Preparation for exchange

Once my exchange semester abroad in Sweden was confirmed, I wrote a checklist of important time-sensitive tasks such as looking into flights and applying for student housing. Most were fairly easy to mark off, but I failed to foresee how some documentation I needed required waiting for other organizations to process them. Fortunately, my residence permit got processed quicker than most, but since the application required formal documents from the partner university confirming both my course enrollment and student housing, my advice to future exchange students would be to apply for things as soon as you are able since these organizations all run on their own schedules and you never know which step of the process will experience a delay.

Due to sudden issues with course selection, I had to defer my exchange by one semester, but this worked in my favour since the deferral was processed before I booked my flight, and the course I was most interested in during my initial research was now offered after being previously unavailable. Once the beginning of my exchange grew close, I did research on what would be available at my dorm, and then packed the minimum of clothes, electronics, and other supplies I would need to live comfortably for five months. It was useful to visualize my daily life since small, yet important things like power adapters and winter boots are easy to forget about. I also listed what I could or should buy while in Sweden, especially since I limited myself to three bags. I knew that Sweden was a mostly card-based society, but I packed some Swedish krona just in case, and figured certain quality-of-life details like public transportation and mobile plans would be better learned through people already living in Sweden. I was prepared for some initial inconveniences in the first few weeks as I experienced my first time not only living in a foreign country, but living alone.
During Exchange

About 18 hours of apprehensive travel ended with a sigh of relief as I spotted some people at the third train stop wearing vests reading “Malmo University”. Since it was already Arrival Day, my jet-lagged brain was immediately put to use socializing with students gathered from all across the world and listening to important information regarding our two week introduction program. As my course would start afterwards, my first two weeks in Malmo was dedicated to attending info sessions and social events, learning the streets between the university and my dorm, and experiencing mild frustrations with installing a Swedish SIM card, paying next month’s rent, and finding any place that sells chopsticks. Mere information was often hard to find through language barriers and implicit common knowledge so I’m still grateful to those few people who were able to help me address issues like this.

As recommended by friends of mine who completed exchange semesters in Malmo before me, I stayed in student housing reserved for international students, hoping to also enjoy the intercultural exchange. While the first few days were indeed like this, the fact that there were over twenty of us in this floor sharing the same kitchen and laundry room quickly became the sourest experience of my entire exchange term. This was not only because whenever I would go eat something from my single refrigerator shelf, the tables would be cluttered or attracting flies, but because twenty people gathered from around the world creates inevitable social barriers. Unless you enjoy sports, love to party, or speak French, it’s a near impossible task to befriend the main clique, much less the entire floor. I was doing well at first, but I eventually needed time to myself and my own interests, and started opting to miss floor-wide events to the point where it was pretty clear that I was an outlier. Of course, no one can be faulted since it is simply a lack of shared interests, but I still had to live with these people. Having dinner meant being dressed and prepared to deal with either a rowdy group using up all of the stovetops, or the awkward silence from cooking next to someone you’ve spoken with once before but now won’t even greet you when you enter. Also, an outlier can’t exactly object to loud parties with dozens of drunken strangers continuing until 3 AM. It was hard to go one night without feeling annoyed, excluded, or regretful that I let my distance from them grow this far.

Fortunately, the rest of my experience abroad was very positive. Malmo can get very breezy, which was nice on hot days, and saw less rain overall than in Vancouver. People are quiet and keep to themselves, which is nice for walks on the streets, but getting information or services can be tricky when most places close before evening. Pretty much every shop accepts both cash and credit, and based on the exchange rate, it sure felt like food was cheaper than in Vancouver, although I can’t say the same for transit. Malmo is considered a multicultural city with everyone except two people I spoke with being able to speak English, but considering they often seemed uncomfortable when forced to switch from speaking Swedish to English, it would probably be polite to learn some basic Swedish instead of assuming five months will fly by like I did. Also, most signs and menus are in Swedish too so don’t expect much English text to appear and help you out.
Simply walking around and experiencing the urban design of Malmo was amazing. Buildings are arranged neatly by the rivers, a wide variety of shops are all in close proximity, and practically every street has a dedicated bike road, which makes riding a bike through Malmo smooth, fast, safe, and super fun, unless it's snowing. Since I'm the type to get satisfied by simply visiting landmarks, the best place I can recommend visiting is Pildammsparken, one of Malmo’s biggest public parks. I still remember the utter awe I felt when I climbed a hill and saw this grand stone stage on the other side.
My experience with a full-time course at Malmo University was very different from SFU courses, mostly from how while the latter would have consistent weekly schedules, every week of my exchange semester would have me go on different days of the week at different times, and often in different classrooms or buildings. Each major module in my multimedia course would have different instructors specialized in the related field such as film, audio, literature, and games, and as expected, lecture material and assignments were generally backed by actual industry knowledge and graded fairly. This course was arguably the best part of my exchange because more than half of the other students were fellow international students, eager to make the most of this educational experience, and everyone seemed genuinely interested in the topics, making it really easy to learn each other’s names and make good friends, something I haven’t experienced since I was in first year.

Reflection After Exchange

My time in Sweden showed me how I compare with the rest of the world. While I was able to make a few friends, our interests would rarely overlap, and it became important to make an active effort towards mutual compassion and understanding. As previously described, most of my challenges came from living in the wrong dorm, a situation that could have been avoided had I taken the time to properly research the living conditions instead of blindly following people’s recommendations. Just because others had a fun and fulfilling time studying abroad doesn’t guarantee the same for you; you have to consider who you are, what you can handle alone, and what would make you feel fulfilled before making a decision as large as going on an international exchange.
That said, I do not regret a single day of my semester abroad. While I may have encountered difficulty interacting with so many types of people, it was through such failures that I learned to truly appreciate times of success. I experienced how human connections are formed when you diligently encourage someone to express their unique values and perspectives, and learned to identify and appreciate the efforts of others who do this. Having to live alone also meant gaining more life experience than I ever could have from my family-supported lifestyle. I made mistakes and achieved successes with traveling, managing money, feeding myself, and collecting the information to do all of this effectively.

As such, in response to those hesitant about studying abroad after reading my story, I say the self-discovery you attain from depending on yourself is much more valuable than the generic fulfillment of simply seeing places and meeting people. Of course, if you can attain self-discovery through the latter actions, then you will definitely have a better time abroad than I did. Just don’t forget to start preparing and collecting information early, especially if you’ll have to communicate with another time zone.