Introduction:

I am a third year Communications and Political Science Major. When thinking about where I wanted to go on exchange, I knew that I wanted an experience that would challenge me academically and personally, and in an environment different than my own. I was fortunate enough to have the American University of Sharjah (AUS) as an option, and to be accepted into the program. While there were a lot of big adjustments I had to make that came with moving to a country very different from Canada, I can easily say that going on this exchange in the Spring of 2019 was one of the best choices I’ve ever made!

Preparation for Exchange:

Before departure, the International Exchange Office (IXO) at AUS was always available to answer the questions I had. This office was the sole point of contact I had with the university, which simplified communication. When planning courses, or trying to figure out what to take in the semester, the AUS website and course catalogue were very helpful. They tend to have the same courses each semester, but the IXO office can always confirm this ahead of time. To note, AUS often cancels courses when there aren’t enough students signed up, so do keep this in mind and plan ahead by having a couple of second-choice courses. Knowing this, IXO tries their best to find good alternatives, and place students in them. In terms of packing, IXO provides some guidelines, but I found that simply googling appropriate attire in the UAE was very helpful. Each emirate has different rules, so looking into what is suitable in Sharjah vs in Dubai is useful. Across the country, loose-long sleeved and long pants is always appropriate, and a good choice because of the hot weather.

If you’re flying through Sharjah or Dubai International Airport upon arrival to the UAE, the university provides transportation to campus if you let them know in advance. On a daily basis, the university provides a (paid) shuttle to the two main metro lines which is useful as the Dubai metro gets you to a lot of different places. With this, I paid quite a bit in taxi fares to get to more complicated parts of the cities, especially during the hotter weather when walking wasn’t a good choice. I would recommend budgeting for this, and definitely trying to make friends with people on campus who have cars. Sharjah is mostly a cash-based emirate, especially in markets. Aside from that, most emirates and retail outlets both on and off campus accept card. It’s always good to have cash on hand, and if your debit/credit card companies don’t charge you per transaction, there really is no need to open a local bank account. Even though exchange is an academic program, it’s easy to forget that and get caught up in the “vacation” mode of living abroad. Because of all the expenses that come with living in such a notoriously luxurious part of the world, I would definitely recommend making a budget, as a I wish I stuck to mine more rigorously.
During Exchange:

IXO puts on an amazing week-long orientation before classes start. During this time, they helped me get my visa and medical documents sorted, walked through rules and regulations that come with living in the UAE and attending AUS, and took us on many day trips to explore both Sharjah and Dubai. The dorms are no more than a five-minute walk from the main buildings (depends if you’re in men’s or women’s dorms). While living on campus is very convenient, AUS strongly enforces a couple of a rules. There are no men allowed in women’s dorms, and vice versa. The curfew for weeknights is midnight, and weekends is 1 am. This being said, the dorm supervisors are extremely helpful and are also a great resource on campus.

I found that courses at AUS are different to those at SFU. Lectures are scheduled so that they are multiple times a week: either Monday & Wednesday (1 hour and 15-minute lectures) or Sunday, Tuesday & Thursday (50-minute lectures). Fridays and Saturdays are the weekend. The workload is less intensive, but the required grade for passing (70%) is much higher. Knowing that, all classes are very small (35 people or less), so reaching out for help both during lecture and after is a lot easier.

Seeing that I went in the spring semester, that is considered part of “winter” in the UAE. During my time there, temperatures were anywhere between 25- 40 degrees Celsius. It got to be quite warm, but there are plenty of activities to do indoors during the peak heat times as well. I was fortunate to visit 4 other countries during my exchange (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey & Oman), and would highly recommend that students try to travel while there as well! The UAE is so centrally located that I managed to get in a couple of weekend trips, and went away for spring break as well. I wish I had better scheduled and budgeted to travel more during exchange.

Reflection After Exchange:

Regardless of where you choose to go, studying abroad is an unforgettable and unique experience. Despite there being some anxieties around travelling to the Middle East, I have never felt safer and happier than I did at AUS and in the UAE. It was my first time living away from home, so I had to “grow up” essentially and become a lot more independent. Once that initial hurdle was out of the way, I learned a lot more about myself and caught the travel bug. Studying abroad instilled in me a love for travel and exploration. As cliché as it sounds, I made friends from all over the world and gained perspectives that I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t gone on exchange.

Before leaving, I wish I had allotted more in the budget for social activities and travel and for any unexpected expenses. So, my biggest piece of advice is to embrace every part of this once in a lifetime experience, but be smart with your money! Whether it is at AUS or elsewhere, I hope your study abroad experience is as rewarding and memorable as mine was!

Photos:
American University of Sharjah (AUS) campus

Downtown Sharjah, taken on an IXO day out
Beach day, an IXO outing

The Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, an IXO day out
The Dead Sea in Jordan, during spring break