There are many things to consider before going abroad to France. This includes ensuring that you find the correct application form for the visa application. I had to visit the French Consulate on two separate occasions to fulfill the visa requirements and the employee guided me in how to find the correct student visa form as there are two. She suggested that this is a common mistake that students make. In terms of researching courses there is not much that can be done in advance of your exchange as during the first few weeks of arriving at Sciences Po they allow you to attend any classes that may be of interest to you. This gives you the chance to meet professors and students while being able to create a schedule with as many courses that interest you. The welcome orientation for students was very informative and was given in both French and English. I recommend arriving a day or two in advance of the first orientation to help ground yourself in the city as well as connect with other students via email.

There are a few different options in terms of how you choose to arrive in Aix. For myself I flew into Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport and took a high speed train (about 3/3.5 hours) and got off at the Aix TGV station. This train ride cost about 120 euros. From there it was a short bus ride into the city. Alternatively you can book a connecting flight to Marseille however it is difficult to find direct flights into Marseille from Vancouver.

The general lecture structure is very similar to SFU amongst most of the professors. Do not be surprised to find that some classes do not have online readings available or no lecture slides. There are no tutorials so it is very important to attend every class as well as engage in class discussion. Be aware that some classes may be cancelled without notice and made up at some point later in the week or within the month. Depending on whether your classes are instructed in French or English the required work will vary. Many classes will have one cumulative exam or paper at the end of the term. It is important to maintain good notes throughout the semester and listen closely to the professors instructions on how to construct and format these exams as they differ from some formats used at SFU.

Although it is the South of France the weather was significant colder than I had anticipated upon arrival. The weather began warming by the middle of February however I do recommend bringing one larger, warmer winter coat as the ‘Mistral’ wind which blows through the region can be very chilly. In terms of footwear I would generally suggest a pair of sneakers and sandals. Rain is not common in Aix and therefore if you are looking to save space in your luggage you can probably get away without packing a pair of boots. The shopping is quite accessible in town and if you need any additional pieces there is the “Les Allees” shopping area which includes stores such as H&M, Zara and Levi’s.

If possible I recommend searching for accommodation outside of the student housing. Although the cost is low for student housing common spaces are not maintained very well and there can be a lot of noise throughout the halls during the evening. However Crous does create a monthly calendar with events for students to participate in to help create a sense of community so that may be appealing to students who are looking to meet both local and international students.

Aix is a beautiful city and is regarded as a university town. Cafes and brasseries are full of students and there are plenty of opportunities to meet local students. Sciences Po is a small school in terms of student population so it is easy to get to know many people through events organized by their international students organization. I highly recommend going to these events as they provide you with the opportunity to feel part of the community. Additionally there are many teams to join through the school however registration for these opportunities is primarily in the fall semester and therefore there are less options for those arriving in the spring. The teams will also be composed primarily of French speaking students so it
is important to keep that in mind. There are many parks throughout and around the city as well as museums that are must-visit.

The South is abundant with beautiful spots that are accessible through many different bus services. At the main bus station in town you will arrive at I recommend getting a bus card right away. You can load the card with a designated amount of euros and then tap your card when travelling. The fare you pay when you tap will last for the entire day costing you as low as 2 euros for travel a day. The bus station also has pamphlets for each of the bus lines which includes the schedule for each stop. I recommend keeping a few of these on hand as they are helpful in planning trips to surrounding areas such as Marseille and Cassis.

During your time spent abroad you will become familiar with FlixBus which services many parts of Europe. It is an inexpensive option for longer distance travels such as Nice, Monaco or Montpellier. As well it will include airport stops if you are looking to fly cheaper from one of the farther airports. If you book in advance bus travel can be as low cost as one or two euros however I recommend you book immediately at such a low price as after a few days prices can jump up to 20 euros or more quickly. Additionally I recommend bringing over a significant amount of euros in cash with you. Although you can use most debit cards to retrieve cash from machines in France there is a fee with each transaction so it is a good idea to keep euros stored in a safe place as many cafes and restaurants will prefer or only take cash. International credit cards can be used at the grocery stores and pharmacies.

While studying abroad in Aix time will go by much more quickly than you realize so it is important to capitalize on every day. I recommend perusing the various markets which Aix is famous for as well as trying a few of their popular restaurants such as Maison Nosh, Mana and Garder Manger. If you are searching for a good place to study or find English books I recommend Book in Bar. The staff is friendly and the atmosphere is quiet for getting work done. The city has several fine boulangeries so have fun choosing a favourite and trying different types of pastries. Because of the generally mild to warm temperatures that bless the region for most of the year spend lots of time outside in public spaces.

Upon returning to Canada it can feel difficult to readjust to old routines. Going abroad can inspire you to take better advantage of Vancouver so I encourage you to spend lots of time in the beautiful spaces our city has to offer. The best thing you can do to make the transition go smoothly is to create a new, healthy routine. It is nice to keep a part of exchange with you so I recommend printing and framing photos or postcards from your time spent abroad. As well as keeping up with international news from France can help in reminding you of your other home. It is also important to maintain friendships that you built while abroad so keeping in close contact with those friends can help make the experience seem less far away. Before leaving for Aix I was intimidated by the language barrier and concerned about forming friendships however it is important to recognize that all international students share similar concerns and by being put into a foreign situation as such you will grow both as a student and a person.
An evening walk out to the student residence from in town. Aix-en-Provence.
A swimming spot in the Calanques, Cassis.
A view from one of apartments in town.
A rare rainy day in Aix-en-Provence.