I completed my exchange semester at the Universite Francois Rabelais in Tours, France. I left Vancouver on September 5, 2010 and returned on January 10, 2011. The following is a collection of my experiences, observations and troubles during my time away.

Geographically, Tours is located about 200 kilometres south-west of Paris and is connected to the TGV railway (the super-fast trains). So Paris can be reached with the TGV in about an hour and connections can be made to other parts of France. Tours is located in the Loire Valley where the proximity of the surrounding rivers makes for a temperate climate. It hardly snowed during November and December and temperatures rarely ventured below zero. I would say that the climate is very similar to that of Vancouver, overall very temperate.

The Loire Valley in which Tours is located is also the home of the famous Chateaux de la Loire, a collection of gorgeous Renaissance-era castles. As the royal families were not particularly well accepted in Paris, they often built elaborate residences in the Loire Valley around Tours. All of these castles are relatively close to Tours. A certain number are only accessible by car or an organized bus tour. Others are accessible by train as there is often a neighbouring village with a train stop. I chose to visit the Chateau de Chenonceau. I went to obtain information from the Office of Tourism which is also easy to find. They told me which castle is the most convenient to visit and it turned out to be Chenonceau. The train cost 12 Euros for a return trip and it ended up being only twenty minutes outside of Tours. The castle was breathtaking and the adjacent village was very quaint.

The office for exchange students organized a number of activities for us. There is an initial information session during the end of September where you are presented with the different opportunities. These opportunities include trips to the various castles of the Loire Valley. There is also a weekend trip to Paris and one to Mont Saint Michel, which is an extremely unique location. Another activity they put on was a kitchen atelier where students were given the opportunity to cook a traditional French holiday meal. I did not participate in all of the available activities as I chose to visit some of the locations on my own.

Although I had some contact with the exchange student advisor at Universite Francois Rabelais before I left Canada this usually concerned paperwork and minor discrepancies in information. I did not have a clear idea how I would be welcomed or if there was even an organized welcome for incoming students. I found out in August in which student residence I would be staying in and had my plane ticket booked. I knew I would be arriving in Tours after closing of the student housing office so I booked one night at the hostel and planned to get my keys the following morning. Everything went according to plan, I received my keys, paid for my accommodation for 4 months up front (as I was not an EU student) and found my building which happened to be a couple of blocks away from the office. In terms of academic advising I had heard from advisor in charge of English-speaking students before I left and I made arrangements to see her a couple of days after my arrival. She informed of the way that exchange students register
for courses and the resources from which I had to choose courses. For example you had
the liberty of choosing courses from any department (Art History, Sociology, Literature etc.) that were aimed at regular French students. This choice was based purely on your
own perception of you language skills and you could choose any course you felt you
could succeed in. There was also a center for students learning French as a foreign
language and they offered courses for exchange students exclusively. For these courses
there was a placement test that gauged at your language level. This test was offered every
Friday for the first three weeks of September. After you received your results you could
choose these exchange student courses which began at the end of September.

One interesting thing I found about the French courses was their credit
numbering. At SFU a course with 3 lecture hours a week generally is worth 3 credits, one
with 4 hours 4 credits and so on. And based on my experience most courses were either 3
or 4 hours of lecture a week. In France I found that a great deal of the courses were only
one and a half hour a week and were worth 3 credits. In this way the credits of the French
institution seemed to be on a 2:1 ratio with SFU credits. In addition, since French courses
had generally less lecture hours a week I found that you were required to take more
courses. So for example I took 7 courses while I was there. This may seem like a lot but
in terms of weekly hours it equalled 3 or 4 SFU courses.

The university’s office for exchange students also put on a great buddy program.
On the day that you go to receive all of your student documentation they give you the
option of leaving your contact information and being paired up with a native French
student from who you can be in touch with and receive aid from. The person I was paired
up with turned out to be great! He was extremely helpful whenever I needed assistance
and we became friends as he introduced me to his group of friends and we often went out
together. I would definitely recommend any other student going to Tours to sign up for
this program as well.

One of the greatest challenges I faced while living abroad was language.
Although I had studied French for a number of years prior to embarking on exchange I
found that handling day to day activities in a francophone milieu was tougher than I
thought it would be. Realizing that everything, from opening up a bank account to
accessing student services at the university, had to be done in this foreign language was a
bit of a shock. However after a couple of weeks this initial surprise wore off and I began
to adjust. Using French as the primary language of communication became customary
and I got used to it.