SFU Exchange Report

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
Prague, Czech Republic
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I am a fourth-year English Literature major who had the absolute pleasure of participating in SFU International’s Study Abroad Program. Despite many warnings from my departmental advisor, I decided to go on an exchange for the last semester of my degree. I suppose you could say I wanted to go out with a bang…

So why did I decide to go on an Exchange?

One of the reasons I came to SFU was to take advantage of their relationships/partnerships with various Universities around the world. I did my research and found out that Charles University in Prague, CZ offered third and fourth year English Literature courses that I could apply directly to my major. Not only were the courses upper division (and offered in the English language), but the courses themselves were fascinating. Reading Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera in the same physical space where the texts were composed greatly appealed to me. Oh yes, and let’s not forget about Prague: it’s arguably one of the best places in Europe to live, work, and study. It is a lively, thriving city buzzing with cultural events. I had done an extensive tour through Europe a few years prior and I was itching to go back.

MY EXPERIENCE…

Studying in Prague was easily one of the best decisions I have ever made. The experience was phenomenal. Arriving in the winter, I was able to see the entire city blanketed in snow—with ancient spires sparkling in the moonlight and locals crowding into smoky pubs for warmth and brews—and then, of course, the dramatic transition into Spring. Public green spaces are very important in Prague and as soon as the sun comes out, so does the population. Lounging about on grassy knolls in Petrin park and drinking pivo in Old Town Square, how could you not love this city?

FOOD AND MONIES:

The cost of living in Prague is extremely low compared to Vancouver—and the rest of Europe for that matter. A half-liter of beer and a greasy plate of food will only set you back about $5.00 Canadian (although it’s fair to say that ‘you get what you pay for’ in some cases). Despite the fact that the Czechs pride themselves in their exceptional sausage, goulash, and dumpling dishes, the vegetarian fare is extremely good. The best course of action is to talk to locals (your teachers, people at the dorm, and friends) where to eat—they will tell you all of the little gems off the beaten path. If you’re looking for beer though, just stick your head in a few smoky bars—if there are big crowds and you can barely see through the cigarette smoke, odds are it’s a great place. Groceries, rent, water, street and restaurant food are all very reasonably priced. Steer clear from things
like movie theatres, fast-food chains, and Starbucks however: anything remotely North American will be priced as if you were in North America.

**ACCOMODATION:**

Oh the student dormitories.
You love them, you hate them, but you have to admit it is pretty fantastic being able to say that you live by a castle. Perhaps the best way to help you decide if you are going to live in the dorms in Prague is to consider the following:

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<th>PROS of Living in the Student Dorms</th>
<th>CONS of Living in the Student Dorms</th>
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<td>• The people: you are in extra-close contact with all of your friends and classmates. It’s so easy to make plans: someone is always willing to go out (usually at all hours of the night)</td>
<td>• The rooms are small, the walls are thin, and the beds are itty bitty (bring some of your own linens if you have room)</td>
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<td>• Breakfast is provided every morning</td>
<td>• The kitchens are a bit laughable. They are equipped with a hot plate only (no dishes, pots, pans, utensils, microwave or oven). Either you will have to bring your own hardware, or you can buy some supplies at the Tesco</td>
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<td>• You live in walking distance of the Castle and Petrin Park—arguably two of the most important sights in the entire city</td>
<td>• Theoretically, a maid cleans your counters, floors, bathroom, and changes the garbage everyday</td>
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<td>• There is internet access and a laundry facility—both of which are fairly inexpensive</td>
<td>• The rent is extremely high. I believe it worked out to $600 CAD per month, whereas you can rent an entire 1 bedroom flat (<em>with</em> an oven) for that price.</td>
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<td>• You have a lovely ‘dorm mother’ who will keep you updated on cultural activities, free tours, and discounted opera/ballet/theatre tickets</td>
<td>• While the dorms are close to the Castle, they are far away from everything else. It takes about 30 minutes by transit to get to the Main building (where most of the classes are) and 45 minutes to get to the secondary buildings.</td>
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I suppose I had the best of both worlds because I decided to move out of the dorms and rent my own apartment half way through the semester; ironically, it was far cheaper to share an enormous 2 bedroom flat with another person that to live in a tiny room in the dormitory. While living in the dorms was wonderful in that you are able to meet a lot of people and coordinate plans constantly, living *out* of the dorm was far more comfortable. It completely changed my experience and I finally felt like an insider. There are many online sites that can help you find a room in a flat or an entire apartment to yourself. Expats.cz is a great resource. Longer-term rentals are substantially cheaper than short-term, so stay longer and enjoy one of the most amazing cities in Europe!
NOTE: If you are thinking of moving out of the student dormitories at any point during your stay, I recommend letting your program coordinator know immediately (as in before you confirm that you will be staying in student housing). If you don’t, you may have to pay a cancellation fee (as I did).

ARRIVAL and ACADEMICS:

The ECES program was especially catered to North American students arriving in Prague for the first time and the first three weeks were dedicated to sight-seeing, getting to know the city, and a two-week intensive Czech language course. Transportation from the airport to the dorm is arranged by the program, so as long as you fly into Prague on the specified ‘arrival date,’ you will be well looked after. As I have learned over and over again, you will make most of your friends on the first 2 days. So go out—even if you are jet-lagged and tired!

Regular classes begin once the language-intensive course is complete. I only signed up for three classes, which gave me plenty of time to experience Prague and travel on the weekends without jeopardizing my academics. The classes themselves were absolutely amazing. All of my professors were extremely intelligent, witty, and quirky Czechs with a enthusiasm for teaching. They were easily some of the best professors I have ever had the pleasure of working with. The small class sizes and informal atmosphere creates the perfect environment for in-depth class discussions and debates. It is in your best interest to keep up with all of the readings for your classes so you don’t miss out on possibly the most rewarding student dialogue of your undergrad career. The workload and reading lists were certainly on par with SFU courses for my upper division English Literature courses. The only noticeable difference was in the marking scheme. Most people did not receive anything lower than a B-. As long as you were passionate about your topic—and original in your argument—your professors would look upon your paper favorably. Ahhh, it was an English major’s dream come true.

WORDS OF WISDOM (before you hop on a plane)

- Attend a pre-departure session and take notes—you will want to bring these with you
- Find out if anyone else from SFU is going to the same Foreign University as you are and see if you can meet up. You can help keep each other motivated and you can work through the VISA application process with a partner.
- When they warn you that the VISA application is long and stressful for the Czech Republic, they weren’t kidding. Seriously—start getting your documents together BEFORE you receive a letter of acceptance from the Czech University. Many of the things that you can do in advance only require time, rather than money, so it’s no skin off your back if for some reason you don’t get in. Get the ball rolling as soon as humanly possible.
- Get your Criminal Record Check right away. This might seem like a small task, but the tricky part is that the signature on the completed Criminal Record Check needs to be authenticated in Ottawa—this can take up to 30 days or more (during
which they will refuse to speak with you regarding your paperwork until the 30 days have passed)

- Expect to invest over $400.00 in the VISA process (translation, postage, and miscellaneous expenses)
- Photocopy everything, especially things that you have sent in the mail. If you can, even photocopy the envelopes before you express post them. Keep records of when you send things and when they are due to arrive. Tracking numbers are important.
- Be patient and optimistic. Despite the fact that I mailed my application in on exactly the same day as another student (and she received her VISA two weeks prior to departure), I didn’t receive my VISA until after I was already in Prague. This was particularly stressful as I had to mail my passport back to Canada for them to affix the VISA. Then, of course, I had to wait patiently for the passport to arrive, hopefully in one piece. Long story short, try to get your paperwork done FAR in advance to avoid the unsettling experience of popping your most important travel document into a foreign post box.
- Budget accordingly. Find out what your daily budget is and try to stick to it. I was able to manage on about 500Kc per day (not including rent).

**DO’s and DON’T’s (while you’re living in the most beautiful city in the world…)**

- **DON’T**: Don’t eat too much goulash. It will rot your insides.
- **DON’T**: Don’t go out in large groups of drunken students, yell loudly in the streets, and only go out to the “North American” clubs. Be respectful of Czech culture and try to blend in: go with a few friends to a pub instead.
- **DO**: Be adventurous: try eating at different places and ordering new things
- **DO**: Try and pick up more of the language than what you learn in your 2-week intensive course. Many Czechs speak English, but they are still impressed by your efforts.
- **DO**: Photocopy your course outlines as soon as you receive them and sent them into SFU for transfer credit evaluation—especially if you are doing an exchange for your last semester.
- **DO**: Explore different neighborhoods: spend an afternoon riding trams.
- **DO**: Go see as many discounted operas and ballets as you can. You will never have another opportunity to see “The Magic Flute” for $5.00 anywhere else in the world.
- **DO**: Travel around the Czech Republic and the surrounding areas on your weekends. Don’t get sucked into the notion of seeing as much of Europe as humanly possible though—so many students were flying to Scotland, Italy, and Greece for the weekend. News flash: you can’t even taste another country in a weekend. Save your big trips until the end of your studies.
- **DO**: Get to know your professors—go for beer with them after class!
- **DO**: Try and make friends with other Czechs: they are amazing people and you will get to see a totally different side of the city.
• **DO**: Keep in touch with the friends you meet abroad; you never know—you might be back sooner than you think!