I have just recently returned from an amazing two semesters at the Université François Rabelais in Tours, France. I went during Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 and as a member of the French Cohort Program I am doing a major in French with an extended minor in Political Science. At UFR however I took mainly French courses as they do not offer many politics ones and I was therefore in the Lettres et langues faculty while I was there.

In Tours, the university is spread out between many campuses, depending on faculty. For students studying Lettres et langues, the majority of the courses take place at either Tanneurs campus or Fromont. Both of these campuses are quite close to downtown Tours and are quite central. Most exchange students lived in university residences, and these are also spread across the city so that students can live close to their respective campus. Location is therefore an important factor to consider when picking a residence as some are quite far away from the Lettres campus. I lived in the Croix Montoire residence, which is fairly close to Tanneurs campus (about a 15-20 minute walk) so as far as location it was a decent residence. I would however recommend the Tanneurs residence, as it is a brand new building that is right across the street from Tanneurs campus. You get to choose your residence a few months before you leave and they make you pick your top picks so I would recommend putting Tanneurs as your number one choice.

Another thing I would recommend looking into before you leave is your type of birth certificate. In France they have a service called the CAF, which is a government program that subsidizes some of your living costs (and they even offer it to people there on a student visa). However one of the documents you need to provide to them is a copy of your birth certificate and they only accept birth certificates that include your parents’ names on it. As normal Canadian birth certificates don’t include this, you would have to apply for a long birth certificate before you leave Canada. The CAF is worth it though if you can manage to get it so this is worth doing.
When I left for France I brought one suitcase, knowing I would buy a lot of things when I got there. Clothing wise I had to pack for the whole year as I was in Europe from August to June and essentially saw every season. But I also bought a lot of clothes in Europe so it would have been hard to under pack. As far as household things I didn't bother to bring any bedding or anything as I figured it wasn’t worth paying for the extra weight. There were also things we could take that were left behind by last year’s exchange students in the international office so I was able to find some household stuff there.

To get to Tours, I flew direct from YVR to Paris CDG and then took a train from Paris to Tours. It is possible to get trains that go right from CDG but none of them worked based on the time I arrived so I had to get a TGV (high-speed train) from Gare Montparnasse. To get to Montparnasse from CDG I could have taken the RER/metro but I opted to take a bus offered through Cars AirFrance. This was 15€ while the metro would have been 10€ but it was much easier than trying to navigate the metro with all my luggage (there are very rarely elevators or escalators). I bought my train ticket when I arrived at Montparnasse but I would recommend buying a ticket online ahead of time, as it was kind of confusing to figure out at the time. The train that I took went directly to the Gare de Tours, but many of them go to Saint Pierre des Corps which is about 15 km away from Tours where you will switch to another train that will take you to Tours. Once you arrive in Tours you can take either the tram or buses to get you to your residence and there are also always taxis in front of the train station.

For finances, France tends to use credit cards quite frequently, although there are still some places that do not accept them. I was able to use my Canadian visa card in most places where credit cards were accepted and only had a problem with it a few times. For the residences it is also necessary that you open a French bank account even if you don’t use it and I personally went with the bank Société générale, as they had no fees for students for the first year. One place where cash was always necessary was eating out in restaurants as they often did not accept credit cards and
also would not split bills so going out with friends would often result in exchanges of cash to reach the total amount. The cost of living in Tours was more than Vancouver in some areas and less in others so it tended to balance out. Rent was definitely cheaper than Vancouver as were many food items and alcohol but clothing and toiletries tended to be more expensive. The cost of living was also dependent on the current exchange rates and I therefore lost quite a bit of money to the poor Canadian dollar.

I arrived in Paris on a Friday morning, as this was the cheapest flight I could get, but I would recommend arriving on an earlier weekday if possible if you want to get into residence right away. The residence administration is only open on weekdays and although I arrived early enough in the day I didn't anticipate the difficulties I would encounter upon arriving at the residence. My residence (Croix Montoire) didn’t open until the third week of September so they had placed me in Grandmont residence until then. Because of this, I didn't have to hand in the paperwork for the residence until Croix Montoire opened. However when I arrived at Grandmont (after a lot of trouble finding the residence while dragging along all my stuff) they told me that I needed to have insurance for my room and that they wouldn’t give me my keys until then. They then directed me to an insurance place and I went off to try and sort that out. I then got lost several more times and although I managed to get the insurance, I was not able to make it back to the residence before it closed for the weekend. This forced me to stay in a hotel for the weekend, which was money I would rather have saved. I found out afterwards that it is possible to get the insurance online ahead of time so I would recommend that others do that.

I got into the residence on the Monday and went to do my orientation later in the same day. The orientation process was fairly easy, but you just have to make sure to bring all your documents with you, including proof that you are covered by your health insurance while on exchange. I also had a fairly smooth time getting into Croix Montoire at the end of September although the paperwork was fairly complicated, as all paperwork in France tends to be. Croix Montoire has extremely
small rooms with minimal storage space and is also an older residence, which makes it not as nice as some of the others. However because of the location it was decent enough that I didn’t bother moving into Tanneurs between semesters.

Academically, France is quite different to Canada. Classes are often lecture style, except for certain language classes which are more like our tutorials at SFU. Classes tend to have minimal coursework with one or two exams that make up your entire mark. Attendance tends to be mandatory for most classes and they are usually not very forgiving if you miss things. The profs are however normally pretty helpful for international students and will sometimes give you alternate assignments or will take into consideration the fact that you are not a native speaker when they grade you. The grading scale is also quite different to at home, with all marks being a number out of 20 and a 10 being a pass. However they tend to mark on a bell curve that usually results in almost half the class failing. They will usually mark exchange students differently though as the French students don’t need to pass every course but we do to get credits for it. It is very difficult to get a mark above a 15 so anything in that range is considered good.

The Val de Loire area is very rich culturally as there are many castles and fortresses close by and I definitely recommend taking advantage of this. The University has an organization called ESN, which puts on trips and activities for exchange students including many castle visits. They are a good option for seeing these castles, as the price is often cheaper than it would be if you went on your own. The area surrounding Tours is also known for its sparkling wine and Vouvray which is 10 km outside Tours offers a very good wine tour for 2€. Another place that is worth checking out if you are there in the summer time is la Guinguette which is an outdoor bar and restaurant right on the banks of the Loire river. It is open from May to late September and often has theme nights, which makes it a great place to interact with the locals.
All in all I had an amazing experience on exchange. I faced many difficulties and hardships but was able to get through them, which helped me grow as a person. I have made many amazing friendships with people from around the world and was able to visit 13 countries in my time in Europe. My advice to other students is to be aware that sometimes things will go wrong but to ride it out because it will all be worth it in the end.

The Hotel de Ville in the center of town
Place Plumereau in the only snowfall we received all year
The Loire river with the Pont Wilson in the background
Ria (one of my best friends from exchange) and I when we travelled to Passau, Germany.