Preparation for exchange

The picture on the left is the view that convinced me to go to Strasbourg! The preparation for exchange can be overwhelming – no matter how organized you are. A lot of the preparation depends on the correspondence with your host university and the university housing (if you decide to live in the university residences). French administration is pretty old fashioned and you’ll find yourself sending letters instead of e-mailing or filling in online forms – which slows down the process. Read everything very carefully to ensure that you’re giving them everything they need…it can be quite unclear sometimes.

Researching courses beforehand gave me a better idea of what sort of courses I would be taking at Sciences Po. I cross-referenced the courses offered with the courses already accepted by SFU – which I would highly recommend doing as it facilitates the whole exchange credit process once you’re home. That being said, I changed a lot of my courses after the first two weeks of school once I discovered that the courses were not as appealing as their title led them to be. You’ll sign up for exams – not courses – at the end of the first two weeks of school, so you have lots of time to make up your mind about which courses to take.

As far as packing goes, it can be a little overwhelming. After all, how does a person even pack for an entire year? My advice would be to take the clothes that you wear the most and that you feel best in. Keep in mind; they do dress a little fancier in France. If you have those vacuum sealable bags, I would highly recommend bringing some bed sheets and a pillow so that when you arrive you’ll have sheets for your first night (I was very grateful my mom convinced me to do that). Everything you buy at home can be bought in France – so pack strategically! Only bring the things that you simply cannot live without.

Getting to Strasbourg from Vancouver, I flew into Paris and took the TGV to Strasbourg directly from there (it only takes two hours). As for travelling within France during my year, I purchased a “Carte Jeune” from SNCF so I would be able to get discounts on train travel within the country. However, keep in mind that train travel is extremely expensive, even with the discount card. Train travel can be relatively inexpensive within Alsace though – if you plan
ahead. For travel in other countries, you have to do lots of research ahead of time to find which sort of transportation will be the best. I travelled almost every other weekend during my year – so it’s definitely affordable if you plan ahead (or at the very last minute).

I created a bank account upon my arrival in France and had some of my money wire transferred over, so I would only have to pay a one-time exchange rate fee and my withdrawals would be free. I mostly used my credit card to pay for things – it was the easiest option and I felt more comfortable when I wasn’t carrying too much cash on me. The cost of living is quite comparable to Vancouver, but the rent in Strasbourg is much cheaper (especially if you’re living in university residences).

**During Exchange**

There was a great two-week orientation program at Sciences Po, accompanied by a two-week French course. We met all the other exchange students and make friends right away. There were two 4th year students at Sciences Po responsible for running all the group activities and they did a great job of including everything. Going to orientation is crucial if you want to make friends right away!

Accommodation and living in university residences was nothing special, but I had everything I needed. The picture to the right is the view from my room. I loved being surrounded by friends all the time, which is definitely an advantage to staying in university housing. You spend so little time in your room that in my opinion it would be hard to justify spending the extra money for an apartment.

The academic process in France was definitely a huge adjustment at first. There are two-hour lectures where the professor will speak non-stop, and all the students around you will be typing notes furiously on their laptop. In order to keep up, I too had to begin writing my notes on my laptop. If you can, try and become friends with the French students around you so they can help you with notes! One amazing thing about Sciences Po Strasbourg is that you have a week-long mock parliament at the European Parliament (pictured on the left). That
week was so much fun and I learned so much about the European Union. The grading is very strict in France. They had a grading scale of 20, and a 12/20 is considered a good mark (though, I believe they tend to be kinder on exchange students). There is not much work to be done during the semester, but you’ll have final exams at the end of the semester worth 100% of your grade…so you have to study hard!

The weather in Strasbourg was really nice. There isn’t too much rain and it doesn’t get ridiculously cold in the wintertime (although I would highly recommend bringing a parka to wear when strolling through the Christmas market on those cold December nights). The picture on the right is of my friends and I strolling through the Christmas market, it’s so beautiful! The French are cold at first, but once you get to know them they warm up to you. Some of my fondest memories are the “soirées” spent drinking wine and eating cheese at my French friends’ apartments. Strasbourg itself is pretty small, although it is very beautiful and there are lots of things to do. It’s a short 2-hour train ride from Paris and sits right on the German border, so it’s really easy to travel around western Germany as well. I would highly recommend visiting the small towns spread across Alsace such as Colmar, Ribeauvillé and Enguisheim. The French charm you’ll find in these little towns is amazing.

There are lots of different clubs offered at Sciences Po and they’re a great way to make friends who have the same interests as you. I joined the Diplomacy Club, which organized the Model United Nations (MUN) and held different events throughout the year. You’ll probably find yourself spending most of your time with other exchange students. This is great, but be mindful that you can’t improve your French by only hanging out with English speakers! There are great, cozy bars all throughout the city centre that are less a 20-minute walk from the University. The city has a very charming, relaxed vibe and if you prefer a casual drink with friends rather than a crazy nightclub, you’ll find yourself at home here.

Reflection After Exchange
As cliché as it sounds, my year abroad changed my outlook on life. It felt as though I had learned more about myself in this one year than I had in the 20 years that came before. I was an independent person before I left, but I gained a new sense of independence that can only be gained from living on your own, travelling on your own (the picture on the right is me on my first solo trip to the Scottish Highlands) and dealing with French bureaucracy (the last one was a joke...sort of). I also gained a sense of confidence that I had never felt before. I was able to stand up for myself and figure out even the most challenging situations. I’ll admit there were times when I really missed home and my friends, but those moments were short lived, as I knew I was having the best experience of my life and I had my new friends surrounding me at all times.

Everyone tells you to appreciate every moment of your exchange because it goes by so fast. They’re not wrong. One second it’s September and everything is new and exciting, and the next thing you know you’re saying your teary-eyed goodbyes to your friends at the end of the school year. However, if you’re lucky like me, you’ll get to visit them while travelling in the summer!

It’s difficult to give advice to those about to leave on exchange, as everyone’s experience is so different. I put a lot of time into planning my travels (I went to 22 countries this year!), whereas many of my friends preferred staying in Strasbourg. I would recommend making friends who live in cities you want to visit (again, kidding (sort of)) and planning ahead. Don’t forget to take care of yourself too. Life on exchange can be fast-paced, so don’t forget to take time for yourself and make sure you’re doing all the things you want to be doing. I would recommend making a bucket list of all the things you want to do and all the places you want to see. You’ll be shocked by how many things you’ll knock off that list.

I hope your exchange year is everything you dreamed it would be!