I stepped off the nine-hour flight from Vancouver to Dublin, Ireland full of energy and nerves. Of course I was looking forward to the great unknown of the journey that lay ahead of me, but I couldn’t help being a little nervous since I was arriving in a city where I had no contacts at all.

My exchange term was at University College Dublin in the Quinn School of Business for the Fall 2016 semester. I had decided to live on-campus in residence, which turned out to be a fantastic choice. I was accompanied in my apartment by five other exchange students, and through residence orientation activities was able to connect with a great deal of other exchange students from all across Europe and even ranging into South America and Australia. Together with these individuals we created a great social circle, which lead to many great evenings in downtown Dublin and study sessions back on campus.

I took two finance courses and two business management courses while abroad and was very happy with my classroom experience. Lecturers were knowledgeable and worked hard to make sure that lectures were interesting and that students were engaged. The workload differed from SFU because the marks were weighted more heavily on a lesser number of assignments; for example, most of my classes were made up of a midterm or group project accounting for thirty percent of my final grade while my final seventy percent came from the results of a final exam; I found this structure to allow more flexibility when I was planning weekend trips.

Dublin itself was a wonderful city. Cost-wise it is quite comparable to Vancouver, especially with regard to food and drink. I found that the best way to immerse yourself in the culture is to explore the Temple Bar district which houses a multitude of traditional Irish pubs. These pubs always have live music playing and travelers are always welcome to grab a pint of Guinness and sing along to the classics.
The country of Ireland is quite small for Canadian standards. For instance, you are able to catch a bus or train to almost any main city throughout Ireland in under four hours. Due to this convenience I had the opportunity to travel within Ireland to other areas such as Killarney, the Ring of Kerry, Galway, the Cliffs of Moher, Bundoran and Belfast. Of these adventures I valued the trip to Bundoran most of all because it was quite unique.

The trip to Bundoran is planned by the University Surf Club, which I joined as a member with some of my new friends. The club is open to new members of all skill level, and regardless of whether you’re reading this as a new-comer to surfing or an experienced surfer I would highly recommend joining the club. In the case of the Bundoran trip I, along with eight of my new exchange friends and approximately fifty other UCD students, ventured out to the Northwest coast of Ireland for a weekend to a town called Bundoran. The Club rented five large houses to accommodate the group and we spent the weekend socializing and surfing in ice-cold waters; this trip was certainly one of the highlights of my exchange.

One concern that some people may have in picking Dublin as an exchange destination is due to the fact that Ireland is an Island, and therefore no land-based travel options are available to connect you to the rest of Europe. However, since Dublin is the headquarters for the infamously low-priced Ryanair airline service, there are many cheap and direct flight options to most larger cities throughout Europe. I was able to capitalize on this opportunity and traveled to Portugal, Spain, Italy, London, France, Hungary, and even more great countries. I valued the option to fly cheaply most of all because the time spent traveling was shortened which is ideal for weekend trips. One foreseeable downfall was that I was constantly limited in my options for packing because I always restricted myself to just one small carry-on bag in order to save money on extra fees. While initially this seemed like an inconvenience, eventually I realized that packing light provides a great lesson in discovering what is truly necessary on short trips. Plus, bringing less items meant that there were less things to potentially lose!

My favourite trip from my entire exchange was probably my journey to Lagos, Portugal. Lagos is a smaller city on the southern coast of Portugal and boasts beautiful ocean cliffs and
outstanding surf beaches. Additionally, since Lagos is a popular destination for younger crowds in the summer months there are many excursion options available such as stand-up paddle boarding, kayaking, hiking, and more. I especially valued this trip because it was the first trip that I was taking by myself. Initially I was intimidated by the fact that I was going to an unknown destination, but upon arrival I was greeted by incredibly friendly fellow travelers who offered great company. Given this experience, I learned how fulfilling it can be to step out of your comfort zone and force yourself to reach out and meet new people. Every traveler is unique and has their own story, and I encourage anyone and everyone to do their best in making new friends in all of the places that they go; I actually have a few visits lined up in the coming years with friends that I met abroad, who want to come and visit Vancouver!

Lagos, Portugal

Now, to go over some lessons that I learned throughout the semester. For starters, try not to overpack: one, because you will swiftly realize that it is inconvenient to have too much clothing around your place and two, because you will certainly be bringing gifts and souvenirs back to Vancouver. Additionally, I learned that while it is of course important to keep up with studies and course assignments you need to make time to socialize and connect with new friends. The in-class learning that I experienced was fantastic but I also learned a great deal by talking with students from across the globe and exploring new countries and cities throughout Europe. Another lesson I learned while on exchange is that it’s important to say yes as much as possible, even if that means trying new and challenging experiences. While pushing myself beyond my comfort zone could sometimes be, well, uncomfortable…I discovered that I learned the most from the new experiences and opportunities that I challenged myself to pursue.

The last lesson that I learned is probably the most valuable, and something that I will never forget. I learned this critical fact throughout my entire experience, but it sunk in most of all once I arrived back home in Vancouver. This lesson is: talk to everyone, all the time. As wonderful as new cities are, as wonderful as great food is, and as wonderful as beautiful scenery can be…the true key to creating lifetime memories lies in the people that you share them with. I arrived in Dublin with literally no friends or acquaintances to speak of, but I came home to Vancouver with a great collection of solid friendships with people from all over the world. I truly believe that
meeting new people is a skill that you must practice and while the first few efforts may seem difficult, the more you practice the easier it gets until you are making connections everywhere that you go. If you remember one thing from reading this report, it has to be that people make all the difference; the only thing you must do is introduce yourself and the rest will follow.

With new friends at the Cliffs of Moher, Ireland

Thank you for reading, and happy travels.