Exchange Report

I spent the Spring 2013 semester at the University of Economics, Prague in the Czech Republic. At the time of my exchange I was in my third year of university, studying Business Administration. I am concentrating in Human Resource Management and Management Information Systems. I spent the most amazing five months in Prague from February to May (and then travelled Europe for an additional two months!).

Preparation

The biggest piece of advice I can give you is to start your visa application as soon as you get your acceptance letter, or even better, start it before. I spent a lot of time stressing over my visa, and ended up having to buy a last-minute flight because I wasn’t sure when my visa would arrive. I arrived pretty late, compared to most of the other students, and I really wished I had been more organized so I could have arrived earlier.

If you can, it is much easier to get a Youth Mobility Visa than a regular Student Visa. The application requires much fewer documents, and the documents that are required are much easier to get. You can still study on a Youth Mobility Visa (you can actually work too). The only thing is, there are only a limited number given per year (although this wasn’t a problem for me). It can still take up to two months, so I would still recommend applying as early as possible.
In terms of packing, bring a very warm jacket. The spring of 2013 was apparently the coldest spring in Prague for over 500 years (or so I heard when I was there), but even during a “normal” spring I would advise a warm coat! February until mid April was very cold, and there was quite a bit of snow. I wore my winter jacket, a scarf, and winter boots basically every day. Bring shoes that are resistant to snow, otherwise they will be ruined. Also, don’t bother bringing heels. The streets are largely cobblestone, making it very difficult to walk in heels, and Prague is very casual. When you go out at night, you won’t see too many girls dressed up. I brought one pair of boots with a small heel, which I wore out the most. May was beautiful. It was sunny and warm for most of the month, so bring some warm weather clothes too!

I didn’t open a bank account in Europe. I found it was easiest to just withdraw larger amounts of cash from ATMs as needed. Check if your Canadian bank is a member of “Cirrus” (it should say on the back of your debit card), if it is, you probably have a lower rate for withdrawals abroad. It only cost me $3.00 CAD each time I withdrew money. Most places accept credit card too, but I always found it easiest to use cash.

Outside the University of Economics, Prague (Old Building)
During Exchange

Prague is the most beautiful city. When I first arrived I was worried that I would be very unhappy there. It was freezing, and I was extremely jetlagged. But two weeks in, I had already fallen in love with the city.

Czech people can be rude (many guidebooks and websites warned me of this prior to my trip), but you get used to it. Just remember not to take anything personally. It can be challenging to communicate, as many Czech people don’t speak any English (or very little). The younger generation is much stronger in English than the older generation. Don’t worry, you can still get by without too much trouble. It can be hard in restaurants, because some of them will only have a Czech menu and the servers may not speak English well. It helps if you are able to recognize some of the basic Czech words (chicken, beef, vegetables, etc.), then at least you will have an idea of what you’re ordering. Beware – Czech food is very meat-oriented.

While in Prague, I lived in Jarov III F, and I would recommend it to anyone. The facilities are horrible and the rooms are small, but it is so much fun because almost all of the exchange students live together there. Sharing a bedroom with another student was a very new experience for me. There was virtually no privacy. However, my roommate became my best friend in Prague, so I didn’t mind! The kitchen consists of a two-burner hot plate (which broke twice during the semester) and a mini fridge. Fitting food for four people in a mini fridge is not easy. The dorms are a 10-15 minute tram ride from the university, and about 20-25 minutes from the city centre. There is a large supermarket only a couple stops away.

My courses were, for the most part, very easy. I took three Human Resources classes and one Finance class. The finance course was pretty difficult for me, but I’m not sure if it was the course itself or if it is because I am not a finance student. I heard from other students that finance and economics classes are much harder than HR and marketing courses. Three of my professors were Czech (with good English skills), and the fourth was a visiting professor from Ireland. All of my professors were interesting and very nice.

I would recommend taking intensive courses. They are courses that have been compressed into either three or five days. The workload for these courses was much lighter than my full semester classes, and they allowed me to have more free time to travel and explore.

While on exchange, I did weekend trips to Krakow, Poland; Berlin, Germany; Dresden, Germany; and Budapest, Hungary. I didn’t travel much compared to some of my friends, but these trips were some of the highlights of my exchange semester. It is such an amazing experience to travel to new destinations with new friends on exchange. I recommend looking into renting a car or van (if you know someone with a European driver’s license) – it can be a lot cheaper than a train or bus ticket.
Post-Exchange

Coming home has been really hard. I have found it hard to adapt to my “normal” day-to-day life after living such an exciting lifestyle for 6 months. It took me a while, but I finally began to feel comfortable in Vancouver again, and I found it easier to connect with my friends and family back home.

It’s so important to keep in touch with the friends you make on exchange. I have made some lifelong friends on exchange, and even though it was hard to leave them, I can’t wait until I get to see them again (whenever that may be)! I have made friends from all over the globe, and I feel like no matter where I travel in the future, I will have a friend close by.

I wish I had bought more souvenirs for myself before I left Prague. I bought gifts for family and friends, but not too many things for myself. I wish I had more things to remind me of the beautiful place where I spent such an amazing 5 months.