I just came back from my exchange in the Netherlands, which is a really awesome country to live and study. I did not expect to have this much fun before I actually went there. Thinking of the Netherlands you might not have an exact image of it, because it is not one of those top options when you are planning your exchange. But if you really want to go to a country where you can really feel the ‘freedom’ or a place that is not crowded with visitors like Rome and Paris, Netherlands is a good choice, either in Amsterdam or Rotterdam or The Hague, you can experience something totally different from American culture.

**Preparation**

I will just start with some questions that I asked myself about what school I want to go and what I expect to see and learn after the exchange program, which I hope could be a good reference that people could have some basic ideas:

1. Do I want to go to an English-speaking country or contrast?
2. Which countries have courses that I could transfer back as my major courses?
3. Is the country safe?
4. When will the semester(s) start and end?

These are just some of the questions that I wondered, and I am sure there will be more specific ones during the process. For me I really would like to go to a European country because I love their architecture and history that will be so different from the rest of the
world, and I want to actually live there to see how lives there would look like, since you wouldn’t see the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ aspects if you are just being a tourist. I am pretty sure there are lots of options besides the Netherlands, but when I first looked at it I felt so tempted because it sounds different and unknown for me. Another option of mine was Copenhagen, which is also a great city, but since University of Amsterdam has more potential courses that I can transfer back I picked it eventually.

Talking about the semester’s ending time, it depends on which semester you are planning to go, and if you feel okay to ‘lose’ one or two semesters when you finish the program. In countries like Australia, New Zealand or England, for instance, school will not finish until late January or it starts from February to June, so you might want to take this under your consideration if you are planning your graduation or enrolment for next semester etc..

After I have decided to go to Amsterdam, I checked some information about this country and the city, getting some common sense about what you should do or what you should not. SFU will send you some emails about what to prepare, which I found really helpful. They have really detailed instructions about what you should do next and how you could contact the advisors in your host university. It is really important to check your emails regularly because you may get important guidelines about getting your visa and resident permit, applying accommodation and enrolling courses. Leave enough time for each of these stages just in case anything happened and you still can have extra time without being panic. If you need to apply for a visa, the consulate of the Netherlands is near Burrard station, and all the other consulates are located in that area too. Make sure you have brought all information to show the staff and book the appointment in advance.
Arrival

After I have arrived in Schipol Airport, there are people from UVA waiting for me and other exchange students from all over the world, so I did not feel very worried about finding my way to school and accommodation. They split us into groups and then they brought us to the main campus for registration. You can get your student card and keys for dorm there. I am staying with De Key (the other one is DUWO) and there are shuttles taking us to our dorms, which I think was really considerate. The place I lived was pretty close to my school buildings and to the city centre that it’s convenient to go to anywhere else in town. There are a lot of canals in Amsterdam, which will really make your day when you go out in the morning with those beautiful views. Here is one photo that I took near where I lived:

There was a grocery store near my dormitory, which was a 5-minute walk only. I didn’t know where I could get food and supplies when I arrived in dorm on the first day, but I met one girl who lived on my floor and she was so nice that she told me some stores
that I might go visit later for groceries. There are five people living on my floor, and we shared two bathrooms, two toilets and a kitchen. And it was free to do the laundry in our building. I have heard in some buildings everyone has to use the same laundry room, but mine was pretty good that each floor had its own laundry machines.

It was not mandatory to attend the introduction week, but you would have a lot of fun and make some new friends in your group, who you may go travelling later with; also you could get to know the country a little. We went to the Artis Zoo in Amsterdam, and we took the canal cruise to go around the city and knew where those sites were. We also had a euro-dinner that everyone brought their country’s food together and share with others, which was fun too.

**School**

The lecture style was similar to ours in SFU. I don’t have any tutorials, but my friends did, so I guess it depends on the courses. They have a similar system like Canvas which is called Blackboard where you can find lecture notes, check out the announcements and your grades. I did not have any hard time going school there, and even though I was taking a full-term program, I still had enough time for traveling, which is amazing. I found out that it is common to see local students absent, and the professors seemed to be okay with that, I am not sure if it is their culture but it looked like school there was pretty relaxing.

**Final Thoughts: Where to Visit**

I do love Amsterdam, and I think I would like to go back someday. Zaandam is really beautiful, you can see lots of Dutch culture there, and the Netherlands has its own architecture type, which is so unique and special. And it is quite easy to go to any other
cities in Europe, within two hours and flights are really cheap.