While nothing could completely have prepared me for my amazing and life-changing semester abroad, I hope to share some knowledge I learned while at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia for future exchange students. As a fourth year student at SFU in the faculty of Environment, taking Archaeology and First Nations Studies, I wanted to expand my learning of Indigenous cultures globally and take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad before I graduated. I was thrilled when I found out I would be going on exchange at Monash University from July to November of 2015 to take Indigenous Cultures and Histories classes.

PREPARATION FOR EXCHANGE

My first piece of advice for future students is to figure out whether you want to live in residence or off-campus. If you want to live in residence, apply as soon as you get accepted! Space is very limited and residence can often be hard to get into. Living on residence was more expensive than a flat share off-campus, but I would not have had it any other way. I met most of my friends on exchange from my building or I met them from other residence events/buildings. My building organized fun activities, including an orientation at the beginning of the semester, a fancy ball and weekly Sunday night suppers. I lived in Richardson Hall and would recommend that building/community. Living off campus is also a good option if you wish to be closer to the CBD and more activities and shops, as Monash is located in Clayton, which is a suburb with limited restaurants etc. However, you have to take into consideration longer commute times to campus and the fact that transit cards for students are not unlimited like the UPass at SFU. You may wish to try to schedule your courses so you have some days off if you are living closer to the city.

If living in Melbourne during their winter (i.e. July semester) make sure to pack warm clothes!! Although my friends from Australia warned me how cold Melbourne was, I was not prepared for how cold and windy it was in Melbourne! You don’t need a heavy-duty winter jacket, but definitely pack a warm jacket. Waterproof shoes are also good to pack as it does rain a lot in Melbourne. Do bring lighter clothes as well, as if you plan on traveling you will not need warm clothes. I would also suggest bringing a journal to keep track of fun
memories and travel agendas to look back on in years to come. You may wish to bring some items such as makeup from home, as makeup is terribly expensive in Australia. It is very useful to try and limit yourself to one piece of luggage, as it will make your return home much easier. However, mostly everyone I met on exchange had two pieces of luggage. I brought one large suitcase and one backpacking backpack, which allowed me to easily travel in hostels down the coast and leave most of my stuff in Melbourne/at friends’ houses in my suitcase. Prior to leaving Canada, I also made sure that my suitcase was only half full. This paid off down the road when I accumulated souvenirs and clothes that I bought in Australia and had to pack to bring home. I opted for a direct flight from Vancouver to Australia, as I have previously had issues on international flights with losing my luggage or missing flights due to layovers and delayed airplanes.

DURING EXCHANGE

As I arrived a month early in Melbourne, I did not have the option of the university-organized pick-up at the airport. However, the SkyBus from the Melbourne airport is much cheaper than a taxi. Tickets can be bought beforehand, but it is very easy to buy a ticket and catch the red SkyBus right outside the airport when you arrive. I brought my laptop for schoolwork, and I also brought some binders and pens/pencils as I had extra room in my suitcase. This prepared me for school and allowed me not to have to shop for school supplies during orientation. I am with Scotiabank in Canada and have found it very useful for traveling around due to the fact that it is partnered with many banks internationally. For instance, in Australia, Fiji and Tonga I never had to pay for a transaction fee at ATMs, as Scotia is a partner with Westpac. When getting a cellular plan in Australia I was required to have an Australian bank account. Setting one up prior to going to Vodafone (or any other company) would have saved me a lot of time and energy as I wasn’t told I needed one until I was at the final stage of getting my phone plan. If you want to use your own cell phone make sure it is unlocked before leaving Canada.

(Sunset at Uluru in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park)
I booked a G Adventures travel tour before the semester. I was able to visit some friends in Adelaide and then travel up central Australia and see the outback and Uluru on a tour all the way up to Darwin (which I would definitely recommend). Traveling before arriving at Monash was beneficial as I quickly familiarized myself with Australian customs, culture and money before I had to move to Melbourne and figure out things such as phone plans and rent etc. I also met people from different countries around the world who were traveling through Australia. I was able to meet up with these people again when they were traveling through Melbourne months later. I would definitely recommend traveling a bit before and after the semester. Often students leave their traveling to after/during the semester. However, in my experience people either have to miss classes, run out of money by the end of semester before they get the chance to travel, have conflicts with final exams, or do not have much time after exams to travel before their booked flight back (as you do not find out your exam schedule until later in the semester). Further, students from North America often had only a few weeks to travel in order to be home for either Christmas or the start of the next semester in January. Traveling a bit before the semester ensures you are able to see those things highest on your bucket list and can also help you avoid the crazy amount of flies that are at Uluru later in the year when the temperature is warmer.

At Monash, lecture formats mostly consist of teacher led instructions, are accompanied by a PowerPoint and are audio recorded and put online. Most classes have “hurdle requirements” so you must attend a certain number of classes and do a certain amount of assignments in order to pass the class. Grading is also different and is not based on “letter grades”. Grades are separated into much larger sections (e.g. High Distinction = 80-100%) so don’t freak out if your grades on assignments are a littler lower than you are use to at SFU. As for places to see and things to do in Melbourne, The Royal Botanic Gardens are a must see. When first arriving in Melbourne the tourist information center in Federation Square, right outside Flinders Station, has several free walking tour maps that allow you to explore the famous lanes, parks, graffiti (be sure to check out Hosier Lane and its constantly changing graffiti) and shops in Melbourne on your own. I found that this really helped me orient myself and get to know the city quickly. My favourite areas of Melbourne were Fitzroy and Brunswick Street as well as Chapel Street. These areas have many cafes, bars, and unique shops to check out.
While the east coast of Australia has many popular tourist destinations (i.e. Sydney Opera House, Great Barrier Reef, Fraser Island) there are many lesser-known places close to Melbourne that are just as spectacular. I highly suggest a camping trip to the nearby Wilsons Promontory National Park and its many beaches. Also, be sure to check out the views, Aboriginal rock art and cultural center at the Grampians National Park when you do the necessary trip along the very scenic and popular Great Ocean Road from Melbourne.

**REFLECTION AFTER EXCHANGE**

In retrospect, I wish I knew how much more expensive everyday costs would be in Australia compared to Canada. When making a budget before I left, I underestimated how expensive things are in Australia. Although the Canadian and Australian dollar are fairly even, the minimum wage in Australia is much higher than in Canada which makes things such as a cup of coffee proportionally more expensive. Surprisingly, the most challenging things for me while on exchange was actually leaving Melbourne and Monash. I made such good friends on exchange and through living on residence that it was really hard to leave. A lot of my friends were from Europe and on exchange for two semesters, so it was difficult leaving knowing they would be staying for another 6 months. Having gone to Monash in their second semester, I realize the benefits that would accompany going on exchange during the first semester. The weather in Melbourne will be better, which subsequently leads to more events on campus and in the city. The first semester also has a greater amount of orientation activities. Moving into residence during the second semester was a bit challenging, as the majority of Australian and international students had moved in the previous semester and already established friendships and groups. While a bit awkward at first, the exchange students easily integrated with the rest of the students and many friendships were made. I will never forget my time abroad in Australia. I met so many people, learned about Australian and Indigenous Australian cultures and saw amazing animals and landscapes. To conclude with one last piece of advice: make sure to stay in touch with your friends from exchange! Making connections with people from all over the world is one of the most amazing things about being on exchange. By nurturing these relationships your friendships will always continue, even when your time abroad ends.

(Melbourne’s famous graffiti – Hosier Lane)