Hi, my name is Shelby and I recently returned from studying abroad in New Zealand. I studied at the University of Canterbury in the city of Christchurch. I first heard about the study abroad program in high school and hoped that I could one day be a part of it. Now, after having done so I can honestly say that it was the best experience of my life.

**Before Going Away**

**Flights & Application Process**

The earlier you book your flight, the cheaper your ticket will likely be. I used a travel agent as she was able to help me find the best rates and also get the best available seat, which you will want as it is a total of 15 hours flying time including transfers. I flew Air Canada from Vancouver to Brisbane, Australia and then from Brisbane to Christchurch. The other option is Vancouver to Auckland and Auckland to Christchurch with Air New Zealand. There are no direct flights into Christchurch from Vancouver.

My only regret out of this entire experience was that I did not give myself enough time after exams to allow for further travel. I strongly suggest you book your return flight for at least two weeks after final exam week concludes. This will ensure that you have enough time to travel and see things you may not have had time for during the semester. Some friends I met even stayed an extra month after exams finished, but if you can manage 2 weeks that would be great. Although I was able to see a lot during the semester and spring break (which is 17 days) there were still some places I was hoping to get to. I tried to change my flight at that point to a later return date but it was going to be cost prohibitive. At UC you have possession of your flat until early December so try to take advantage of this and book a later flight back home.

Don’t stress about the application process as you will receive loads of information that will walk you through each and every step. However, do start early as there is a fair bit involved. Check the expiry date on your passport as it must be valid for a minimum of 6 months following your return date. You will also need a student visa so be sure to apply for this asap.

**Packing**

What you pack will depend on the time of year you travel to New Zealand. Their seasons are opposite to ours so even though I left in July, I packed predominantly winter clothes along with a few summer items as it does warm up in the springtime. I lived in jeans and hoodies, as do most students, so one nicer outfit for going out is likely all you will need. Although Christchurch is one of the driest cities in all of New Zealand, you should still pack a raincoat as it is likely you will be travelling to other parts of both the North and South Islands where weather will vary.

One key item I highly recommend you pack is a pair of hiking boots. Even if you don’t consider yourself to be an avid hiker, I promise you that you will use them over and over again. I used mine with both jeans and shorts, and in snow, through mud, on sand, and even in city centres. That’s the
beauty of hiking boots, they are so versatile. There’s an abundance of beautiful hikes from beginner to experienced and it is a spectacular way to see the country. You won’t regret having your boots!

A useful packing tip is to vacuum pack your clothing. Winter items are especially bulky and using this method allowed me to fit a lot more into my suitcase. The flats have vacuums so you can repeat the process when you return home.

Financial

I brought $100 NZ cash with me to get me started and then I mainly used a credit card. I have a bank account with TD Canada and I was never charged an “international fee” while I was away. If I needed cash, I used my Canadian debit card at an ATM, and once again I was never charged an ATM fee. This system was easy, straightforward and it worked great for me. I never opened a NZ bank account while I was there so I can’t speak to that. However, a few people I know did open an account and it seemed to work out well for them, so if that appeals to you then it may be something worth looking into. I would recommend going into your bank before leaving and speaking to someone regarding this so you know ahead of time what to expect and what will work best for you. There is no tipping in NZ and the taxes are included, so the price you see is the price you pay.

I also strongly suggest that you get your cell phone provider to “unlock” your phone so that you can take it with you abroad. The NZ cell phone provider ‘Spark’ offers a good phone plan for $20/month and a NZ SIM card for $5. This is one of the main ways you’ll be able to keep in contact with the friends you meet while you’re there. And it’s especially handy to have a working cell phone on road trips.

During the Exchange

Arrival

Upon arriving at Christchurch International Airport, you will be greeted by student representatives from the university. From there, they will load you into a taxi which will take you directly to the campus free of charge (this ride has to be arranged before you leave for NZ, but again all this information will be given to you throughout your application process).

I strongly suggest you arrive before Orientation Day to ensure that you do not miss it. You will be given valuable information about living in Christchurch, university life at UC, safely driving on the left hand side of the road etc. All exchange students attend this event and it is where I met 90% of my friends. Remember, everyone is in the same boat so it’s a really great way to meet people right off the bat.

Accommodation

You will most likely be staying in Ilam Apartments, which is only about a 5 minute walk from campus. The Ilam flats are quite nice and have pretty much everything you will need. Most flats are designed to have 5 people living in them, so chances are you will have 4 other flatmates. What’s nice about these flats is that you will get your own individual room with a bed, a desk and a large
closet with drawers. Having your own bedroom gives you a place to get away and have time for yourself as well as a quiet place for study/homework. Along with the bedrooms, each flat has full Wi-Fi access, 2 shared bathrooms, both equipped with a shower, a kitchen fully stocked with appliances and cookware, a communal dining room and living room with couches and a TV. Each flat also has a balcony. The one thing that was missing was an oven and while it would have been extremely nice to have one, it was pretty easy to make decent meals without. There is an optional meal plan but most students I knew opted out of this as it was expensive and the dining hall was a fair distance away. Laundry facilities are in a separate building within the halls of residence. The cost is $2 to wash and $2 to dry. Because of this I tried to limit my laundry to 1 load/week.

There is also a communal building within Ilam Apartments called “Home”. This is a great place to hang out with people you’ve met as it has a big screen TV, couches, beanbag chairs, a study area and a pool table. It is also where weekly events are held. These events are another great way to meet other students and they are a lot of fun. A few of these events include: Create your own milkshake night, movie nights, cooking classes, ice cream sundae night, and board game night. They also served free pancakes every Thursday evening from 8-10, so definitely take advantage of that!

The campus itself is only about a 5-10 minute bus ride from a major mall and about 15 minutes from the downtown centre of Christchurch. There are also two grocery stores as well as a number of restaurants and shops within walking distance of Ilam apartments. Buses go everywhere and are an easy and convenient way to get around. The university also has free bike rentals Monday-Friday.

**Academics**

Although during your application you will indicate what courses you want to take at UC, you don’t actually enroll in them until you arrive on campus. Enrollment is on a specific day and takes place in person. Even though it may sound confusing, it is extremely easy and straightforward – so don’t stress!

The course structure is very similar to SFU, and it is likely you will have both lectures and tutorials. Tutorials are often compulsory and attendance is taken, so make sure you attend! Course work was also fairly similar to SFU, though it may differ depending on what courses you choose to take. One of my courses consisted of only one paper (30%) and a final exam (70%), while another course had multiple assignments as well as a final exam. Midterms are not common at UC, and I didn’t end up having any!

**Activities**

One thing I cannot stress enough is to join clubs! UC offers so many great clubs and there is something for everyone. The three clubs I joined and highly recommend are the Tramping (hiking) Club, Snow Sports Club, and Student Volunteer Army. I wanted to join the Kayaking Club, as I heard it was a lot of fun, but I just didn’t have enough time. It’s likely that the majority of the friends you make will be international students, so clubs are a great way to meet some locals! They know the best spots to travel to and without a doubt are some of the friendliest people you will ever meet. I still keep in touch with several kiwi friends on a regular basis.
There is a 17 day break in the middle of the semester, so I highly recommend you use this time to travel! I flew to Auckland and did a road trip around the entire North Island. It was an absolutely amazing trip and I got to spend it with some really great friends. If you do decide to travel during this break, make sure you plan early! You can get cheap flights through Jet Star (a subsidiary of Qantas Airways) and hostels typically range from $18-$30/night (I suggest using the Hostel World App to find the nicest accommodations for the cheapest price).

Note: Be prepared to drive in New Zealand. I went with the mindset: “They drive on the left side of the road – no way am I attempting that!” But I quickly realized that New Zealand is a land made for road trips and driving is the best and cheapest way to see the country. It was very easy to make the adjustment to driving on the left and as long as you focus on the road and drive safely, you won’t have any problems. If you can travel with 3-4 friends to split the cost, car rentals are really cheap (including full insurance). On weekends, some great day trip destinations include, Kaikoura, Hanmer Springs and Castle Hill.

**Sightseeing**

There are so many incredible things to see and do in New Zealand it is difficult to find enough time to get to them all. Some places I highly recommend you see and activities you should do include:

**South Island**

- Boat Tour through Milford Sound - a very beautiful and mystical place
- Visit Queenstown – Go up the gondola, luge down the mountain and if you’re brave enough, go bungee jumping!
- Go kayaking in Akaroa
- Swim with fur seals in Kaikoura
- Hike up the Christchurch Porthills
- Star Gaze at Lake Tekapo
- Visit Mount Cook in the Southern Alps
- Abel Tasman National Park – coastal track
- Attend an "All Blacks" rugby game – they sell out every game so get tickets early or better yet, before leaving home.

**North Island**

- Visit Cape Reigna (northern most point in New Zealand)
- Go sand surfing down the Te Paki Sand Dunes – incredible!
- Visit Hobbiton!
- The Māori culture is rich and diverse – attend a cultural performance and feast
- Hike through Tongariro National Park
- Raft through the glow worm caves and see the mud pools in Rotorua
- Visit Cathedral Cove on the Coromandel Peninsula
- Go to the hot water beach and dig your own hot tub
My greatest tip would be to remember that plans can change and some of the best experiences are the ones you were never planning for!

**After the Exchange**

**What I learned**

Studying abroad is an absolutely incredible experience. I learned that some of the greatest experiences start by saying “hi” to someone. That’s exactly how I wound up taking a road trip with three Kiwis up to Arthur’s Pass on just my second day in New Zealand! So don’t be afraid to put yourself out there! Although I was really happy to return home to see family and friends again, I very much miss my life in New Zealand. I was surprised at how quickly it became like home and I have definitely left a piece of my heart in this beautiful country!

Mt. Eden - Auckland
Sand surfing – Te Paki Sand Dunes

Bungee Jumping - Queenstown
Springtime on Campus

Port Hills - Christchurch