Between January and June of 2013 I was on exchange in Oslo, Norway, at the University of Oslo (Universitetet i Oslo). I am an Honors Physics major at SFU, and I went for the end of the third year of my Bachelor degree. I have wanted to go to Norway since high school when I found out they had free tuition for all students, including international students. However education is only offered in Norwegian unless you are on exchange, so I decided that at some point in my degree I wanted to go live there as an exchange student.

In preparing to go to Norway, the most important thing to know is that it is one of the most expensive countries in the world, and possibly the most expensive (according to the Big Mac Index it is http://www.economist.com/content/big-mac-index). Be prepared to spend way more on food and services than you do in Vancouver. Eating out is not really feasible financially, so if you don’t cook, get ready to learn. To eat out cheaply costs roughly 120 NOK (around 20$), and even fast food generally runs around 80-90 NOK (14$). A half price haircut is still 300 NOK (over 50$), so make sure you get your hair cut before you leave! The good news is that cell phone bills are inexpensive and student housing is not that much more than residence at SFU. Some other useful financial information: a monthly bus pass is about 400 NOK (68$) and alcohol is very expensive; a pint of beer is usually upwards of 10$ (60+ NOK) and I never bought liquor once. Fortunately you will probably travel a bit, and you can buy alcohol at the duty free. It’s what all the Norwegians do anyway.

Because life is so expensive, it would probably be best to bring as much as you can with you. I wish I had brought a router for instance. You will also need warm clothes and boots, which as a Vancouverite I didn’t own and had to buy in Norway. Make a trip to IKEA in the first few days; there is a free bus from downtown and the prices there are pretty standard. Even things like shampoo and some non-perishable food would be good to bring if you have the space. Finally, note that virtually everywhere in Scandinavia accepts credit card and you will not normally need cash, though some bars only accept Norwegian Visas. This is really convenient as my bank charged me to withdraw cash while there.
I intentionally arrived in Oslo on the day they had a pickup service scheduled. This ended up costing me a lot extra for my plane ticket because they announced the date very late, and more frustratingly the organization that was supposed to pick us up never made an appearance. Fortunately, I made some friends that day as we all realized we were exchange students waiting for a pickup that would never happen, and took the metro to our residence together. The metro (called the t-bane) is actually really easy to use and is very comprehensive, so I rarely had to take a bus. You can even get to the forests around the city and go hiking right from metro stops!

I stayed in the Kringjså residence, which had seven rooms per floor, all sharing one kitchen. One person had a private bathroom while the others all shared with one other person. The residences were old and definitely dated, but they were fine for student residences. The room I was in had a desk, bed and bookshelf, but no curtains. The window is large, which is nice, but be aware that you will probably want to buy something; especially if you are going in the summer months when it is bright all of the time. Our kitchen shared all of our supplies, so we didn't have to buy anything new, and all seven of us were students, which was really great. At the end of the hall there was another big room equipped with its own kitchen and bathroom and a family lived there. The student residences are not only for students, and I know some people who had very few exchange students as flat mates. The other student residences are similar, with Sogn the next most popular. Most Norwegian students have different places to live and rent apartments, so there are not many in the residences (there was one on my floor). Also worth noting: the residences aren't on campus, but it is easy to bus to campus from them. It is about 15 minutes from Kringsjå on the t-bane.

2 OSLO FROM THE TOP OF FROGNERSETEREN; A HILL ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN.
3 The University of Oslo campus in the winter. The black building is the main library and is called Georg Sverdrups Hus.

Academics in Norway are organized similarly to how they are here, however the instructors expect much less of you, and the courses are far less work. One class I took had only 16 lecture hours in the semester, and 100% of my grade was based on a 10 page paper. This course transferred back as 5 SFU credits! The physics course I took was much less demanding than any I've taken at SFU, had only 2 assignments and a final, and was also worth 5 credits. At one point we had 4 out of 5 consecutive weeks off of classes with no homework; great for travelling, not so great for learning. I took a Norwegian language class that was a bit more work, but only had a 100% final. I really recommend taking a language class; it was very interesting and a lot of fun, and of course full of other exchange students. Not to mention it really helped to integrate and be comfortable in Norway. Though it was very hard to practice; everyone in Norway speaks perfect English! Expect to have a lot of free time around your classes, which is great for travelling around the country and around Europe.

Travelling in Norway, like everything else, is very expensive. Make sure you take into account the cost of getting to the airport when
flying anywhere, as if you fly with RyanAir or another cheap airline it is not uncommon that the flights are less expensive than the bus. I took advantage of being in Northern Europe, and rather than explore Western Europe, which would be easier from a more central location, I travelled around the Nordic countries and Eastern Europe. Bussing to Sweden is quite inexpensive, and Stockholm is my favorite city I visited the whole time I was on exchange. It is also cheap to go to the Baltic Countries so make sure to check out Estonia and Latvia. There is also some free or very cheap cruises to Copenhagen. These are a lot of fun (an overnight ferry with cheap alcohol) and you get to spend a day in Copenhagen! Also, while going to Iceland is still expensive, it is cheaper than from other places in Europe and amazingly pretty. I also travelled around Norway, which was really enjoyable. I went up north in the winter to the picturesque Trømsø and saw the Northern Lights, to Stavanger and hiked Preikestolen, and took the train to Bergen; an incredibly scenic adventure to a city surrounded by mountains. From Bergen you can also visit a few fjords (it is on the west coast) and take the railway to Flåm, which is among the most beautiful places I have ever been.

5 THE NORTHERN LIGHTS I SAW JUST OUTSIDE OF TRØMSØ.

The culture in Norway did not take that much getting used to. It is very similar to North America and Norway is one of the most Americanized countries in Europe. The one thing that I never got used to was just how collectively obsessed the nation is with cross country skiing. Everybody skis! And the saying that Norwegian children are born on skis is not far from the truth. I would frequently be riding the t-bane and find myself to be the only one going away from downtown not carrying skis going out in to the forest. Everything is closed on Sundays (including grocery stores), and the majority of the population takes this as an opportunity to hit the trails. I learnt to cross country ski while I was there and it was a lot of fun! There were trails five minutes away from Kringsjå. Also while I was there, there was the Holmenkollen ski jumping festival, an event followed by most of the city and with over 100,000 spectators.
The language barrier when speaking with individuals is nonexistent because of the level of English that everyone speaks, but it does make it harder to go to events organized by the school or just to get around because everything is written in Norwegian. One of the on campus activities I enjoyed anyway was the café-pubs that exist in every department’s building. For example, in the basement of the physics building there is a pub that is open during the day that serves waffles and coffee or tea for very cheap, and at night serves beer and other drinks with events from time to time. It is affordable, and a neat place to hang out. Some of my friends and I went every Tuesday for waffles.
There is a lot more I could write about, including brown cheese, the small but plentiful grocery stores, the kitchen parties (it is very expensive to go out to bars or clubs), and Oslo itself, but it is impossible to encapsulate the entire exchange experience in one relatively short report. As cliché as it is, I learnt a lot about myself while on exchange. But more than that, my outlook on the world has changed significantly. Living in another country made me a lot more aware of Canadian culture, and really made me think about how other people live. It opened my mind to new ideas, new ways of doing things, and made me reconsider a lot of the things I take for granted in Canada. That perspective is something I feel can’t be learned in a classroom, and something I will take with me for the rest of my life.

8 PART OF THE ENORMOUS PARADE OF MAY 17TH, NORWAY’S NATIONAL DAY (NASJONALDAG).