I attended Institut d’Etudes Politiques d’Aix-en-Provence in Aix-en-Provence, France for studies in political science during the fall and spring semesters of 2016-17.

In regards to my preparation for exchange, I found it valuable to have copies of all my important documents and many passport-style photos as they were required later on for obtaining social insurance and a student card at my school. As for packing, the weather in Sept is mostly around 30 degrees, so pack lots of summer clothes (I didn’t). The mistral winds are brutal in the winter so scarves and a good down jacket are essential. Lots of hiking in the area and exploring to do, so good shoes too. Make sure you bring a good carry-on suitcase, as while you’re there you’ll want to make weekend trips with Ryanair/Easyjet, with whom you can only bring a carry-on (but worth it because cheap tickets). Aix has an H&M so buying basics all year is no problem. Just make sure everything you pack is something you’ll really wear, and bring any north American food you’re really attached to – you’ll need it once in awhile.

The cost of living is high in Aix, especially food-wise, and I recommend getting a credit card with no international transaction fee and mostly using that, as debit costs like 5$ usually to use (if Canadian bank). It’s good to withdraw money once or twice a month though, as you can only use credit for purchases above 5-10 euros, and can’t use credit at markets, small shops and some bars. When you arrive in Aix, try to get the Carte jeune from the Gare routiere, as for under-26ers, it greatly reduces the fee you’ll pay to ride the buses to the airport/train station/surrounding towns in the Bouches-du-Rhone.

During exchange, you might find the students at Sciences Po somewhere between friendly and cold. It’s a small and elite institution, so somewhat clique-like, but also full of many lovely people. If you’re willing to speak French and join clubs, there’s definitely friends for you there. The lecturers at SPX move quickly and don’t usually use powerpoints, and expect you to write down everything. It’s easy to ask a French student for notes if you feel yours aren’t sufficient, as they’ll usually share no problem. Attend lectures as best you can, as exams make up 100% of your grade in 90% of the classes, and it’s hard to learn 7 courses right before finals. The lectures are 2 hours, and avoid evening ones if you can, they’re way harder to focus in. The classes designed specifically for international students are great and interesting, but don’t only take those if you can – take mostly French lectures if you want the real SPX experience, mixed in with the French students, learning what they learn. The exams are challenging, especially the orals, but if you study well and practice talking to yourself, you should be ok. Most profs are understanding and also appreciate the added challenge for us with speaking French. For the written exams, its expected that you follow a certain format – most profs will mention it before the final, definitely follow it, it can make a big difference in your grade, content isn’t everything. The finals are graded out of 20, and in France, even an 18 is amazing, so don’t be disappointed with a 14, be happy!!
If you’re living in residence, both Cite Universitaire de Gazelles and de Cuques are good. Cuques is farther away from town (about 10 more minutes walking) but considerably newer and cleaner. Gazelles is kind of dirty but does the job, especially if you’re going to travel a lot, the money saved on rent versus an apartment is worth it. The kitchens can be quite nasty as many students don’t clean up after themselves, so I recommend getting a rice-cooker and a kettle, as they’re cheap enough online (Amazon, ship to a pickup point at a local tabac) and make it soo easy to whip up meals in your room. Make sure to lock your doors always, and be prepared for random power outages. Also be prepared for many bureaucratic hoops to jump through, as that’s just guaranteed. When you feel like screaming, rant to a fellow student, take a walk or call home, then try again. Every problem is solvable, even if you have to visit an office 4 times before you can solve it.

The nightlife in Aix is fun, there’s lots of great bars and happy hours, but the town is small so definitely go explore Marseille for day activities as well. It’s close by bus and super different. The local bus routes (Cartreize) go all around Bouches-du-Rhone and are well worth the trip; check out Arles, Avignon, Martigues and Toulon. French culture is beautiful and timeless, but it can be frustrating for us too. Don’t expect the same level of customer service you’re used to at home, and some people will be rude when they overhear English, but overall, French people are fairly welcoming especially to students that speak French and use their French as much as possible. There’s also a lot of catcalling, so if you experience it, don’t be afraid to just ignore them.

After exchange, I feel a little lost to try and sum it up in just a few paragraphs. It can be a wonderful, confusing, frustrating, amazing experience. It has its challenges but overall it’s a year that’s meant to be for your enrichment, both in education and in worldview and cultural perspective. Never have I learned so much about the world, its people, and myself than I did in my 9 months in France. The ability to travel freely around the continent was one that I took full advantage of and highly recommend to every student on exchange in Europe. Buy postcards everywhere you go (some to send home, some to keep for yourself, and write on the back of yours the dates of your trip and some memories you made) and always, always take advantage of a good patio with a beautiful view. Slow down when you can and take notice of the incredible opportunity you have. Be culturally sensitive and open to meeting those from every corner of the globe. Most of all, profitez bien!!
The entrance to Sciences Po’s main building.

The beautiful Place des Cardeurs in the downtown
The Calanques de Cassis, an amazing natural park area with hikes and swimming, there’s tons of them, google them and find routes in Cassis and Marseille! Amazing day trips and a must-see.

Me with some other exchange students
Plage des Catalans in Marseille, easy to reach on foot once you get to Marseille, a great place to swim and hang out all day