When doing research and preparing for my four month exchange term at Humboldt University, what I found the most difficult to figure out was confirming what visa documents I needed to have and how to set up my bank account, wifi, and sim card. When packing for my big adventure, I kept on adding unnecessary things such as my magic bullet, shampoo, and toothpaste etc, but I soon realized that I could indeed buy all these things there! For some reason, when packing I assumed I needed to bring everything from home that I would need, but you can buy most of your things when you get to your destination. You’ll soon find out that your big suitcase doesn’t actually fit all too much, and you’ll probably want to bring your clothes and personal items over things like conditioner! Pack wisely, and pack the things that you truly will need and cannot buy where you are going. This means your favourite clothing, photos you’d like to bring, and other essentials. Arriving in Berlin, it was extremely easy to get a sim card for my unlocked phone, and much much cheaper for data than back at home. I would recommend buying only data and no calling or texting plan, as you can call via Skype or Facetime on data. 3gb of data a month costs around 20$ (with the phone company Lebara), and can be picked up at any corner store or even at the airport. Unfortunately, the dormitory I was staying at did not include wifi, so I was worried coming that I would be stuck in the middle of nowhere with no means of getting on the internet! Luckily, when I arrived, my roommate was already living
there and had her wifi set up, so I paid her 5 euros per month to share her wifi. If you are living in a dorm, you can most likely ask your neighbours to chip in on their wifi, it is the easiest solution, as setting up a router is probably something you’d want to avoid as it takes awhile to set up and is a lot pricier. In Berlin, the cost of living was much lower than Vancouver, so I was really only spending about 25-30 euros a week on groceries, and 250 euros for rent per month. Bring enough cash to last you for a month or two so that you have time to set up a German bank account. This is most ideal if you are there for longer than 4 months as it is costly to withdraw cash from your Visa card every time. It is also advisable to transfer a large sum to last you for your time there to your German account (or whichever account), and withdraw the cash you need, free of charge, from there.

When booking your flight to your exchange destination, be wary of the time of arrival you book it for. You don’t want to be arriving late at night in a new city, and not to mention with all your heavy baggage! Plan well in advance and research how far and what mode of transportation you’ll want to take on arrival. When you arrive at your dormitory, there will be a “hausmeister” that will direct you and welcome you. If you are staying at an apartment, then the landlord would likely welcome you and help you adjust as well. The dormitory that I stayed at for the duration of the exchange was located in far East Berlin, so it took me about 35-45 minutes to transit
directly into the city center. Although this might seem far, I got used to it so it really wasn’t all too bad! Academic wise, for me, I was taking my electives as the school I chose did not have courses that were applicable to my program back at SFU. If you find yourself at Humboldt University though, I would highly encourage you to enroll in the “Berlin Perspectives” program, which is essentially courses that are tailored to international students. This program is different from a normal lecture as the maximum enrollment number is only thirty students, so it makes for a much more intimate and in depth learning experience where you can get to know other peer mates on a more personal level. Enrollment differs immensely at Humboldt, as you receive a “matriculation” time and day when you arrive in the beginning of the semester to register in classes and collect your bus pass. You can of course also research online which classes you are interested in. If you’re looking for a diverse, multi cultural, and bustling city that is always moving, I would choose Berlin as your host city. The city is always full of activities and things to do, it is certain to have something for everyone! Being Germany’s capital city, the city has an abundance of 20th century history including its Holocaust Memorial and East Side Gallery, as well as a thriving art and music scene. Biking is a popular thing to do here for the locals and is often the main mode of transportation if you live in the city, and you will regularly find locals flocking to the green parks encompassing the many canals and vintage flea markets around the city. Of course, you can’t forget Octoberfest and the biggest and most beautiful Christmas markets in the winter! If you can’t speak a word of German, don’t fret! Berlin is the most internationally diverse city in all of Germany so most everyone can speak English.
Moving across the world and being in a completely different city and culture independent of anyone was definitely an experience that I will appreciate and treasure forever. I have without a doubt faced many challenges in my months abroad that have forced me to think on my feet and trust my own instincts, and I think it has shaped me into a stronger, more independent and forward thinking person. What I wish I knew before I left on my exchange was how travelling would change me and make me never be able to stay in one place! As cliché as that sounds, this experience has really altered my outlook on life and my priorities have shifted, but in a good way. The only advice I can give to other students is to take the leap, and just do it. You will in no way regret going! It is truly life changing and something that will stick with you forever.