In addition to preparing your visa application before departing for exchange, it is also useful to do some research beforehand regarding which phone plans you can get, which bank you can open an account with and do some general research on the area you will be staying at so you can better plan for transportation (if you should need any, such as taking the tram or bus to class). The most common phone plan carrier is Sunrise, with relatively affordable rates and their national Postbank is the most common bank used by students, with ATM’s all over the city (some close to campus) and easy access to an online banking account which they set up for you. In Switzerland, people mainly use cash for payment in stores and cafes and restaurants however; almost all places also allow for payment through Swiss debit cards. Canadian credit cards also work at some larger or more globally known stores. The cost of living is significantly higher than in Vancouver, for instance a Starbucks cup of coffee will be worth double in Canadian dollars in Basel. Living expenses are also high in terms of restaurant and grocery store prices. The largest grocery store chain in the city is Migros, which has multiple locations across the city. There are also large department stores, spread out all over the city, which are definitely worth a visit, with multiple floors and selling a varied range of products.

Basel has an interconnected transport system, which will allow you to easily travel around the city as well as cross the border and visit Germany or France. The main form of transportation is their distinctly painted green trolleys. Most longer distance trolleys and trains all converge at their train station called the SBB, very close to the city center. The cost for transport is relatively affordable, with monthly passes available as well as daily or weekly passes, which can be purchased directly at automated kiosks, which are located at each station. However, most places within the city (including the University) are easily accessible by foot and most people walk in the city rather than taking public transportation or driving. Taxicabs are uncommon in Basel and are very expensive.

Within the first week of arriving at Basel, you will get in contact with the exchange office at the university, where they will help you with directing you to their city hall to get your residency permit, ID and confirm your health insurance status (all visitors in Basel must arrive with health insurance, therefore it is wise to plan ahead). There is an orientation provided for all the exchange students and you can also join the exchange student network (Basel ESN), and go on monthly excursions and events. On campus the University provides housing, but it is not uncommon for students to rent an apartment and share with other students in the city.

The lectures and format of courses are very similar to those of SFU, with large lecture sizes and lecture halls as well as smaller class sizes more geared towards higher-level
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courses and include discussions similar to a tutorial. Depending on the classes you take, they generally range anywhere from 2-4 hours, with some lectures also having a tutorial component. The registration for the courses is done online, and the university will provide you will registration details and aid you with creating an online account and setting up your university email.

Basel is very similar to Vancouver in terms of weather variability; however, there is less rain, with generally mild weather. The general culture there is also similar to Vancouver and there isn’t much culture shock involved when arriving in Switzerland for the first time. Many of the same stores and restaurant chains that are prevalent in Vancouver are also present in Basel. Since Basel is very close the French and German border, it is easy to travel to those countries and visit nearby cities on a weekly basis. There are many castles and beautiful fields and mountainous ranges surrounding Basel and it is a relatively short distance to travel by train to visit those places. Basel is better known for their unique cafes and unique bars and restaurants. Unlike Vancouver, the nightlife scene in Basel is not as prevalent, and the city is usually very quiet after stores close at 8pm. All stores are closed on Sundays (except for museums and the stores at the SBB train station, which includes a grocery store). There are countless museums in Basel, each worth visiting during your exchange, such as their famous Tinguely Museum, Anatomy Museum, Museum of Natural History and the Toy Museum. However there are many more museums in Basel, I suggest doing prior research and decide which museums interest you the most and you would like to visit. The Basel Zoo is also a very beautiful place to visit, which also includes a terrarium and large aquarium. The cost of these places are relatively high, however student discounts and available, and the Museum of Natural History does have free entrance on select days of the week.

REFLECTION

After my academic exchange to Basel, I developed a better understanding of what it means to have a global mindset and gained an appreciation for having an international experience. The network you create while on exchange will stay with you for years to come, and provides you with the opportunity to visit Switzerland again and perhaps pursue graduate studies at the university post-undergrad. There were not many challenges in Basel, as the administrative office and exchange advisors at the University, as well as the exchange student network makes it easy for incoming students to feel welcome and get accustomed to the city and the culture. The main advice to prospective exchange students to Universität Basel is to take full advantage of the clubs and amenities they have at the university, such as their gym and fitness program and various student run clubs.
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PHOTOS

View of the city and the church from the river

Photograph of the city during Christmas
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Photograph of the river and the bridge at night

View from the top of a 15th century German castle at a nearby village