On my exchange semester abroad, I attended the University of Maastricht which is located in Maastricht, the southern part of The Netherlands. My semester started from September and ended December 2018. My major is business with a concentration in marketing and operations management. I had completed all my operations management courses at SFU therefore, the 3 courses I selected were in marketing. The courses I took were Marketing Strategy, Marketing Management, and Brand Management. Given, that I had never been to Europe this exchange was a very exciting and nervous experience for myself. I had never been away from my family for more than a week, so 4 months away seemed very intimidating.

During the exchange application process, I found that going to all the info nights and meeting students that had been to my exchange university really helped. I remember asking all the questions that I was wondering about to an exchange alumni and she had the answer to all of them. The info nights really helped calm my nerves and showed me the reality of what to expect on exchange. In addition, the SFU canvas exchange course also really covers a lot of the aspects that should be considered when planning exchange. For example, how to adapt to a new culture, meet new people, and plan a budget.

When researching what courses to take, I recommend seeing if the exchange university’s semester lines up with the SFU semester because then when you come back you are able to start the new semester on time. Furthermore, check to see if you are eligible to take the course because some courses have prerequisites that you need to have. For me personally, I took courses that would count toward my business concentration and graduation. This allowed me to waste no time in completing my degree requirements and graduate on time.

When I started packing for my exchange, I actually took the wrong approach. For some reason, I thought I would need all my clothes and thus I packed my whole closet. However, I was completely wrong and had a lot of extra clothing that I never wore. I suggest researching the temperature in your exchange country and pack accordingly. Moreover, I’d advise to pack clothing that are comfortable, warm, and stuff that you would wear on a weekly basis.

When choosing a traveling options, I recommend searching all the nearest airports near your host university. A mistake I made was I chose Amsterdam airport because I assumed it was the closest one being 2 hours away and in the same country. However, after meeting some friends and asking them how they got there, I was told that Brussels airport was 1 hour away even though it was the neighboring country. It would have saved me time and money because flights were cheaper to this airport.

In terms of money, The Netherlands use Euros. The conversion is tough because 1600 euros is equivalent to 2500 dollars. When I arrived in Maastricht, I opened a bank account at ING bank which has a special offer that allows international students to open an account. This was very useful because it gave me a debit card which I could use all over Europe and not have to worry about carrying too much cash. Both cash and debit card were accepted in most places, so I did not have an issue.
Upon arrival, University of Maastricht had arrival week full of activities that help you get used to the city. This I highly recommend because this is where you meet other exchange students that end up being your friends for the semester. In addition, there are activities such as city and campus tours which really help you find your way around. I stayed in the UM guesthouse which is where all the exchange students lived, and I suggest staying there because it is very fun. The guesthouse has events, sports, and parties that really help you settle in and enjoy your exchange experience. Furthermore, a lot of the tours to other cities and countries leave from the guesthouse so you don’t have to travel anywhere. Another reason, to stay at the guesthouse is that you will always know what is going on in terms of social gatherings and it helps you stay in the loop.

The teaching format at University of Maastricht is very different from SFU. At SFU, we have a professor teach us the content in a lecture format. However, at University of Maastricht the students teach each other. It takes a week or two to get used to it, but it is manageable as long as you do your homework and prepare for each class. The workload is heavy if you take harder courses because have class 2 times a week for each course. Furthermore, there are group projects and exams and most of them are geared to finish near the end of the semester, so it is crucial that you manage your time wisely. Nonetheless, learning in a different environment helps you absorb information in a way you’re not used to, which ultimately makes it stick in your brain.

Maastricht, Netherlands is a small city in the province of Limburg. It is a beautiful city with historic buildings and full of students from all over the world. I recommend Maastricht to anyone who is looking for a complete international experience. Reason being, it is in the centre of Europe and traveling to other countries is very easy and relatively cheap. After exploring cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht in The Netherlands, I traveled to neighboring countries such as Germany, Belgium, and France. In addition, I was able to visit Spain, Czech Republic, and England as well because they were on my travel list. I advise to save money for traveling because it is such a wonderful experience. By traveling, you learn how to be responsible all while experiencing new cultures.

Some of the challenges I faced were managing my budget, being homesick, and adjusting to transportation. Although I budgeted enough for my exchange, one month I was close to going over budget because I did not track how much I was spending. I was eating out a lot and realized later in the month that this would not be sustainable. Therefore, I recommend planning what days you will eat out and make your own meals for the most of your exchange. Trust me, this will help you save money so you can travel. Furthermore, being homesick is a normal and very common feeling. What helped me is calling my parents whenever I felt homesick and just hearing their voice automatically makes you feel good. In addition, keep yourself busy with friends, school, and exploring the city because this helps keep your mind off being away from home. Lastly, being from Vancouver I was not used to biking which is huge in The Netherlands. The first week is an adjustment however, after that it is very easy and doable.
In the grand scheme of things, it was great because it keeps you in shape given all the different foods I was trying.

All in all, I think going on exchange was the best decision in life because it taught me so much about what is out there in the world outside of Vancouver. I learnt so much about myself because I was outside of my comfort zone and it allowed me to grow as a person and really develop my personality. Looking back on this experience a few years from now I can truly say that I will miss it because I met so many cool people. I’m glad to say after this exchange, I now have friends all over the world.

Photos Below