From September to December of the Fall 2018 term, I participated in a study exchange at the University of Tours in France. My exchange program was the Formation duale, which allows Professional Development Program (PDP) students in the French teaching module to spend their first semester in France studying Masters-level sociolinguistics and language teaching. As a SFU French department alumni and a current PDP candidate in the Faculty of Education, I found this past term the most rewarding one of my entire SFU career. Not only did it give me an enriching language and cultural experience, but it also opened my eyes to a different education system that will help inform my future practicum teaching strategies. My report focuses mainly on the logistical/practical aspects of my amazing adventure in Tours, because these are the things I wish I’d known before coming.

Preparation for my study exchange term began long before I arrived. Because I was in a set program (Formation duale) with five other SFU students, we didn’t have to research courses as these were already pre-set for us. The two main hurdles were getting my French student visa (study permit) and applying for a room at the university residence.

If you need to apply for a French student visa, make sure you bring all the required documents to your appointment and check the embassy website regularly. I prepared my supporting documents months in advance, only to find upon arrival that they had recently added the requirement of a medical insurance covering repatriation and emergency hospitalization. My application was rejected the first time and I had to buy extra insurance that clearly stated the two coverages above. Then I had to make another appointment, which was complicated as their time slots didn’t open up very often.

Another important step in preparation is applying for a residence room. All of my classes were at the Tanneurs campus, which is where most SFU students take their classes in Tours, so I recommend selecting the Tanneurs residence as your first choice—it’s a five-minute walk from campus. You will have to buy housing insurance for your residence room. I recommend La MAE because it gives you your proof of coverage upon purchase and doesn’t require you to have a French telephone number. Check your email regularly and avoid putting things off during the room application process, as this will give you a better chance of securing the location you want.

The French put a gigantic emphasis on paperwork. Double-check that you’re providing all the documents that they ask for, exactly the way they want them. If not, you risk getting into lengthy email conversations where they will ask you to send various documents one by one. At one point, I considered not going to France altogether because of the hassle—but the exchange experience is MORE THAN WORTH the initial stress! If you are bogged down with visa or residence paperwork and are thinking about giving up, hang in there…it will be worth it!!

Pack summer clothes for the warm months of September and October and rain gear and winter clothes for November and December. It also helps to bring sheets, towels, a pillow and a roll of toilet paper for your first night. I wouldn’t worry about bringing too many cutlery and household items, as there are a couple of stores nearby (Mistigriff and Carrefour City) that carry these.
It would be wise to bring at least 500 euros in cash to France (it’ll help pay for your first month’s rent, which should be somewhere between 250-350 euros), as well as a credit card. Most grocery stores accept credit cards; however, local farmers’ markets and shops often don’t have the card machine.

To get to Tours, I took an Air France plane to the Charles-de-Gaulle Airport in Paris, then a train to St-Pierre-des-Corps (a small city next to Tours), then a shuttle train to Tours. I didn’t find the transfers too much of a problem, because the French train system is very up to par: there are signs everywhere directing you and lots of personnel available to give you directions (don’t hesitate to ask!) The Tours train station is a 30-minute walk away from the Tanneurs campus and residence, but you can also take the bus.

The first few days in Tours were very hectic with all the procedures of settling in a new country. Again, it’s okay to get discouraged at this point—just remember that the craziness won’t last forever!

The most important thing is to schedule an orientation meeting with the Direction des relations internationales (or the International Student Services) at Tours. At the orientation meeting, you’ll meet other international students, sign up for your student card and learn about the Erasmus Student Network, a student association that organizes lots of cultural activities for international students throughout the semester. You’ll meet friendly staff who are there to help you transition into life in Tours. You can also pick up lots of household items that previous students have left behind. I got hangers, a drying rack, most of my utensils, a duvet, pots and pans, and a travel kettle at the orientation.

The next *highly recommended* step is to open a French bank account. Having a French bank account makes life a lot easier, as it keeps you from getting charged extra for paying from a Canadian card. It’s also mandatory if you are receiving a monthly scholarship from the university, or if you want to rent certain items for the duration of your stay (ex. a bicycle). I opened a free account with Société Générale, the bank recommended by the University of Tours. You must make an appointment in advance to open a bank account and bring a lot of documentation (notably your passport and proof of residence in France with the EXACT address).

The last big step is to get a mobile plan. There are lots of phone service providers available (Orange, SFR, Free Mobile). I got a monthly plan with Free Mobile for 19.99 euros/month which gave me unlimited calls, texts and data within France, as well as calls to Canada. There are also cheaper options that give you limited calls and data, so you can choose one based on your needs.

I really enjoyed living at the Tanneurs residence. Close to the Tanneurs campus, three bakeries, the campus dining hall (where you can get a full meal for 3.25 euros) and downtown, it’s in an ideal location. There’s also a laundromat across the street (but take note—washing costs 3 euros/load and 1 euro/12 minutes of drying time!) Each room has its own washroom, fridge and small balcony, with shared kitchens on each floor.
The school system in France is much more lecture-based than the more interactive teaching/learning style in Canada. Because it was my first time taking Masters-level courses, I found a lot of the content pretty theoretical, but I gained valuable experience in research and in more teaching-centred tasks (ex. writing lesson plans.) Being in the Formation duale program gave me and my SFU classmates the chance to visit a French middle school in St-Pierre-des-Corps to observe classes. I even got to give a couple of mini-presentations on Canadian culture to a Grade 6 English class.

Take lots of initiative in approaching professors to ask questions and participate in class discussions. As a student, you will have access to an Environnement numérique de travail, or ENT (a bit like Canvas at SFU), where you can check your weekly schedule and access course materials online. It’s very important to check ENT often, as class times and rooms change every week.

Of course, life in France wasn’t all studying and housekeeping tasks. Tours is situated right next to the Loire River, where there are plenty of gorgeous castles to visit. Most are a 20-minute train ride away (a roundtrip ticket costs about $15CAD). For 8 euros, you can get a Student Cultural Passport that will grant you free entry to most of the museums and art galleries in Tours, as well as reduced rates to concerts, shows and more. Being a music fan, I went to my very first opera and jazz concert here and it was surreal! There are plenty of clubs on campus that you can join to get involved in French student life. What most helped me get involved was the Erasmus Student Network, which organized Saturday trips to castles and neighbouring cities and other fun events for international students (ex. French cooking classes). Through the ESN, I got to make friends with German, Australian and Mexican students.

Overall, I loved my semester in Tours and I can’t recommend this exchange enough! What will stick with me most is the friendships I’ve made with people from across the world, the French language skills I’ve honed through being immersed in the language on a daily basis, and the chances I got to travel to neighbouring French cities on the weekend and during reading break. I really hope this report will help you in your preparations and that you’ll enjoy your study exchange semester as much as I did!

Some final practical tips for life in France:

- Remember to weigh your own fruits and vegetables on the scale at the grocery store (I went to Carrefour Market in LaRiche, which has a large selection of food and is similar to Superstore in Canada. Lidl and Auchan are slightly cheaper, but farther away from the Tanneurs residence).
- Bring reusable bags for your groceries, as stores either don’t provide plastic/paper bags or sell them at ridiculous prices.
- Pack adapters for your electronic devices, as French/North American voltages are different.
- If you get sick, the best way to get help in short order is by making an appointment by phone with SOS Médecin (a local clinic). I went once for bronchitis and the doctor was very kind and professional.
• If it’s your first time in France, you may be “summoned” ( convoqué) to a nearby city, Orléans, to finalize your student visa. This is normal; let the International Student Services office know as soon as you arrive and they can help you make arrangements for it. Just make sure you bring all the required documents to your appointment in Orléans.
• Always ask if you don’t understand something.
• Don’t stress too much about the administrative procedures…and have fun! 😊

Château de Chenonceau, one of the many castles near Tours
I took many walks along the Loire River as it’s literally just beside the campus!

Light Show at the St-Gatien Cathedral, a popular night event in September when the weather’s still quite warm
The local Christmas market in downtown Tours (free entry, mid-November through December) with traditional Christmas goodies and artisan vendors