I went on exchange for fall 2011 to summer 2012 to Belgium and attended class at l’Université catholique de Louvain. I am a French major, but I was entered into the school through Political Science, my extended minor. Until I received my acceptance letter from UCL, I’d actually believed I had been entered through the French department, the first of several problems.

When you’re preparing to go and apply for a student visa for Belgium, I would highly recommend calling up the embassy in Quebec and asking them plenty of questions, as a lot of the information concerning applying for a student visa found online can be confusing and outdated. In addition, two of the required documents, a criminal record check and a medical certificate from your doctor authenticated by the BC College of Physicians, can be pricey items to obtain. In terms of financial preparation, I set up a student credit card with Bank of Montreal before going over. While there I found it way more convenient and cheap to withdraw money using it at ING bank ATMs and deposit that money into my Belgian ING account. The conversion rate this way also worked out cheaper than paying the fees at currency exchange businesses. In daily life in Belgium, they perform mainly cash transactions but many places offer bancontact, their debit system. A lot of the smaller shops, especially in the university town, did not offer a credit card option, so a Belgian bank account is a necessity.

For housing, probably no matter when you apply you will receive a reply back from the university that all university housing (kots) has been filled and you should seek private housing. However, at UCL international students show up at the city near the end of August/early September with no housing and stay at Kot Erasmus (a kot-à-projet that helps international students) while they look for a kot. Apparently, so many Belgian students fail out of the university at about this time that places open in kots around the city, and international students line up from 8am on in order to try and find a place. On the other hand, I stayed in private housing as I was unaware of this. I made an appointment with the housing agency Eckelmans to view apartments, and when I got to the city I signed for a studio apartment two minutes walk from the main square for 459 euro a month and was able to move in September 14th. Unfortunately, this meant that I was living alone and for this reason I would
recommend the first option, as you would get the opportunity to live with Belgians and have an easier integration.

The Belgian rail system is very easy to navigate, and relatively cheap, although you must be careful that you go to Louvain-la-Neuve and not Louvain. The city of Louvain-la-Neuve itself is small and extremely pedestrian. It is possible to walk to any of your classes from the main square in under fifteen minutes. When you arrive, you need to register with the university in person at the building in Place de l'Université and register with the Administration Communale in the Grande Place once you have your accommodations set. As for orientation, there was an hour long meeting for all political science students that informed on how to apply for classes (they advised an online form that turned out to only be for national students - international students must sign up for their classes on paper) followed by a meeting for international political science students that discussed social meet-ups.

Classes in Belgian are an entirely different experience from North American classes. They are still grounded in what would be considered and old educational approach based on rote memorization. They contain a large amount of information and there are no assessments or assignments throughout semester. Instead, the only evaluation is at the end of semester during the final exam. The month long period at the end of each semester that is the exam period is called blocus and everyone in the student city settles down and studies from dawn to dusk. Exams are difficult and many that are multiple-choice are also negative marking- when a question is marked wrong, a point is deducted rather than simply not given. Exams for classes run at the end of every semester, so it is possible to retake your exams from first semester during the same period when you would do your second semester exams. In addition, I would make sure that your faculty has good communication with the complimentary faculty at UCL to ensure you have someone to help you choose the right classes to take- unfortunately mine did not, and it made everything a lot harder. I know international students from some other countries had such good links between their schools that they were able to get a list of classes for
their faculty that was colour coded for which were good for international students.

Again, the city of Louvain-la-Neuve is small. On the other hand, it’s also extremely vibrant and lively. It is a student city which empties regularly on the weekend as Belgian students return home to their families. The international student community there is extremely tight-knit and active; it is not difficult at all to make friends. Many kot-à-projet have bars on their first floor, and the city loves to party. The main student nightlife hub is called Casa and it is located in an underground car park and run by students. The university throws two major parties- one in September for arrival and one in October for the 24hr-velo, a 24-hour bicycle relay race around the city. Belgians in general love holidays and decorate accordingly. As a country, all of the main cities are lovely to visit and travel is cheap- especially for students as it is possible to get a 50 euro card that allows you ten train trips. I would highly recommend Bruges and Ghent to visit, and Antwerp for shopping. Food, especially produce, is extremely cheap at the grocery store Delhaize, especially the brand 365. I was able to get my weekly groceries for about 10-15 euro every week.

One of the best things about Belgium is the fact that a major Ryanair hub is located in Bruxelles-Charleroi. This is an Ireland-based budget airline that runs cheap flights all throughout Europe, and from Belgium these are especially cheap. For example, a flight to Manchester, England is 10 euro. Roundtrip to Budapest could be as low as 25 euro. I highly recommend taking advantage of this while you’re there, and setting aside funds for travel when preparing financially.

In short, there were a lot of difficulties and things I had to find out the hard way for myself during my year of exchange. However, I had a truly great year there. I experienced so much and did a lot of growing up. Belgium is a beautiful, under-rated country and the people are interesting and vibrant. An exchange there involves learning things both inside and outside of school.
Inside the grounds of the Jardin Botanique, in the heart of the more modern-looking North Brussels.
A cornet de frites with mayo, one of the traditional Belgian dishes you would need to try alongside waffles, chocolate and moules.
All major Belgian cities have really great tourist maps that detail what you should see, good places to eat, etc. I added a few things to my Brussels map as I went there so often.
There is a lot of really good graffiti in Belgium, so keep your eyes open while you’re walking on the streets and riding trains.
From the top of the belfry tower in Bruges, a must-climb.