I chose UCL because I was looking for a university that offered the majority of its courses in French. I also wanted to live in a city that wouldn’t be as international as somewhere like Paris. In the final decision of choosing UCL, I did a lot of research to see if I could find courses that were at least similar to ones I would want to take at SFU, towards my extended minor in French. Planning is definitely more than half of the work of going on the actual exchange, especially if you’ve never done much traveling. Finally at the end of January, I was on my way. I had researched exactly which train to take from the Brussels airport before leaving so that the whole train-with-large-suitcases thing would be that much easier. From the Brussels airport it is between 1-2 hours by train to Louvain-La-Neuve, depending on if you do one train transfer or two (doing only one transfer means a longer journey). I found it convenient that the train that takes you to Louvain-la-Neuve has Louvain-la-Neuve as the terminus station. It is very important that you realize that there are two “Louvain’s in Belgium – Louvain and Louvain-la-Neuve and they both have universities in them. It is a common anecdote to hear of international students showing up in the wrong Louvain.

A couple of weeks before the semester starts, you will receive an email asking if you want to be a part of the ERASMUS buddy program. I didn’t choose to do this because I didn’t really understand what it was, but I had some exchange friends who did and I would recommend it. Basically it entails a student from the university helping you to get from the train station to wherever you are staying that night, and they will also be available to help you find your way around in the first few weeks of your exchange.

Conveniently enough, the weather in Belgium is fairly similar to Vancouver weather: lots of rain and not a ton of snow. The semester I was there, it was apparently uncharacteristically warm and dry, but they usually do get snow. Take note as well that it is often windy in Louvain-la-Neuve which really is no fun in the winter when there is also freezing rain.

The cost of living in Belgium is higher than in Vancouver in the sense that if something is $20 in Canada, it will be €20 in Belgium (and the Euro is worth more). As far as money went, I didn’t end up opening up a bank account in Belgium (but I could have). I usually just went to a bank machine and used my MasterCard to withdraw some cash. I usually tried to carry cash on me because although a lot of places did accept MasterCard, smaller locally-owned type restaurants and stores didn’t always accept it. I liked to carry the cash to avoid any surprises. For paying rent (if you stay in a residence or ‘kot’) your statement of expenses usually will come with a detachable bank-looking form. You can take this form to the Proxy Delhaize or post office once it’s complete, along with your rent money, to pay your bills. I didn’t find this out until after I had paid most of my rent, but it would have saved me a lot of money, as I had been getting my parents to do wire transfers to me through my bank at home.

Before arriving in Louvain-la-Neuve it is important to know that you can’t move into your dorm until the day the semester starts. If you plan to arrive earlier than that, one of the residences, called Kot ERASMUS, offers accommodation, but only for a limited number of nights. I ended up staying in a hotel
(the only one in LLN) for a few nights. Also know that academic administration is generally slower and more relaxed at UCL (I think it’s a European trait). Although classes start right away in the first week, there isn’t a lot of rush to be formally registered in your classes until the second or third week and the profs and academic advisors there generally encourage international students to attend the courses they want to take before registering for them, to make sure they will be a good fit. Administration hours are at times a bit random (my advisor was only available Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings for three hours). Lecture formats are similar to lectures at SFU – some profs will have PowerPoints, some wont, some will give you their PowerPoints, and some won’t. One thing I really liked about my courses was that I didn’t have to buy any textbooks. Instead you go to the university bookstore to buy a customized syllabus for your course. It was a paperback book-type thing that the prof wrote for the course and is anywhere from 50-300 pages long. It is basically a textbook that the prof wrote specifically for the course. It was nice to have bought this book (for around €8) and to know that the whole thing was relevant to your course.

One major academic difference was that most courses base your whole grade on the final exam. I didn’t have any midterms, term papers, or weekly assignments from February to May. This is great if you are hoping to travel on the weekends, but not great if you have trouble studying for exams. I did take 2 French-for-non-francophones courses, and those were very similar for French classes at SFU – quizzes, assignments and a midterm. UCL seems to also enjoy conferences. It was mandatory within the curriculum of 3 of my courses to attend an evening guest lecture. Although it wasn’t always convenient, I ended up really enjoying those conferences. I heard the President of Amnesty International speak, a famous Belgian author, a man who lived in East Germany during the Cold War, and a Harvard professor who spoke about economic crisis in the world. These were all deeply informative, interesting, and definitely grew my worldview.

Aside from these conferences, there is always plenty going on in Louvain-la-Neuve. The number and frequency of festivals held in town actually became a sort of joke between me and some of the other international students, as it seemed there would be a festival or some sort of event happening in the main square for the slightest reason and sometimes there were even multiple events in one day/weekend. There were also special residences in the university called ‘kots à projet’ which were student houses that ran the university clubs and would host events and parties.

My time on exchange was a unique, stretching, and exciting experience. Although I ended up not doing as well academically as I would have liked, I consider it to have been an invaluable experience. My goals in going to Belgium were to improve my French and to experience the culture of Europe; not only were my goals met, but they were greatly exceeded. I was thrilled to not only be in Europe, but to also be educated on the world from a slightly less ‘America-centric’ point of view. Whenever anyone asks me about exchange I passionately urge them to participate in one themselves because I believe exchange not only is a great academic experience, but more importantly, a great character-building, viewpoint-changing trip.
The view from my bedroom window

The lake in Louvain-la-Neuve, my favorite study spot.
Ice cream in Antwerp on the first warm day of Spring.
My friend and I in the main square in Brussels.