
Hi, my name is Maika and I am a fourth-year communication major with a minor in publishing at SFU, and this is my study abroad story. In mid-January, I decided to venture off to the UK, as a gift to myself before graduation. And it was evidently the best gift I could ever give. I found myself falling in love, traveling, and learning new things about my field of study, British culture, and of course a bit about who I am and who I wish to be. I’ve learned that there is so many things to see, touch, and experience, ultimately coming to the conclusion that I am so grateful to have had a chance to learn, travel, and make life long friends with people around the world.

January: 2016

However, planning my time abroad was honestly a hot mess. With all of the paperwork to the unexpected travel fees, a couple things I’ve learned is always read the fine print, and listen to the locals and past exchange students they will know the most. Since I was little, I’ve had this wanderlust mentality: this strong urge to travel the world. Almost every year I would go on vacation with my parents, picking up bits of knowledge, which was helpful from time to time. But let me tell you, there is a huge difference from traveling for leisure and settling down.

For my visa application experience, a small form quickly accumulated into a pile of paperwork and a major headache. But remember, that these things will vary on many external factors, such as your length of stay, nationality, and other travel plans. Now getting to Leeds was even harder. Long story short, take the easiest flight there. It may cost more, but in the end you won’t feel like you got hit by bus. Also beware of all vehicles, everyone drives here like it’s a race, they are fully aware that you’re pedestrian, but could honestly care less if they hit you.

Tips #1: look both ways before crossing anything that looks like a road. Also the sidewalk aka “pavement,” is very historic and uneven and you will hurt yourself if you forget.

The first month was a struggle. But this is not to say it wasn’t enjoyable. Everything was just a haze, being jet lagged and having to adjust to a different culture can really shake someone. Everything just seemed different or some would even say backward. From the transit to the education, things were just inefficient and old fashion, but I soon realized once I got to know how things worked, everything was ok, and gradually thing became great. The weather was similar to back home, a little crazy, a little rainy, but a tad drier. Sadly, no matter how much
internally I loved England, my body fought against me. I was quite ill throughout my stay, on and off from an odd cough to twisted ankles, and bloody feet. But I’m a rare case ...so don’t you worry! When I first arrived, other residents were really considerate and welcoming, people even offered to help me with my suitcase. After doing an accommodation inventory check, a handyman came up the next day making sure things were up to standards. I stayed in one of the cheapest residences offered, which was named Lupton Residences. And to be honest, I’m glad I did, the campus was walking distance (25 mins) and the town of Headingley had such a vibrant student culture. Everything you could ever ask for was in a five mins radius from the flats. However, if you are not active, I’d advise you to find a residency closer. Since transit is fairly expensive, paying the extra pound or two may be worth it to stay somewhere nearby.

Tip #2: Always bring comfy runners aka “trainers,” they will save your life.

Tip #3: Sign up with the NHS in the case of any medical emergencies there is a clinic on campus.

February 2016

After spending a couple of weeks settling down, there were a few things I learned about the British education system. Since the marking scale is based on three levels, most marks are provisional. And is based on a scale of 0-90 rather than 100, which meant every mark you received you would have to add 10% extra to compare it to the systems back home. Although their system is efficient it is catered towards memorization and knowledge, rather than creativity and growth. Even as an above average student, I found it difficult to adjust. Exams and assignments were either 50% of your grade or 100%, which meant it was pass or fail. Within the school of Communications, presentations and attendance were worth 0% of my grade, which in my mind made no sense at all. Since much of the power and control is dependant on the board and administration team, all issues would be addressed to that specific entity. This entails a lengthy and a labor-intensive process if there were any inquiries about your mark.

Apart from the flawed education system, England is by far the best place for dairy, produce, flights, and nightlife. Although I was not a huge fan of the traditional food, the quality of their markets (in my opinion) surpassed most places in Canada. In addition, flights out of the country were insanely cheap with Ryanair in February flights were .75 pence to Ireland which is the equivalent cost of a stick of butter. The nightlife in Leeds is well known and is the complete opposite from Vancouver. It is wild and consistent. If you get distracted easy or suffer from FOMO (fear of missing out), I’d reconsider going to Leeds.

June 2016
All in all, Leeds collectively was an unforgettable experience. And I swear to you, above all of the things I’ve mentioned, leaving will be the hardest part. Six months goes by so fast, and then you find yourself constantly surrounded by these loving people, to wake up to a day where you don’t know when you’ll ever see them again. But if you really try, you can make it happen, I guarantee it, you just need to try. And for these reasons, and so many more I have yet write down my study abroad experience will always hold a special place in my heart. I will never forget the amazing live music, walking through the lush green parks and forests, and traveling throughout Europe with some of the coolest people I know. There are so many things that I will miss, and it hurts to even think about leaving, but I know that this is just a step forward to an amazing life filled with travels, friendships, and laughter. And I can't wait for what’s to come.
Gabrielle Aplin live at the O2

A photo of Leeds campus that looks strangely similar to SFU campus
The town of York

My friends and I, in Ibiza for reading break
Sunshine and rainbows in Ibiza