Partner university: Université de Tours
Country: France
Program: Formation Duale (PFP)
Exchange dates: Sept – Dec 2018

Pre-departure:

The preparation before leaving is an essential part of the study abroad process, especially when going to France. About a month before my visa appointment, I started gathering the necessary paperwork as some time to research and buy extended health insurance is needed, for example. The visa application process can be quite frustrating – if you need a visa, make sure to follow all instructions provided fully and during your appointment, be prepared for the whole thing to take two hours. If you need a visa, I’d recommend making the visa appointment as soon as possible just in case you go to the appointment and don’t have all the required documents. By scheduling the appointment early, you may still have enough time to schedule another appointment (possibly several weeks later) and receive your visa in time.

In Tours, cards are accepted at most places, but not all. It’s a good idea to check if your credit/debit card will charge fees for paying in a foreign currency. If you’d like, you can set up a French bank account to avoid these Canadian card fees. All of the French banks offer a “compte jeune” that costs around 3 euros/month and I found it much more convenient to pay by card instead of cash. To set up a French bank account, you’ll need to provide proof of residence in France and a copy of your passport. (Remember to set up an appointment a week and a half before you leave, though, to close the account!) The cost of living in Tours is, after accounting for the exchange rate, a little bit more expensive than in Vancouver (except housing and phone plans).

I highly recommend saving a digital copy of important documents (passport, visa, proof of residence, proof of extended travel and medical insurance, proof of enrollment) and bringing at least one photocopy of these documents with you. This will make your life a lot easier once you get to France and have to do more paperwork.

During:

The university’s international office sends out by email a very helpful guide for exchange students. There’s lots of information on how to get to Tours, accommodation options, where to buy things, student life, etc. A big plus is that they also have a “braderie,” so when you go to their office to register for courses, you can also pick up, for free, all sorts of household things you’ll need during your stay (i.e. bedding, cooking ware, plates, etc.).

I stayed at the residence Tanneurs and I chose a simple room, which comes with its own toilet, shower, and sink. The communal kitchen has hot plates and a sink but no oven. The fridge in the bedroom is very small, and there isn’t a freezer, so meal plan accordingly. There are also options to choose a room with 2 hot plates. Some floors can be quite social while others are quieter. I found the communal kitchen to be a good place to meet other students and make some friends. There’s a local market at Place des Halles (2 minutes away on foot) every Wednesday and Saturday morning. It’s a great place to get local produce and some items here are cheaper than at the grocery store.
For our specific program, almost all of our classes were chosen for us. Including us, the Canadian students, we had about 25 students total and took most classes together. There’s lots of group presentations, some group papers and some individual papers. I highly recommend doing the presentations early on in the semester as this will reduce your load at the end of the semester when all the papers are due. Some classes are quite “magistraux,” meaning the professor lectures with little student participation but other classes require a lot of student participation. In general, the profs are happy to provide support to students and set up appointments with them outside class hours to answer questions, provide feedback, etc.

The international office and Erasmus Student Network organize many activities, such as excursions to the region’s castles, food and wine tastings, cooking workshops, and lots of social events. These events are an easy way to meet other exchange students from around the world and explore the region together.

You can buy the university’s recreation pass (Pack’sport) for very cheap and this lets you sign up for different things (i.e. dance classes, sports, etc.). It’s a great opportunity to meet local French students and stay active. I did a weekend hiking trip to Mont-St-Michel and Brittany and it was one of the highlights of my exchange. We got to visit Mont-St-Michel at night and during the day by crossing the bay on foot (you’ll learn about quicksand and experience getting out of it safely!). We then did a beautiful hike along the coast and the colours were phenomenal.

You can also do a long-term rental (5 months) of a bike through the public transportation’s Velociti program. Getting around Tours by bike is very easy and also gives you access to the bike routes in the region.

There’s lots of different things to do in the city, for example, going to watch a professional volleyball game, enjoying live music (highly recommend Le Strapontin, they do jazz on Monday nights), visiting museums and going to see an opera or listening to a symphony. The university’s cultural office has a “Passeport Culturel” that gives you discounts or free admission to various cultural opportunities and special events.

There is a one-week reading break near the end of October. This can be a great opportunity to travel. In general, the earlier you book transportation and accommodation, the cheaper it is. Although the academic load is significant, you can still find time to travel on some weekends as well, especially in the first two months.

Reflection:

Having already spent a significant amount of time in France before, the biggest advantage for me this time around was experiencing the French academic system. This helped me better understand French culture and also allowed me to continue improving my written and oral French. My biggest piece of advice would be to focus on what’s most important to you (meeting French people, meeting other exchange/international students, traveling, getting involved with local organizations, benefitting from the academic experience, etc.). You won’t be able to do everything, so concentrate your time, energy, and resources on what you prioritize.
Photos:

Cycling route around Tours

Mont-St-Michel by night

Lisbon

Château de Chambord
Hiking in Brittany