Preparation for Exchange

The time before my trip was a little stressful. Watching the months turn into weeks, and weeks morph into days, I found myself in a bit of a panic over whether I was really prepared or not. The one comfort that I had, though, was knowing that many exchange students in the past had gone through the same experience that I was having in one way or another. Luckily for me, there was a wealth of information and resources, including reports like the one I’m writing here, that I accessed to better prepare myself for my upcoming exchange. In the same way that those resources helped me, I hope that the experiences I’ve gained during my exchange and am detailing here will be useful to anyone regardless of whether they’re headed to South Korea or not.

PACKING

To jump straight in, in my experience, packing will vary considerably between different people and different lifestyles. There is no one packing guide that will suit everybody. Deciding what to pack will eventually come down to your own preferences. But don’t stress about whether you need exactly seven or ten t-shirts because anything that you might need or forgot to bring will be easily found in a city like Seoul. Personally, I didn’t need more than one medium suitcase and my backpack for the entirety of my four months in South Korea. Bringing less means that you’re carrying less through the airport by yourself and that you’ll have some extra space for whatever you might buy.

ACADEMIC DETAILS

As I got closer to leaving, there were several important things I had to take care of such as applying directly to SNU, applying for a student visa, and registering for courses and dorms. The exchange coordinator at SNU sent detailed information as to what was needed and when the deadlines were. Also, the school websites, like the course registration site, are easy to find and contain useful information. One important thing to note is that certain items have very tight deadlines. Both the registration for courses and dorms (if you plan on living on campus) are extremely competitive and the time windows for completing everything is short. I highly recommend applying for the SNU Buddy program as they plan numerous group events throughout the semester that will make it extremely easy to make friends.
TRAVEL & FINANCES

Travel and transportation are straightforward as there are numerous resources on the internet designed to help you plan your trip. Personally, I used Google Flights and AirBnB to book my flights and any additional accommodation. Compared to Vancouver, I found that Seoul was similar in terms of cost of living. Of course, however, this can heavily depend on your lifestyle and spending habits. Living in Seoul can be as cheap or as expensive as you want it to be as you have a myriad of choices when it comes to food, accommodation, entertainment, and more. In my experience, using credit cards tended to be more convenient as almost all establishments shy of the traditional markets will take card. Having cash on hand is always handy, though, as some places can’t take foreign cards. Applying for a domestic bank account and debit card is painless and free to do with several bank branches on campus.

During Exchange

Arriving in Seoul for the first time in my life alone, not knowing anyone, and in the dead of night was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. For the few days before the official move-in date at the dorms, I stayed in an AirBnB near the university. There was an official orientation presented by the school’s Office of International Affairs as well as an unofficial one put together by the school’s SNU Buddy club. Both are worth attending as they give useful information for getting around both inside and outside the university.

LIVING

Moving into the dorms was relatively easy and painless, but the overall experience may not be great for everyone. Although the dorms are extremely cheap and affordable, some of them are also very old and cramped. There are much newer and more comfortable buildings, but the selection process is largely random perhaps because the demand is high. There are many options for off-campus accommodations, but I decided to go to with the dorms because it was easier to arrange, cheaper, and closer. Despite ending up at one of the oldest buildings, I spent most of my time outside of the dorms, which made the stay bearable for me in the end. Besides being able to wake up 15 minutes before class and still make it on time, living on campus has many upsides. Socializing was effortless because everything and everyone was so close together in proximity, and every day consisted of spontaneous outings and/or mini unofficial events. All in all, while the dorms might not be what I was comfortable with, it was a novel and extremely rewarding experience for me. As a side note, as of Fall 2019, there is a set of new
dorm buildings recently constructed that will likely change the process and availability of on-campus housing for students.

CLASSES

Generally, I found that the structure and format of classes at SNU was very similar to what I’m used to at SFU. Of course, though, my experience is limited to the classes offered entirely in English language instruction as well as within courses in the humanities departments. It's entirely possible that the English instruction courses are tailored to more international students and that courses in other faculties be structured differently. For more information, I would recommend looking up course details on the SNU course registration site and contacting professors or advisors directly.

SOCIAL

Once again, I highly recommend signing up for the school’s unofficial buddy program that is almost entirely run by SNU students as a club. The buddies contribute an enormous amount of work and effort into the program in order to provide an amazing experience for all the exchange students. The program itself gave me an environment where I could make friends effortlessly in a group of over 300 people. When signing up, there was a website where exchange students could choose from a list of profiles of buddies to connect with to be personal buddies with. From there, we were put into 10 different groups of about 30 people each and composed of a mix of Korean buddies and exchange students. There were events several times a week and took up lots of my time because the people were so much fun to be around and I wanted to participate as much as possible. Aside from hanging out with your personal buddy, the events ranged from things like weekly lunches, dinners, and nights out as well to outings to places like Lotte World, Gyeongbukgung Palace, and the Han River together in our groups. There were also weekly pub nights held where everyone in the program came out to drink together (at a place called Casstown where you might soon become familiar with) and buddy-wide events held once or twice a month. Seoul has an enormous variety of things to pick and choose from when it comes to socializing, nightlife, tourist attractions, and much more. With the amazing people I met in SNU Buddy, I made countless memories that made my time at SNU and in South Korea all the more special.
Reflection After Exchange

Returning home has been a little bit of a struggle as I have had to slowly re-accommodate to life back home in Vancouver. Going abroad for an extended time for the first time in my life has allowed me to experience all the subtleties and not-so-subtleties of living in an entirely foreign country with its own culture, customs, language, and more. For me, this has literally and figuratively opened my eyes to the knowledge of another world. There were many situations and challenges that, although they might not have seemed like it at the time, has made me grow and develop as a person over the course of the last few months.

From attempting to learn a new language and having to attempt to communicate using it, to meeting and interacting with other people from all over the world as well as studying different things at a foreign institution, these were all opportunities that I was able to experience by going on exchange. Whereas I expected and thought of this past term to feel long and drawn out, it has turned out to be short and fleeting as the months have passed by all so quickly. These times have been so jam-packed full of amazing experiences that, looking back, I can’t imagine what might have happened in a scenario where I’d have chosen differently and ended up not going on exchange.

At the same time, in considering all the novel experiences that I’ve had, it has been important for me to remember that this adventure is not necessarily a definite beginning and end of something that might have been momentarily relevant and then not again now that I’ve returned. The connections made before, during, and after this time are all continuous in that time itself hasn’t paused simply for me to go off across the ocean and come back. With that in mind, its comforting to know that many of the people I’ve befriended will remain with me after this period in varying capacities. Realizing that my encounters are both special and not-so-special simultaneously has helped me to stay grounded, readjust myself, and reflect on my experience from a new perspective.

To return to the larger context, however, making an effort to stay in contact with my now distant—but-only-physically friends has helped ease my ongoing transition here. As I look towards the near future and hope to return to South Korea sometime, I find comfort in knowing that this experience is not one that I’ll be forgetting anytime soon.
Normal day at one of the numerous on-campus cafeterias.

Outing to Gwangjang Market with my group.
SNU Buddy-wide overnight event “Temple Stay” at Guinsa Temple.

Water activities with my group in Gapyeong as part of our overnight trip.