I attended Sciences Po Bordeaux in the South of France from September 2017 to May 2018. At home, I am in the French Cohort Program where I study Political Science with a concentration on Public and International Affairs in both English and French. Preparing for my exchange year required a significant amount of planning, organization, and additional expenses that I had not anticipated.

The amount of time that the entire application process demanded, along with the constant set of hoops and additional unexpected requests the French Bureaucracy system demanded, was oftentimes frustrating and stressful. However, much to my surprise and relief, the packing process was the easiest part of the preparation as Bordeaux is located on the west coast of the South of France so the weather is fairly moderate. I would recommend packing multiple layers of clothes rather than one heavy winter coat as the temperature rarely dropped below 5°C. In the Fall and Spring, the humid heat can oftentimes become extremely uncomfortable as the temperature can easily rise above 30°C. Bringing cool and light clothing is essential in those hot months as air conditioning is not as common as you might think.

I arrived in Bordeaux by TGV train after landing in Paris from Reykjavik. Bordeaux has three tram lines that interconnect throughout the city. Transportation within the centre of Bordeaux can easily be done by foot or by bike. However, contrary to what the name of the school suggests, Sciences Po Bordeaux is actually located 40 minutes outside of the city in the university domain of Pessac.
During Sciences Po’s orientation week, international students attended multiple courses on France’s culture, administration system, and society after taking a French language placement evaluation. Additionally, the International Student Services team, Erasmix, organized a fieldtrip to Saint-Émilion for a wine tasting tour. During this week, international students completed various administrative duties such as obtaining French social security and student identification papers.

Throughout my time at Sciences Po Bordeaux, I lived on campus in Crous’ student accommodations. My residence was located in Village 3, near Tram B’s university stop. The room itself was much smaller than I had anticipated. At 9m², my home for the year had a single sized bed, a desk, a closet, a mini fridge, one small hot plate, a few cupboards, and a bathroom complete with a shower, sink and toilet. In actuality the sink failed to fit the majority of standard sized dishes which meant that in order to wash the dishes I would have to bring them into the shower with me. When studies permitted, I would spend as much time as possible outside of my building since I would often feel trapped within the four white walls of my room. The thinness of my walls left little doubt as to what my neighbours were engaging in.

For future students of Sciences Po Bordeaux, I would strongly recommend finding accommodation off campus in an area closer to the downtown core. While the rent would be more expensive, the benefits would far outweigh the financial disadvantage. Moreover, after multiple long days of classes, I would have to make the time to take a tram downtown to pick up basic groceries, making multiple trips sometimes, due to the limited fridge space. Furthermore, the option of having an oven and microwave in a rented flat downtown allows the opportunity to eat

Beach town of Biarritz, just outside of Bordeaux
what you enjoy. On campus, food options are extremely limited to what the cafeteria serves, when actually open, or what you are able to make on a single hotplate.

Academically speaking, exchange provoked an unrivaled feeling of inadequacy. Having done exchange during my third year, I had already satisfied the lower-division requirements for my degree. The timing of my exchange meant that in order to obtain valuable credits towards my degree, I had to take upper-division Master’s courses in which I had no background knowledge. It is important to note that graduates of Sciences Po Bordeaux go through a 5 year program comprised of two cycles of certification: the first cycle incorporates the first three years where students gain general understandings of social sciences and methodology, the second cycle corresponds to the remaining fourth and fifth year where students specialize in their choice of Masters and undergo professional training in the domain of their desired career. In my experience, the courses provided in the first cycle are roughly the equivalent of 200 level Simon Fraser University courses.

This course credit translation means that at Sciences Po Bordeaux I had to take Masters courses that I was not academically qualified to take so that I could accumulate relevant credits beneficial to my provisioned graduation date. This critical information would have been helpful to know prior to choosing my exchange institution. In addition, as Sciences Po Bordeaux is a relatively new partner institution, there was an extremely limited list of courses I could enrol in that were actually pre-approved by Simon Fraser University. The lack of previous student experience with Sciences Po Bordeaux, meant that I had to make educated guesses on the courses that could possibly transfer back in a helpful fashion. This could result in adverse financial difficulties for some students should they need to make up credits. Simon Fraser University evaluates European credits to be half the value of Canadian courses. This difference in credit necessitates students to take double the amount of courses at their host university. It is mistakenly
believed that because of the reduced hours of the courses in France, the amount of work required for the course is also reduced. While this is most likely the case for courses offered in the first cycle at Sciences Po Bordeaux or possibly at other partner institutions, I believe the courses I was left with to take in Sciences Po Bordeaux’s second cycle did not reflect that diminished amount of work.

The evaluation setup at Sciences Po Bordeaux relies solely on the final exam. The specificities of the exam method vary depending upon the professor. Some may choose to do an essay while others may choose to do short answers or multiple choice. Contrary to Simon Fraser University, a few professors may decide to conduct an oral exam of either 10 or 20 minutes. I would advise future students to expect minimum free time, as you could be expected to know even the most irrelevant information from your course material. I also found French professors to focus on bizarrely specific details rather than general concepts. This contrast could perhaps be an educational culture difference, or possibly a way to prove to international students that Sciences Po Bordeaux shall remain a highly selective and prestigious higher education establishment.

The constant sense of ineptitude I felt in these class fostered a new sense of reality that I was previously unable to accept with my flawed perfectionism. This reality was the feeling of knowing you did the best you could, yet your efforts proved to be insufficient regarding the achievement of your goal. Having never failed an exam, let alone a course, Sciences Po Bordeaux provided an unusual landscape to reach a heightened level of personal growth.
However, the city of Bordeaux is architecturally beautiful. Oftentimes the sun will set in such a way that the rays reflect off the river and illuminate the cityscape in a golden hue fit for a story tale. The vineyards that surround the region are home to world class wine and incredible castles. The main street in Bordeaux, Rue Sainte-Catherine, is the quintessential European experience. In fact, if you wander off into the side streets, you will likely stumble upon some cute shops, lively bars and historic monuments tucked away in Bordeaux’s shadows.

The places I was fortunate enough to explore, the bonds I made with the other girls of the French Cohort, and the maturity I gained from the emotionally-charged academic environment revealed aspects of myself that might have remained hidden without this experience. While I am the last person to say that study abroad will be the best time of your life, in no way do I deny that it is an unforgettable experience. Although this journey was certainly not the one I thought I would have, I do not regret the year I spent in Bordeaux.