I spent the fall 2015 and spring 2016 terms at the Institut d’Études Politiques d’Aix-en-Provence (Sciences Po Aix) in Aix-en-Provence, France. It is a small University specializing in Political Science. This year was filled with amazing and exciting opportunities, as well as some challenges, but it was without doubt an incredible experience and I would recommend exchange to everyone.

Preparation and organization were very important when planning for my exchange. As soon as I received my official acceptance to Sciences Po I started the application process for a visa. I also gathered and photocopied important documents I would need for exchange and organized them in a folder. Documents such as passports, insurance and birth certificate are necessary and I cannot count how many times people I knew had difficulty because they were missing required documentation and had to have a family member mail it to them.

I recommend packing fairly light. Bring the essentials for each season and a few more formal pieces. I also stayed in residence and when I arrived the room was empty. Therefore, I would bring a pair of sheets, a roll of toilet paper, a plate, a knife, a fork, a cup and a small pillow. On a side note, France uses graph paper instead of lined paper. I brought some paper with me from Canada and it ended up lasting me the whole year.

When preparing to buy flights, it is important to know that the closest airport to Aix-en-Provence is the Marseille-Provence airport. There are not many airlines that fly Vancouver-Marseille directly, so I took a connecting flight through Amsterdam. After arriving at the airport, transport to the city is quick and simple with the Cartreize bus that takes passengers directly from the airport to the city centre of Aix. I highly recommend signing up for the free Cartreize bus card because it provides service between Aix and many great destinations in the south of France for only 2 euros per trip. Other than that, transportation around Aix is very easy because most places are within walking distance. I also recommend taking advantage of time off to travel as much as possible. There are many good and inexpensive airlines, train and bus companies that have destinations around France and other European countries.
As with most European countries, the currency in France is the Euro. Aix is also one of the most expensive cities in France, so the cost of living is higher than in other areas. However, since Vancouver is a fairly expensive city as well, I actually didn’t notice much of a difference in prices. I would say that Aix is more of a cash-based society, largely because that is the only form of payment accepted by many markets and small shops. However, the larger shops will of course take cash, credit and debit.

Sciences Po Aix does a great orientation week. On the first day there is a French exam to place students in their correct language level. For the rest of the week the mornings are spent in a course called “Bienvenue en France” where different professors teach students about French culture and customs. Each day in the afternoon, the International Association does various activities around the city and in the surrounding area. They also help with administration, such as getting Cartreize bus cards, setting up a bank account and paying for social security. In addition, they plan fun themed events for students to get to know each other. There is also a club’s day where international students can meet other students and sign up for clubs, as well as try-outs for sports teams.

Accommodation is relatively easy to find, especially for international students going to Sciences Po as part of an exchange. A residence room with a private bathroom and shared kitchen is about 255 euros per month, compared to a 400-500-euro room in an apartment. Residence is where most of the international students choose to live, as well as many French students. Therefore, it is a great way to get to know other students from around Aix. There are also facilities at the residence such as laundry, a restaurant, study rooms and a large room where occasional student events and sport classes are held.

Depending on which program you choose, there are a wide variety of courses available. There are courses in lecture format that are taken with both international students and French students. For these, the instructor will usually give one lecture per week, sometimes with the aid of a PowerPoint or hand out and it is then up to the students to take notes on course content. There are also international student specific courses. These contain more interactive elements with many projects and presentations. Similarly to SFU, students create their own schedule. For example, since I am in the French Cohort Program at SFU, my courses in France consisted essentially of political science and French. One important note is that the grading scale in Europe is very different from the one in North America. Instead of using letter grades to correspond with a percentage, students are marked out of 20.
Aix-en-Provence is a beautiful city in the south of France. It is relatively small and filled with culture and heritage. With a very mild, Mediterranean climate, the way of life is relaxed and laid back. On the weekend and certain weekdays many streets in the town centre fill with vendors and transform into a market. There are also many great parks and hiking trails near Aix that are must-visits, especially the Montagne Sainte-Victoire. Aix is also very close to many beach towns, such as Nice and Cassis. The airport, train station and bus station near Aix also makes travelling around France and other countries relatively inexpensive. It is also worth noting that since Aix is such a small city, most shops and restaurants are closed on Sundays and many stores and services also close for 1-2 hours on weekday afternoons.

There are lots of options to join extracurricular activities at Sciences Po, such as clubs and sports teams. The wide variety of student associations also holds events and large gala celebrations throughout the year. There are also many nice pubs and restaurants around the city to have food and drinks and the mild climate makes sitting outside on terraces enjoyable almost all year round.

There are definitely also some challenging aspects of exchange as well. Primarily at the beginning when there are a lot of administrative steps needed to be taken to secure lodging, university courses, a bank account, social security etc. that must all be dealt with at the same time and in the first few weeks. However, as I stated earlier, all the other international students are going through the same thing and everyone helps each other and works together to find out what needs to be done. Other than that, there are only minor struggles, but finding solutions can be fun, because, odds are, most of the other international students will be experiencing the same issues. At the end of exchange, the hardest part will be saying goodbye to all of your friends and your new life, but the best part is knowing you have new friends from all over the world and the opportunity to make plans to visit them and have new adventures.