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Host University:
Institute d’Etudes Politiques Strasbourg, France

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A Brief Introduction

In my third year at SFU I decided to go on exchange to the Institute of Political Science in Strasbourg, France. As a student of the French Cohort program at SFU it is required that you study abroad for one year in a francophone environment. We were given the choice between a few places in Quebec, Belgium and France. I decided going to Europe would be the best choice as it would provide a whole different perspective on political science. We learn so much about Quebec in the French Cohort program it seemed going to Europe would offer new variation of theories and conflicts to analyze. Being a very timid person the thought of going to a huge city like Paris seemed very overwhelming to me although the Institute of Political Science there does have an outstanding reputation. When I researched Strasbourg a little and looked up some photos I thought it couldn’t be more perfect for me.

Strasbourg is located in the Alsace region of France and is on the border with Germany. It is very rich in both French and German culture. It is great for political Science students as it houses several international institutions such as the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights.

Travel and Visas

[Note for International Services for Students – Campus France is no longer in operation, thus the process for Visas have also changed. Please visit the French Consulate website http://www.consulfrance-vancouver.org/ for most up-to-date information.]

… If you are lucky and prepared with all the necessary documents the appointment at the French Consulate should only take fifteen to thirty minutes. Unfortunately, although I was prepared the guy in front of me was not. I had to wait about 2 hours in the French consulate to get my student visa. This is just a little preview of the famous French public administration.

It turns out that the Vancouver consulate gave us all the wrong visas. We discovered this very quickly after arriving in Strasbourg during a meeting about how to apply for our residence permits. We applied for our residence permits anyways. We eventually (after 3 months) got an appointment to have our lungs X-rayed and to be questioned about our health to make sure we did not have tuberculosis. As I said I am a political science student and not a medical student, but I would think that if we did have tuberculosis we would have already spread it around after being there for three months. We had to buy a 55 Euro stamp from the treasury for this medical appointment. After the medical exam, we were told that our student visas were expired because we had gotten the wrong ones and for that reason we could not get our residence permits. We were then told to go to the prefecture in order to try and solve the problem.

Finally, a few weeks after going to the Prefecture and re-applying for our residence permits we received our permits. They tried to make us pay another 55 Euro
but we argued that we had already paid it when we went to the medical exam. This problem with the student visas and the French Consulate in Vancouver should be fixed by now but it would be best to make sure you have the right student visa before you leave.

Our travel to Strasbourg was relatively easy. The two other girls from my program and I all decided to fly over together to make things easier. Once we arrived, we took a taxi to our residence (about 40 Euro split 3 ways). Beware when buying your flights that you can only book 300 days in advance. Therefore you will have to pay a fee (approximately $200 depending on the airline) to change your return flight later on in the year. We flew Air Canada into Paris and then took another flight into Strasbourg. You could also fly into Frankfurt and take the train to Strasbourg.

Financial Details

In total I probably spent about $20,000 this year, but it was well worth it! I opened a bank account when I got to France so that I could wire money to it every couple months to use if I needed cash or to pay for groceries. I used my Canadian Visa wherever I could since I would get charged every time I wired money over, but there were some places where it did not work. It is very important to make sure you have a bank and credit card with a chip and pin code before you leave otherwise most places will not accept it. It is also quite important to call your credit card provider and let them know you are going to be in Europe for the year so that they do not cancel your card on you.

The most important reason to get a French bank account though is so that you can get CAF. CAF is a program where the French government will reimburse students for about a third of your rent, but you need a French bank account in order to receive it.

Arrival and Orientation

The IEP Strasbourg held what was called a “Stage de Français” for the two weeks before classes started. I am really glad I attended this. We were divided into groups based on a comprehension test we took on the first day. There was only a couple hours of class a day. Also, during these two weeks the international students were taken on various excursions around Strasbourg including a boat tour, going to a 17th Century Castle, and going to tastings at the local wineries. There was also a lot of organized nights out to try out the local food and nightlife. It gave me a really good chance to meet lots of other international students as well as get to know my way around Strasbourg before our classes started.
The first couple weeks were still quite stressful, despite the orientation. We really were not sure where to eat or shop. We needed to get cell phones and bank accounts and we were not sure what providers to go to. It seemed we needed photocopies of important documents like passports or student cards as well as a wallet sized photos for everything we did and we were not even sure of where to get this done. It seems in Canada this would be really easy to do as most stores are open 7 days a week some 24 hours a day otherwise they are at least open until late at night. In France, however, most stores are only open 5 to 6 days a week and no stores are open later than 8pm.

Accommodation and Living

If there is one thing I MIGHT have done differently it would have been my accommodation. This year I lived in a student residence called Robertsau. My room in Robertsau was actually really nice. It was a good size, had a huge window, a sink, a fridge and a big desk. However, there were a lot of problems with the rest of the building. Although it is not permitted to smoke inside the building, some students still smoked in their rooms and the smoke smell would drift into my room. The washrooms were horrible. Each floor had 32 people on it. For these 32 people there was a washroom at each end of the hall with either three toilets and two showers or two toilets and three showers. Essentially there were 5 toilets and 5 showers for 32 people. The toilets did not have seats nor did the stalls have toilet paper in them. In order to wash your hands you had to go back to your room and wash them in there.

It was really the people in our building that made all the difference though. The staff was really nice and never bothered us unlike some of the other student residences around. The other students were also really nice. There were lots of students from France living there as well as other international students from all over the world. It gave me a chance to meet lots of other students that were studying in other faculties in Strasbourg. Most weekends we would organize to have brunch together in our residence kitchen which was really fun and meant we got to eat home made crepes every weekend!
**Academic Details**

The Institute of Political Science, Strasbourg is very different from SFU. I took about 8 or 9 classes a semester. Each class was about two hours a week. There were no assignments just a final exam worth 100% of your grade. The classes were very detailed and specific. Most of the IEP students in Strasbourg do a year or two of preparatory school before going to the IEP so the classes are at more of an intermediate and advanced level not really introductory. I really enjoyed all the International Relations courses that I had taken as well as Political Geography. Most of the courses are taught in French. There are a couple offered that are taught in English or German but I chose to take all my classes in French. The international students had the option of doing a Certificate d’Etudes Politiques en Europe. For this certificate the international students had to divide into groups and prepare a presentation about European studies. The subject varies every year but this year it was the events of 1989 and 1990 in Europe and the fall of communism. Our group’s presentation was about how these events unfolded in what was then Czechoslovakia and how the country then divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. We got to spend a week doing these presentations in front of the second year students at the IEP and listening to guest speakers. This week took place in the European Parliament which is situated in Strasbourg. It was a really good experience and I would recommend to any one going to the IEP Strasbourg to participate in it. It also counts towards credits.

**Information about Strasbourg**

The weather in Strasbourg is quite similar to Vancouver. This winter there was an exceptional amount of snow though. It can change quite suddenly sometimes you can leave in the morning and it will be perfectly sunny and you leave in the afternoon and it is snowing. In the winter there are Christmas markets in the downtown squares where you can buy all sorts of Christmas baking and artisan products. The Christmas markets in Strasbourg are known to be some of the best in France and people come from all over Europe to see them. There is also an outdoor skating rink set up outside the Cathedrale. Vin Chaud, Hot Chocolate, Crepes and Tarte Flambé are sold at every turn.
It is really easy to travel anywhere from Strasbourg. From their central station you can take the train almost everywhere. You can also take Ryan Air or Easy Jet for cheap flights if you go to Basel, Switzerland or Karlsruhe Baden, Germany. Both airports are about two hours from Strasbourg. It is really easy to travel around Germany from Strasbourg. You can take a normal city bus to a nearby city in Germany called Kehl for the normal cost of a bus ticket or with your bus pass. You do not even need to show your passport when you cross the borders which makes travelling really easy. We found it a lot cheaper if travelling by train to go to Kehl and by our train tickets there even if we were going to catch the trains in Strasbourg. There are a lot of holidays in France which gave us a lot of opportunities to travel. This year I was able to go travel around Spain, Germany, Italy, France, England, Scotland, Ireland, Greece, Czech Republic, and Austria.

Social/ Extracurricular activities

The IEP has a few sports teams you can join. They are not highly competitive and just for fun. Every year all the IEPs in France have a sports competition called KRIT that is hosted in a different city each year. This year the KRIT was hosted in Strasbourg so I volunteered on one of the days as well as watched some of the games.

There is a brochure you receive at the beginning of the year that tells you what organized sports activities you get a discount on with your student card. It is a pretty good deal and they offer a wide variety of sports such as rock climbing, ski and snowboard, hiking, swimming and so on. There is a lot to do around Strasbourg. We often went hiking on our own with some French friends who
knew the area a bit better in the Vosges Mountains. It was really easy to take the train to near by small towns and go hiking from there.

Other than that there are lots of bars and clubs to go out to on the Weekends. There is not usually cover to get in but if there is it is only about 2 or 3 Euro. Everything is in walking distance which is really nice. We often went out to bars with the other international students at the IEP, and sometimes the Bureau des Sports at the IEP would put on different themed nights which were really fun.

**Wish I Knew Before I Left**

What I wish I knew before I left was that I had the wrong visa. This would have saved me a lot of stress. Another thing was that there was no internet in our building for the first month we were there as we had to wait for residence to process our accounts. Finally, when we first arrived the IEP made us pay 198 Euro for insurance. We already had insurance from the SFU health care plan that we should have been able to use. This 198 Euro plan was a huge rip off because we could not go get our cards unless we had a residence permit which we did not receive until we had been there for 6 months. Therefore if anything had happened to us in the first 6 months we would not have been covered by the French insurance they made us buy even though we had paid 198 Euro. If I had known this I would have tried to prove I already had insurance with SFU instead of paying 198 Euro for nothing.

**Words of Wisdom**

I think the best thing to do is go on your exchange with an open mind and be up to try anything. Meet lots of other international students as well as French students so you do not spend the whole time talking in English. Travel as much as possible. It is so easy to travel in Europe with Cheap airlines like Ryan Air and Easy Jet or by train or bus, so take advantage. One thing I am really glad I did was buy some travel guides for France and Europe before I left. They really helped with all our travels and gave us great places to stay and see while in other cities. I bought the Lonely Planet Western Europe and Lonely Planet France travel guides but there are lots of different ones out there. Do not let money hold you back. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity and you can always make it back later. Try to keep your self busy so you do not get homesick and you do not regret doing more once you get back home. Finally, pack lightly. You are going to want to buy a lot of stuff there and bring it back so make sure you have lots of room.
Conclusion

In all going on exchange to Strasbourg was probably one of the best experiences of my life. I can not even sum up how much I have learnt and how much fun I had. I would recommend it to everyone.