris and then from Paris to Bordeaux. Due to some unforeseen issues in the airport, I ended up missing my flight between Paris and Bordeaux, and then the next flight out ended up being delayed by two hours, so I arrived in Bordeaux seven hours later than I intended. In terms of booking flights and such like, I would say to do this relatively early as it is cheaper. Also, I would hold off on buying the ticket until your visa comes through. This seems a given, but I thought it was worth mentioning. Some people purchased one way tickets to France and then bought their return tickets a month or so before they returned home. This is a good option if you are thinking about travelling after the semester ends. I didn’t do this, but I kind of wish I did. I did, however, manage to do all that I wanted to do in terms of travelling without difficulty though.

You could fly to Paris and then take one of the fast trains to Bordeaux if you wanted. It makes the trip a bit longer, but you could save a bit of money too. I am a terrible traveller though, so I decided to just fly all the way through. From the airport I took a taxi to the school. This was very expensive and I later learned that taking the bus and tram was much cheaper and easier than I had anticipated. Try and figure it out and save yourself 50euros.

My struggles with the French administrative system began in my first hour in Bordeaux. Even though I had been in communication with the housing office for weeks before my arrival and had mailed in all my required documents, they still told me there was no room booked for me on campus. I was not the only one who experienced this and we all shared in the frustration of trying to speak with the lady at the residence and housing reception. Eventually, I was given keys to a room and had to refill in the paperwork I had already sent in two months prior. Everyone speaks only French (they understand English, but will respond to you in French) which can be really frustrating, but you learn to deal with it. My room was a match box, but it was a place to
sleep, and after being homeless my first night in Bordeaux, I welcomed it happily. The bathroom was legitimately the same size as an aeroplane bathroom. I could put one hand on the wall in the shower and the other hand on the wall next to the toilet. Needless to say the accommodation provided on campus was really not the best, but honestly, it really didn’t bother me. It added character to my experience. I lived on the top floor of the building and none of the residences in my “village” as they called it, had any elevators. I had my own room and bathroom and shared the kitchen with four other people.

Cost of living really depends on where you live. For me, because I stayed on campus it was pretty cheap- 243 euros/ month for rent. Staying in the centre (downtown) was obviously more expensive, but in general, the cost of living is cheaper. You can easily use your debit/ credit card or cash, whatever you are more comfortable with. I found myself using more cash than anything, even though here in Vancouver I always use a card. They will encourage you to open a French bank account, but you really don’t need to. At least I found that I had no trouble not opening one, but they will strongly, strongly recommend that you do open one.

The orientation arranged by the school was excellent. I met the people who I spent most of my time in France with on the first day. There were introductions, a campus tour and we were given maps of the city as well as our student cards. We were then informed of some other activities that were lined up for us including wine tasting tours and a walking tour of the city. Do these things! You will not regret it! Especially the wine tour because transportation there is taken care of for you.

In terms of social activities, the ERASMIX team is fantastic at arranging events for people to go to, as well as informing people of events that are being held. They would organize trips downtown for cultural and sporting events as well as nightlife. The entire team is really friendly and helpful and they know everything about everything that is happening in Bordeaux. They coordinate pretty much all the events for exchange students, but also let you know where the local students hang out so everyone can mingle together.

The lecture format is much different to here at SFU in some classes. Some professors have powerpoints, some don’t. Grading is also different. There are typically no midterms or tests and your entire grade is based on the final exam. It sounds daunting, but it really wasn’t that bad.

All in all, I had the most amazing time in France. Never have I ever been challenged the way I was challenged in that semester. I was thrown way out of my comfort zone into a completely different atmosphere where I knew nobody and everyone spoke a different language. I was consistently confused and frustrated by the administrative system and definitely got lost on multiple occasions. I wouldn’t change a single thing, however. I made friends who I still keep in contact with now and have the most incredible memories and stories to share. I grew and matured so much and honestly would do the whole thing over again in a heartbeat!