Exchange Report

In the spring of 2012, I went on an exchange to Strasbourg, France through SFU International and the following is a report of my experience. In reading this report, I hope that it convinces you to take the opportunity to go abroad and I hope to share some helpful tips and other things that will make your exchange even better than mine. This report will be particularly useful for those of you heading to the Institut d’études politiques (IEP) in Strasbourg but it will also be very useful for those travelling to France and somewhat relevant for those travelling to Europe in general.

In preparation for my exchange I did the basics: find a place to live, get a visa, create a basic budget and figure out roughly what the weather is going to be like for 6 months. I felt pretty prepared going into my exchange. I was also lucky because I had family in Europe so when I showed up there before heading to France I was able to relax a couple of days and get over my jet lag and pick up as many free cooking supplies and other household items from my relatives which saved me a lot of money. I made sure to grab a map of Strasbourg and get a general understanding of how the public transportation worked over there. When I moved into residence I found the room really nice, the whole building was clean and everything was up kept well. I shared 2 bathrooms and 1 kitchen with a floor of 30 people but surprisingly, I never had to wait in line for a shower and I only waited in line for the kitchen when I ate in the evening. As such, I switched my meal habits to eating around 5 as opposed to 7 or 8pm. The people I lived with were pretty cool, most of them were either on exchange or foreign born. They were all really nice to me and I ate meals with them a few times a week and it was a great way to learn about them, their respective cultures and practice my French. In terms of finance, I found it took a long time to open a bank account so I had to withdraw a lot of cash which racked up transaction fees. If I had to do this sort of thing again I would probably look into opening an international account with HSBC or something of that nature which would have made withdrawing money a lot easier.

Life in France is a lot more laid back than it is here, everything is closed on Sundays and there are seemingly random holidays every couple of weeks. Every day, between noon and 1pm, the overwhelming majority of shops and offices are closed down for lunch. This took a while to get used to as I liked to get things done during my lunch breaks back in Canada. The education system is also very different, classes consist of 2 hour lectures with little student interaction (typically the professor just reads his/her notes for 2 hours), you have virtually no assignments, you get a very basic course outline subject to constant change and your grade consists of an oral exam at the end of the year worth 100% of your mark. That for me was the strangest part as I was used to writing essays and having written final exam, it was definitely an interesting academic experience. It gave me a much greater perspective of European politics and how Europeans view world issues as opposed to my regular North American views. Apart from academics, Strasbourg had a lot to offer in terms of culture, extra-curricular activities and places to explore. Strasbourg is a really cool place because of its mixture of French and German cultural influence. On top of that, Strasbourg is the European Capital which leads to some really interesting cultural events and a wide range of people living there. Even though it’s a small city, it has a very vibrant night life, everything from bars and clubs to operas and plays, there’s something to do every night. Better still, Strasbourg is a fairly centrally located city and has great forms of transportation.
You can train, bus and fly to virtually every single city in Europe from Strasbourg. Located five minutes away from Germany by train and an hour and half away from Switzerland, you can go for some pretty insane weekend trips for a relatively low cost.

The best part of going on an exchange is the people that you meet. The people I met during my time abroad really made my time there exponentially better. It’s really important to get involved when you’re abroad. Join clubs, go out to the orientation and go to class because that’s where you will meet some really interesting people, with different ideas and perspectives, who will show you how to have a really good time during your exchange. Another really fun part of being on exchange in France is the fact that you get a lot of opportunities to travel. I personally travelled to Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Italy and the Czech Republic during my time in Europe. Some places I went for a weekend, others for a week during our reading breaks and the rest after I had finished school. Travelling is worth it. I experienced so many cultures, saw some unbelievable things and had some really crazy experiences with friends and I can’t wait to be able to do it again.

Looking back at my exchange, there isn’t a whole lot I would do differently. I probably would’ve saved up more money before going abroad because near the end of my time I started eating a lot less to save money for travelling which resulting in me losing a lot of weight. I would’ve tried to make more friends with actual French students, 90% of my friends were exchange students. This was fine as we still spoke in French but I think it would’ve been good to get to know more French students. I enjoyed every moment of my exchange, even the really bad parts like being stranded in the middle of nowhere in Italy due to a train strike. If I were to give future students going to Strasbourg any advice I’d tell them to sign up for internet in residence as quickly as they can when they get there, buy a bike instead of taking the bus, never say no when someone invites you out to the opera, bar or to a dinner, do your research when you want to go travelling and buy your groceries in Kehl to save money. Most of all, remember that eventually you have to come home and the sooner you come to terms with that the smaller the cultural shock will be for you when you come back. I hope this short report has inspired you to pursue your exchange ambitions and has given you a few tips on how to deal with any challenges you might face.