SPRING 2017

Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Barcelona, Spain
Introduction
I am in my third year at the Beedie School of Business and went on exchange to Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain. My exchange was during Spring 2017 from January to March 2017. This university is also on a trimester system like SFU and had short 3-month semesters. I chose Spain because I wanted to improve my Spanish; I took a Spanish course while I was there and got to practice the things I learned in class. Studying abroad has been the best experience of my life and I would do it all over again (and more) if I could!

Preparation for Exchange

Packing:
Aside from your standard travel necessities, there were a few things that you may not typically think to bring when going abroad that I found were very useful to have (or wish I had brought). The following are some of my recommendations:

- Indoor slippers
- Ziploc bags and food containers (if you plan to be cooking at home)
- Tape
- Big reusable bag (for things like laundry)
- Souvenirs for new friends you meet! (I regret not bringing anything)

Visas and Finances:
Normally, to study for an extended period of time in Spain you would need to get a visa. I was planning on applying for one but in the end, I decided to stay in Spain for exactly 90 days (the maximum amount of time allowed without a visa) because my semester was just under 3 months. I had no problem entering and exiting Spain without a visa. I didn’t have to show my UPF acceptance letters at the border but I had them with me in case they requested to see it.

The cost of living in Spain is cheaper than in Vancouver but the amount of money you spend will vary depending on how often you eat out, what types of activities you engage in, and where you travel on the weekends. Groceries, accommodation, and entertainment activities are relatively cheaper compared to Vancouver. However, I found that eating at restaurants was basically the same cost as Vancouver.

Almost all stores took credit cards but the most common method of payment seemed to be cash. I mainly used cash and only used my credit card for online payments such as flight tickets for trips. I would recommend bringing both.
During Exchange

Arrival and Orientation:
I arrived at the El Prat airport in Barcelona at night time. There are many ways to get to the city from the airport. The easiest and most convenient way to get to the city centre is to take the Aerobus (but of course this is more expensive than taking the city bus or metro). The Aerobus is what I typically used to get to and from the airport because it runs every 10 minutes during peak times and tickets can be pre-purchased online. It also has an area to store suitcases so I would recommend taking this bus during your initial entrance to Barcelona. The terminus station is Placa Catalunya which is the central area of Barcelona, and close to UPF.

There was an orientation at UPF in a large auditorium where we received information about the next few months and the services provided at the school. I made a few friends there but it was difficult because the majority of the students were from the USA and already knew each other prior to coming. There was also no ice breaker activities to help us meet new people. It was an informational orientation but not particularly a fun, activity-filled one. I made most of my friends in class in the following weeks.

Differences in the School System:
As Barcelona is the capital city of Catalunya, almost everyone living there speaks Catalan (and Spanish). UPF is a Catalan university and so all the signs in the school are in Catalan, not Spanish, which was confusing at times.

The cafeteria food at UPF was cheap and very good. I went to the cafeteria almost everyday that I was at school to get a “cafe con leche” and croissant or to buy lunch. They sell alcohol at school which I surprised to see. Drinking and smoking on campus was allowed.
At UPF there is a program for exchange students called Hispanic and European Studies (HESP). I took courses from this program but the only setback is that you only meet American students in them and they did not fulfil any of my business course requirements. However, they were very interesting and a unique experience. For example, I took a course about FC Barcelona... where would you ever be able to take a course like that? My favourite class was Spanish and it was 4 times a week for 2 hours in the morning. The rest of the HESP classes are all in the afternoon which is good if you plan on travelling or going out at night.

**Lifestyle and Culture**

Although I was in Barcelona from January to March (winter time), the weather was beautiful. The temperature was considered cold for the citizens but compared to Vancouver it was warm. It was probably sunny or cloudy for 90% of the time I was there. In January it was a bit cold with temperatures ranging from 5 to 15 degrees. In February and March it started to warm up to 15 to 25 degrees. Keep in mind that even on a sunny 20 degree days it is not common for people to wear shorts; you will attract attention that you are a foreigner if you do.

The restaurant/bar culture is very different in Spain than Canada. Tipping is not expected nor required but if you receive great service it is nice to leave a small tip. Typically, if you want to order water, you will have to get bottled water and pay for it. It is very uncommon to ask for free tap water. It was often cheaper to get an alcoholic drink or juice than to get a bottle of water so that is what I ended up doing most of the time. I recommend trying a Catalan drink called Cacaolat which is common to drink cold or hot. It tastes like chocolate milk or hot chocolate. Most restaurants do not have hosts; you often walk in and greet the waiter and just seat yourself. Because of the nice weather, it is equally common to sit outside as it is to sit inside. Most people sitting outside, however, were smoking. It is also not uncommon to day drink. You will notice many people sitting at local bars and cafes drinking a beer in the morning or afternoon. There are many cute artsy bars hidden within the city that are easy to miss. "Don’t judge a book by its cover" is really important when travelling because some of the best experiences aren’t the fancy, chain restaurants you see everywhere but the shabby place run by a local family.
Almost everyone speaks Catalan and Spanish. If you have a basic knowledge of Spanish, you will be fine. Much of the older generation and employees at local stores will not speak English. Workers in the touristy areas will typically know English and many restaurants have menus in Catalan, Spanish and English. However, if you have no knowledge of Spanish I do recommend learning at least the basics and taking Spanish during your study abroad semester. The language tells you so much about a culture and I think it is respectful to the country you will be living in to try to communicate in Spanish (or Catalan). It will add so much more to your experience to embrace their culture and try to be a part of it.

**Social and Extracurricular Activities:**
Barcelona is fairly big city with so much to do and see. I really recommend travelling around Barcelona and all the unique neighbourhoods with local restaurants, as well as going to the other parts of Spain. A few local activities I recommend are:

- Watching the sunset at The Bunkers (Bunquers del carmel)
- Joining The Free Walking Tour (if you are interested in learning about Barcelona’s history)
- Trying out a salsa class at the City Hall near Placa Catalunya on Mondays for 5 euro
- Watching a Flamenco Show (preferably in Andalucia)
- Joining Erasmus through UPF
- Watching an FCB match at Camp Nou

**Reflection After Exchange**
As cliché as it sounds, the biggest thing I got out of going on exchange is growing as an individual and learning about myself. Prior to this exchange I had never travelled alone
before. I didn’t even know how to navigate an airport nor what a boarding pass even really was. Living alone and having to figure everything out on my own has really made me more of an independent person and comfortable doing things by myself. I also learned a lot about myself in terms of personal and professional aspirations. While on exchange I decided to switch majors... I went from planning to graduate with an accounting major and get a CPA to pursuing a Joint Major with Business and Environment. I have a new found passion to learn Spanish. I have been continuing to study on my own time since my return to Vancouver.

Some challenges I faced were getting used to the different lifestyle there such as using their transit system, buying groceries at the supermarket (yes, even buying groceries is different than Canada), and communicating in Spanish. Fortunately, I was living in a shared flat with other locals and they helped me out a lot during my stay with questions like this. It was nice to make friends outside of school from different backgrounds and ages that I can spend time with.