I am a fourth-year student pursuing a degree in Sociology and Latin American Studies. I chose to go on an exchange mostly to improve my Spanish, but also to experience a different culture and learn something new.

Before you go…

If you are unfamiliar with Argentina’s recent history or culture, I would suggest you pick up a book or at the very least, read a Wikipedia article about it. As you will discover, the country suffered a catastrophic economic and political collapse in 2001, which it is steadily recovering from. This crisis robbed many Argentineans of their savings, leading to riots in the streets, widespread vandalism, and a permanent distrust of authority. If you bring up the subject of politics with an Argentine, be prepared for a long and understandably bitter rant. Also, pay attention to the news. Argentina’s economic history has fluctuated on an almost decade-to-decade basis between strong upswings (like the one they are going through now) and devastating downturns (like 2001).

As far as paperwork is concerned, follow the Exchange Manual that SFU International gives you.

Accommodation and living…

There are a few options when it comes to accommodation in Buenos Aires. You can choose to go through the UB website and stay in a homestay or in an apartment with other UB students. Obviously there are potential advantages and disadvantages to both of these options. Homestays can be great for improving your Spanish as the majority of host families do not speak English to any degree of fluency. However, it is likely that you will be sharing the homestay with as many as three other exchange students who probably will speak English. Breakfasts and dinners are included in the homestay rent. I ultimately
decided against staying in a homestay because I was concerned that it would be too sheltered. I have heard that some host families insist on a curfew.

The furnished dorms and single apartments available through UB are also an option, though be prepared to pay top dollar. I was afraid that if I were living in a dorm I would spend the majority of my time speaking English and that if I was living alone, I would be too panic-stricken to leave the apartment. But that’s just me—I’m somewhat neurotic.

As many students had done before me, I decided to go through craigslist. I was looking to rent a room in a shared house or apartment and as luck would have it, I found one two weeks before I got on the plane. I ended up staying in a very nice townhouse in the Palermo area, owned by a young woman and shared with a French student and a Greek student. I was exceptionally lucky to find a place with such a friendly atmosphere. That is not to say that going through craigslist doesn’t come with risks. Whatever you do, do not send money ahead of time. Another option is to get on the plane without prior arrangements, stay in a hostel, and look at apartments from there. That way, you can see them first hand before making a commitment. I know several people who did that and were quite happy with what they found. These are the most recommended barrios for us foreigners: Belgrano, Palermo, Recoleta, Microcentro, and San Telmo.

Grocery shopping is pretty straight-forward. There are a number of major grocery chains in the city. Find yourself on a google map and look for these names: Disco, Carrefour, Coto, and Jumbo. There are also any number of produce markets and corner stores. If you go to a major supermarket, however, make sure you have at least an hour to spare. The cashiers are very, very slow. “Caja rapida” is an oxymoron.

Finances…

Argentine ATMs can be tricky things. Depending on what machine you use, they can put a daily limit on the amount of pesos you can withdraw. This can become an issue if you have to make a rent payment in excess of, say, 1000 pesos. Either you can spread your
withdrawals over several days or buy several thousand dollars (USD) worth of American Express Traveller’s Cheques. That way, you can take them to the Amex office (near the Plaza de San Martin) and have them converted to dollars or pesos. Usually landlords will accept either. Using US currency means fewer bills.

When it comes to using pesos, remember that there is a coin shortage. Store owners and cashiers will often be out of small change or extremely reluctant to hand it over. Try and hoard your coins, especially if you plan on taking the bus or train. Also, avoid paying with 100 peso notes for charges less than 50 pesos. This is important to remember especially if you are taking a taxi as they will often try to scam you by claiming it’s fake.

**Arrival at the airport…**

It is possible to arrange for a representative from UB to meet you at the airport and take you to the university, if that’s where you want to go. I arrived in the country two weeks before school started (something I recommend you do), so I had no interest in going to the school right away. I took a remise to my accommodation.

As you are about to leave the airport, there are a number of stalls with expectant looking attendants in them. Look for ones that say “remise.” **Do not** take one of the taxis waiting outside the exits. Just don’t. The remise attendants will ask you where you want to go and will quote you a price. If you want to shop around, you can, but it will likely only get you a ten peso ($3) difference. Once you’ve paid (in pesos), you will be taken to a driver outside. I paid 110 pesos to get to Palermo.

**Universidad de Belgrano…**

The academic aspect of the exchange was the most disappointing. I had been warned that UB—particularly the Latin American Studies program—was not the most well-organized or challenging, but I was expecting a little more professionalism than what I found. You will attend a pleasant orientation seminar and take a Spanish placement test (not difficult), followed by a scheduled appointment with your academic advisor. You will sign up for courses. If your Spanish is excellent, you may want to take a course with other Argentines. Be prepared for a pile of weekly readings.

PEAL classes are two hours a week with a reasonable amount of homework. If your grammar in Spanish isn’t the best, don’t worry. As long as you can get your point across, you should be OK. Lectures are in Spanish and don’t worry, you’ll get used to the heavy Argentine accent.

UB is a stickler for attendance. You will be given a magnetic strip card that you will have to pass through a machine before every class. Don’t forget to do it—it’s important. If you miss more than 25% of lectures, you cannot write the final. Mid-term and final exams are obligatory. If you miss the mid-term, you cannot write the final.
Make sure you email or visit your academic advisor if you have any questions about exams, schedules, or visas. Do not expect them to keep you informed. It is up to you to find out what is required for the visa and when the school is sending groups to the Migrations Office. I had to go through the process on my own and it was a major headache.

**Country facts and things to see…**

![Iguazu Falls](Image)

Though it depends on what courses you sign up for, your academic life should only take up about 40% of your schedule. If you sign up for the PEAL program, you will not have school on Fridays. If you are planning to take a few trips out of the city—which you would be a fool not to do—there are many popular destinations that you could see over the course of a three or four-day-weekend. Here are a few must-see locations: Iguazu Falls, Salta, Jujuy, Cordoba, Mendoza, Puerto Madryn, Uruguay (Montevideo, Colonia, Punta del Este), Mar del Plata. If you have more than four days, a trip to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego would make an exciting trip. Keep in mind that the South of Argentina isn’t that far away from the Antarctic. Between June and October most of the major tourist destinations in the South close down due to the weather. Also keep in mind that the South tends to be more expensive than the North. If you are planning to cross any borders, check if there are any visa requirements **before** leaving Canada.
In terms of weather, expect extremes. Summer in Buenos Aires is humid with temperatures well into the 30s and lasts from November to February. Despite the fact that BsAs gets about 2mm of snow every century, winter is cold. The humidity and wind chill makes it feel about ten degrees colder than it actually is. Bring a warm jacket, gloves, toque, and scarves. It doesn’t rain often, but when it does rain, it pours. Seriously. Umbrellas are useless because of the wind. Just stay indoors. Everyone else does.

Extra-curricular activities and nightlife…

Buenos Aires is a big city with loads of things to see, eat, drink, and do. Every barrio has its own cultural centre with everything from arts and crafts to theatre and dance classes available either for free or at a reasonable rate. No doubt you will get roped into tango classes at least once during your exchange. You really have to try it, if only for the cultural atmosphere. Beginners’ classes are a great place to meet other exchange students, expats, and the occasional Argentinean. I recommend a place called La Viruta, which is located in the Armenian Cultural Centre in Palermo Hollywood. It is less “touristy” than most milongas and a decent price for what you get. Lessons are fast-paced but the instructors are sympathetic.
Konex is a great place to hear music. See Bomba de Tiempo on Mondays at 7pm.

Security…

I heard a lot of things before going to Buenos Aires, from Argentines and foreigners alike. While it is true that there is a much higher crime rate in Buenos Aires than there is in Vancouver, it tends to be blown out of proportion. I was fortunate not to have anything stolen from me in my six months there, which I attribute to a combination of sheer luck and general wariness. However, I know of one student who was robbed at knife point twice, once on a deserted street and again in a crowded area. Here are a few tips:

Always be aware of your surroundings. Always. Purse-snatching is very common, particularly on the subway, in restaurants, and on street corners. As paranoid as it may sound, anyone could be a thief. Style of dress, sex, or age has little to do with it. Make sure to keep an eye on your belongings at all times. Pickpockets do it for a living, so don’t expect to know when it’s happening. If you put your cellphone in your pocket then get on a crowded subway, don’t be surprised if it disappears by the time you reach your stop.

I never ran into problems with taxi drivers, but I know a few people who have. Travelling alone in a taxi you hail from the street usually isn’t too risky, but for an extra sense of security you might want to call a company to send one for you. If you’re carrying luggage and your passport, I would recommend calling ahead.

Apart from that, just be careful. Don’t take risks you wouldn’t take in your hometown. Also, accept that despite all precautions, you might just be unlucky enough to get mugged (meaning robbed by someone with a weapon, not necessarily beaten). If this happens, give them everything they ask for and don’t put up a fight. It is unlikely that they will get violent if you put up no resistance. After it happens, report it to the police but don’t expect to get your belongings back. It’s a pretty common occurance.
En fin…

Don’t let all the warnings put you off. Argentina is a beautiful country, with incredible landscapes, vibrant cities, and friendly, passionate people. Buenos Aires is an exciting city. It has an impressively active nightlife and a rich cultural and political scene. But it is always worth taking a trip outside to see how different life is outside the capital.

My time there has changed the way I see myself and my place in the world. If I could do it all over again, I would choose Argentina in a heartbeat.

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