Introduction

Partner university: Sungkyunkwan University (SKKU)
Country: Seoul, South Korea
Major: Business Administration
Term: Fall 2019

Pre-departure

One of the most important factors about exchange is the kind of courses they offer and luckily at SKKU, there is a range of different classes that exchange students can take. You will be given a student ID and password a week or two before the course registration time to access the Kingo Portal where you can find or add courses to your course bag. However, it is important to note that course registration is extremely competitive in SKKU, so it is likely that you will only be able to get into 1-2 of your desired classes. In this case, it is up to you to email the professor prior to class for permission to enrol in the class or to register for class offline by attending the first lecture.

On the logistical side, the Korean student visa is very easy to obtain once you receive the "Letter of Acceptance" from SKKU. The Korean Consulate offices are also conveniently located in downtown Vancouver and it only takes about 2 weeks for them to process your documents. Please bring cash for them as they do not accept card payments. Additionally, the dorm offices require all students to submit a TB test result before moving in. You can go to VAC, a travel clinic about a 7 minute walk away from the consulate, and they can do this exam for you for $50 (this was one of the cheapest options I found online). Just be sure to phone them a few days in advance to make an appointment. In terms of airfare, I started monitoring prices about a month in advance. They can go for quite cheap depending on which airline you take.

For my four month trip, I packed everything I needed in one 24” suitcase, but I did bring another empty 26” luggage because I am expecting accumulated a lot of things during my trip. Most of this consisted of a few shirts, hoodies, pants, shorts and a denim jacket. Since it can get really cold in Korea compared to Vancouver, I decided to buy a long down parka when I got to Seoul to save luggage space. If you arrive in the last weeks of summer, you can actually get these winter jackets for pretty cheap at the department store because of the off-season.

Finally, in regards to the transportation, getting around Seoul is very easy because of their extensive metro line and buses. They operate very frequently even if it is late at night and it spans all over the city. Taxis are also quite affordable if you find yourself stranded after transit hours.

Departure

The SKKU orientation took place a few days before the start of school. This is a great opportunity to meet other exchange students, as you are placed in groups, and to meet your GPS buddy if you chose to register for the program. I recommend that you also go early and walk around the campus first as the only type of tour the orientation provided was a digitally filmed one. Additionally, there is an after party at a bar (tickets for this will be sold the day of).

Accommodation wise, I was placed in the domestic girls dorm (G-House) which was about a 20 minute walk away from school. A shuttle bus was also offered during the morning rush, but from my
understanding, this was not an option other dormitories. The rooms were decently sized for two people with a toilet and shower. Washers and dryers were located on the basement floor with each cycle costing 1,000 won. Unfortunately, my dorm did not actually have a kitchen, which made it impossible for any cooking to be done. Otherwise, dormitory was actually quite nice and secure with a security guard in the lobby almost 24 hours a day.

Academically, SKKU is very similar to attending classes at SFU. Business classes typically ran for 3 hours once a week or 1.5 hours twice a week. Course sizes ranged from about 18-70 students with about 4 exchange students per class. The university actually has decent range of classes taught in English. However, I had some professors who would speak or answer questions in Korean without translating, so do be aware of this. In terms of grading, SKKU does use the bell curve, but certain classes will separate local and exchange students when assigning letter grades. The upside is that because the lectures are delivered in English, professors are more lenient with giving high marks. For instance, the guideline for many business classes are that 50% of students will receive grades of B or higher. During my exchange term, I primarily ate at the cafeterias located in the Business Building or 600th Building. Meals are priced anywhere between 3,500-6,000 won. The area around campus, called Hyehwa, is also scattered with various activities to do (like coin karaoke, bowling alleys, 24 hour cafes, batting cages and bars) and student friendly cheap eats.
The climate in South Korea varies greatly. In the summer months, temperatures went as high as 36 degrees but by late December, temperatures fell to as low as -12. Unlike Vancouver, Seoul does not actually see much rainfall except in September when it is typhoon season. In these cases, it will downpour for a week, coupled with heavy winds, and you can experience some minor flooding on the streets or large puddles on the sidewalks. SKKU is also conveniently located near lots of the famous palaces in Seoul. They are very affordable to explore (about 5,000 maximum for entry or free if you rent a hanbok) and is a good way to immerse yourself in Korean history. Dongdaemun is approximately a 15 minute walk away and many performing art events will be hosted there. A popular tourist and shopping called Myeongdong is located about 10 minutes by bus or a 40 minute walk. Here, you can find a wide array of cosmetic and clothing stores, as well as various types of food from street vendors.

Sadly, I could only enter Korea once on the D-2 student visa. This means that travel out of country impossible for me until I received my Alien Registration Card (ARC) about a month later. Luckily, there’s a lot of places to go outside of Seoul. For instance, Gapyeong is located about an hour away from SKKU and is home to Nami Island, Petite France and the Gamcheon Rail Carts. Korea also has a train system and intercity bus that runs from one end of the peninsula to the other, and depending on the type of bus or train you take, it can be very affordable. I was able to explore the port city of Busan, Daegu, Gwangju and various parts of Gyeonggido). In these cities, you'll find various attractions ranging from cute villages to landmarks representing major historical events. On the other hand, Jeju Island is also a must see destination. The island is about an hour plane ride away from Seoul with roundtrip tickets going as low as 60,000 won. There you can find numerous beaches, hike to the top of a volcano and take a ferry to see another small island called Udo. Jeju was definitely a personal favourite with its stunning views and gorgeous sunsets. It is important to note that transportation on the island is limited to buses only, which often only comes every 30 minutes. If possible, it would be best to get your international driver licence and rent a car.
One thing I wish prior to arriving in Korea was knowing where I could exchange CAD to won for the best rates. The reason being that depending on the area you are in (i.e. Dongdaemun vs. Ewha), the rates can actually be quite different. Therefore, one tip is to do research online. I found that the currency store in front of the Chinese Embassy located in Myeongdong were the best. They were generally just 10 won under what the market offered. Moreover, I wished I had gone to open my bank account with someone who understood Korean or with a teller that spoke English. When making my student account at Woori Bank, I was just expected to sign a lot of papers without understanding what it entailed. Hence, I was not aware that the bank would take 20,000 won a month to place it in a savings account that I could not touch until I cancelled my card. One way to work around this is by getting a Citibank visa, and according to some of my Australian friends, they tend to give acceptable conversion rates.

Post-Exchange

Streets of Gwangju (the 6th largest city in South Korea)  
Local beach located in Jeju island