Exchange Report- IEP Strasbourg, Fall 2018

Major: Political Science

I am a student in the French Cohort Program here at SFU, and one of our program requirements is to go abroad in our third year for either a year or a semester. I chose to go for a semester, and I can honestly say that it is one of the greatest experiences. I went to Strasbourg, France, which is in Alsace right near the border between France and Germany, and studied at the Institut d’études politiques. Strasbourg is also home to several European institutions, including the Council of Europe and the European Parliament.

Preparation for Exchange

The preparation for exchange was probably the most stressful part of this experience, as there are several details that you need to coordinate with SFU, the school you are attending while away, residences, and the French government. SFU will send your name and information to the school in Strasbourg, but after that it is mostly up to you to act as the go between. In order to stay in university residence, you have to apply through the university, but all of the residences are managed by CROUS, so after you are given a placement, you have to deal with CROUS directly. If you are looking to stay in student housing, make sure you respond to the email as soon as you receive it as places are limited and they fill up quite quickly. The residences themselves are located all over the city and the rent varies between them, so make sure you do research on them before the application comes out as they will ask you for your first, second, third, etc. choice.

The exam period at the university also falls in January, but if you are only going for one semester and want to return to SFU before the Spring semester starts, you will have to organize to take exams early. The process to go about doing this is actually quite simple if you know who to contact. The point of contact with the IEP is Michelle Benoit, who is their International Advisor, and if you send her an email asking to take your exams early, she will send you a form that you will need to get Study Abroad at SFU to fill in for you.
One of the worst parts about preparing for exchange is getting a visa to study in France, so I would recommend starting the process earlier rather than later to ensure that you have it in time. The visa you will need is the 3B student visa, which you will only have to pay the administrative costs on. When you are booking your appointment at the office, I recommend getting a morning appointment and leaving yourself the day as there is a chance you will have to leave and come back with different documents.

When travelling to Strasbourg, I flew from Vancouver to Amsterdam and then Amsterdam to Strasbourg. The airport in Strasbourg is pretty small, so there are not a lot of flights that go there. I chose to do this because I didn’t want to have to worry about taking a train, but there were people who chose to fly to Paris and then take a train. I flew out on September 3rd and came home on December 24th, and it ended up costing about $1400 in total.

In terms of what to pack, remember that you will likely buy a lot and try to pack on the lighter side. I packed too many clothes and ended up not wearing some of them. In terms of the weather, it rarely rains in Strasbourg and it doesn’t get cold until well into December, so there is no need to pack a parka. If you are staying in residence, just be aware that only the bare bones are provided with your room. I stayed in the Résidence de la Robertsau, and they did not provide anything aside from furniture, but they do offer bedding that you can rent. However, they do not provide pots, pans, cooking utensils, plates, or cutlery. They also don’t have hand soap or dish soap, and you have to buy your own toilet paper. I ended up buying my cookware at Ikea after I got there, but if I did it again I would throw some toilet paper and soap in my bag so I have them right when I get there.

I also found it really helpful to get in contact with someone who had been through it all before who I could ask questions. This really helped to keep me from worrying too much about all the small details, and it gave me someone who had more information that I could question.

**During Exchange**

When I first arrived, I chose to do the optional French course, as it gave me a chance to meet some of the other international students studying in France. They also organized to have two students from the IEP there to organize activities for us and to answer questions all semester, so there were also evening activities for the exchange students during the first two weeks of September before the semester started. These activities were also a chance to learn how to get around the city and get to know Strasbourg.
The lecture format was basically just two hours of the professor talking while you take notes, sometimes with PowerPoints. Unlike SFU, the courses only happen for two hours a week, so you are able to take more than four each semester. There weren’t really any assignments to hand in through the semester, so your whole mark is based off an exam at the end.

One of the best things about Strasbourg is that it isn’t a huge city, so you can pretty much walk everywhere, especially in the centre of the city where they have a beautiful cathedral. They do also have a really good public transit system, although a lot of the bus routes don’t run at night.

It is also really easy to travel to other places in France and Europe for relatively little money, especially if you’re willing to sit on a bus for several hours. Flying places is possible, although not really from the Strasbourg airport. There is an airport right over the border in Germany (Baden-Baden) although it does require two trains to get there. I was able to visit Paris, Germany, Italy, the UK, Switzerland, and Ireland. While travelling is great, make sure you don’t miss out on seeing Strasbourg and Alsace, as they are beautiful and have really rich histories that are worth exploring. Definitely check out the Strasbourg Cathedral, it doesn’t cost anything to go in and it only costs a couple euros to climb to the top and get an amazing view. Strasbourg is also home to Europe’s oldest Christmas market during December.

**Reflection After Exchange**

Despite some of the difficulties I faced, this exchange was 100% worth all of the challenges I faced. I had an amazing time and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I was able to see the world, make friends from many different countries, and find a city that will always feel like a second home to me. Having never lived alone before, this was quite an adjustment for me but it has really taught me how to be more independent and what I am capable of. It is an amazing way to challenge yourself, as you will be put completely outside of your comfort zone and will have to learn to solve problems on your own.