Preparation

The application process was straightforward and processed through the SFU study abroad department which provided all the necessary information to apply. Researching potential courses at the host university during the application was done by browsing through courses offered in current and past semesters on their website.

As per the host university’s instructions, I entered Turkey on a tourist visa and applied for a residence permit during university orientation.
Valid health insurance was a requirement for the residency permit. While several students purchased health insurance locally, it is more convenient to acquire travel health insurance in advance.

Istanbul is a modern city in which I had no issues finding what I needed. Nevertheless, phones, computers and high end sports equipment are relatively expensive due to taxes, I suggest avoiding the purchase such items in Turkey. It may also be worth bringing some specialty non-perishable foods as most foreign food products are not commonly found in Istanbul.

Outside of mosques, it is of little consequence whether or not conservative clothing or head scarves are worn. As such, it is not mandatory to pack such items for Istanbul. Nevertheless, as smaller towns and Southern/Eastern cities tend to think and dress more conservatively, packing a conservative attire set may facilitate travel if intending to visit the rest of the country, though headscarves are never mandatory outside of mosques.

**Financial details**

Though Credit cards are widely accepted in Turkey, the country is heavily cash based. While bars and large supermarkets accept credit cards, street vendors, local shops and minibuses only accept cash. Turkish Lira (TL) is the Turkish currency. I suggest buying enough Turkish lira to cover transport from the airport and some more to cover expenses over the next couple of days in case there are issues withdrawing cash while in Turkey. At the same time, I advise against keeping large sums of TL due to currency depreciation.

Cost of living is a significantly lower in Istanbul than in Canada. With certain notable exceptions such as bananas and imported alcohol, most food was significantly cheaper. Furthermore, rent is incomparably cheaper. I suggest doing an internet search to review up to date cost of living figures.

Koç University offered dormitory placement for all exchange students. For the undergraduate three person dormitory room option, ten months cost me ~US$ 1,100. Off campus accommodation generally costs slightly more but can have the benefit of being closer to the city compared to the dormitories.
On Exchange

Country Information

Istanbul has fantastic weather throughout the academic year. While Istanbul’s winter resembles Vancouver’s, the cold period is relatively short and it has less annual rainfall and cloudy days. Nevertheless, climate can vary widely across Turkey.

Turkish cuisine relies heavily on meat and animal products, butter in particular. Most restaurants have few, if any, vegan options and staff are not always helpful. Vegetarians and vegans should expect to have to do most of the research or cooking on their own.

Something I was not expecting was the clash between nationalist views and religious ones. These are sensitive topics to argue over but these are very relevant to understanding modern Turkey and almost everyone I met had an opinion and was willing to share it.

English education in Turkey is very poor outside of university, many locally educated Turks, even doctors, do not understand much of English. Learning even a little bit of Turkish can be a big help.
The main square of Koç University.

Arrival

During my last semester at the host institution, incoming exchange students needed to make their own way to the university. I recommend visitors to have a look at the map of the airport area and be aware of the methods of transportation from the airport to their destination.

When I arrived at the Atatürk International Airport, the arrival terminal, though small, was not intuitive. Moreover, the airport Wi-Fi network was designed in such a way that it can only be accessed with a Turkish phone number. If necessary, get free Wi-Fi from the Starbucks Coffee shop in the domestic departure area.

Incoming exchange student orientation begins one week prior to classes and lasted five days. I highly recommend attending orientation as it will provide students with the opportunity to meet the other exchange students, the local student volunteers, get their advice, get to know campus, apply for the residence permit and also help obtaining a Turkish SIM card.
Accommodation and Living

Off campus accommodation can be found by looking through various websites. Some exchange students took up room rentals posted in Facebook expat groups. Depending on location, it can become more convenient to reach the city at the expense of convenience travelling to campus.

Most exchange students chose dorms. All undergrad exchange students who choose to live in dorms were given a spot and assigned to three person rooms with a small fridge and three desks. These dormitories are located on the separate West campus, called “Koç Üniversitesi Batı Kampüsü” but referred to in its shortened form as “Batı”, it is an exclusively residential campus. Exchange students are assigned to Turkish roommates, usually freshmen taking pre-university English courses. Living with two roommates can lead to problems, in the worst cases, there is the option transfer to another three person room.

The university is extremely well funded and the facilities reflect this. Batı alone boasts a small cafeteria, one large common kitchen, a gym, a 25 meter indoor swimming pool and on site
doctor. Furthermore, there are several small grocers, restaurants and one bar in a ten minute walking radius.

Travelling between the Batı and main campus is done in public minibuses or university shuttle buses operating on a variable schedule which gets posted on the university website and on the bus stop. The distance can be covered in 45 minutes on foot if absolutely necessary.

Batı is surrounded by stray cats, dogs and even cows. Though they are mostly harmless, but bites and scratches can occur which still require the victim to undergo an inconvenient series of rabies shots.

Travelling from either campus to the metro is done by taking the previously mentioned minibus or the public buses. The commute takes between 15 minutes and 40 minutes depending on traffic. Commuting in the metro is straightforward. However, it is useful to keep in mind the metro service ceases shortly after midnight.

In the event of needing late night transportation, there is a night bus, number 40 Taksim to Rumelifeneri, which has a stop next to Batı. Uber is also a popular option.

Courses
Koç University’s academic curriculum is similar to that of SFU. The host university’s credits are equivalent to those of SFU as well. Most lectures followed the same format of 75 minutes twice a week. Attendance is mandatory.

Koç University is much smaller than SFU. As a result, the average class is smaller in size than SFU.

The language of instruction for almost all courses is English, however, it was common for Turkish professors to speak in Turkish during class. Some exchange students felt that this came to constitute a serious problem. If arrangements cannot be made by talking to the professor, it may be more useful to speak to the exchange supervisors.

With some exceptions, I was under the impression that the grading standards were more generous than at SFU.
Mt. Tahtalı and Mediterranean coast near Antalya, during KUDAK’s spring break trip.

**Social and Extracurricular Activities**

The majority of student club activities used Turkish as their only or majority language, most exchange students shied away from them after attending events after a couple of tries.

In spite of that, I highly recommend the Koç University Mountaineering Club (KUDAK). Trekking and rock climbing can be done with a very basic set of Turkish words. Additionally, they were willing to incorporate foreigners. They are very friendly and organize affordable mountaineering activities in various parts of Turkey roughly twice a month throughout the entire year.
Sunrise while scaling Mt. Hasan with KUDAK.

Reflection

I am extremely grateful for my amazing exchange experience thanks to some highly involved local students and the members of KUDAK. I am also glad that I spent two semesters there and took some Turkey based courses which allowed me to learn even more about the region.

The most common problems were related to dormitory roommates. Nobody thinks themselves to be in the wrong, be assertive, be clear and when a discussion needs to be had, do it sooner rather than later.

Tips:
- Always carry photo ID
- Attend Orientation
- If you need Wifi on arrival, find a Starbucks
Descending from Mt. Erciyes (3917m) with KUDAK.