For my semester abroad in the French Cohort Program, I chose to study in Strasbourg, France, at the Institute of Political Studies (l'Institut d'études politiques), because of its proximity to Germany and relatively small size compared to Paris. IEP Strasbourg is actually a part of the University of Strasbourg that specializes in politics, encompassing everything related to political science, including history, law, economics and international relations. My semester abroad took place during the Fall 2013 semester at SFU, but because students at IEP take their exams in January, I was in France from September 2013 to January 2014.

When preparing for this trip, I looked a lot into visa requirements. France has very strict visa laws, but luckily being a Canadian student looking to study through an inter-university agreement simplified the process quite a bit. All you have to do is collect all the documents required (it is all very clearly laid out on the consulate website) and make an appointment at the French consulate in Vancouver. It only takes about a day to receive your visa, and if you’re only staying for one semester this is the only immigration document you’ll need. Students staying for more than six months will need to apply for something else at the prefecture office after arriving in France to supplement a long-stay visa, but unfortunately I don’t know the details of this process.

I also found it very helpful to read all the information provided by IEP carefully, as it included everything from housing to insurance to services offered by the university. As long as you pay attention to your email you shouldn't miss any important information. Packing wasn't especially difficult: the weather in Strasbourg is very similar to the weather in Vancouver so it was easy to pack clothing even for a winter semester. I’d recommend bringing photocopies of important documents, especially your passport, and about 10 passport-sized ID photos, because you’ll need these for almost everything. Even signing up for a student discount card at the grocery store required an ID photo, so it’s better to have more than enough of these on hand. There are small photo booths in some shopping centers that will give you five ID photos for five euros, but you'll need a few photos right off the bat so it's better to bring them with you.

I tend to be over-prepared when it comes to travel, so I was very careful when booking my flights and other arrangements to make sure I could get to the dorm with no possible chance of being stranded somewhere. I’d recommend going to see a travel agent rather than booking a flight on your own, and make sure you book a return flight at the same time! Charter flights are often cheap in the summer but prices go way up in winter, so if you'll be returning after only one semester you could be paying almost double to get home. I flew from Vancouver to Amsterdam, then from Amsterdam to Strasbourg, with the same route in reverse on my return. Despite the six-hour layover, I found this the most convenient way to travel, although you could also fly to Paris and take the TGV to Strasbourg, or even fly to Frankfurt and take a shuttle bus to Strasbourg (about a two hour ride). There is a train from the airport that will take you to the central train station, but since I was flying with two other students we decided to split the cost of a taxi instead (about 10 euros each) to avoid navigating the tram with all our luggage.

The cost of living in France doesn't seem very different from in Vancouver until you see the actual conversion from euros to dollars. At the time of writing, the euro isn't especially strong, so things
seem much more expensive when you pay off your credit card in dollars. That being said, credit cards are widely accepted and are definitely the most convenient method of payment, especially for rent in student housing. ATMs are easy to find, although not all debit cards work on all machines (check for a Plus logo on the back of your card; that seems to be the most common). However, you should always have cash on hand, because sometimes there is a minimum purchase amount before cards are accepted, or sometimes cards just aren't accepted at all. I didn't open a bank account as it seemed like too much hassle for staying only five months, but there are many options with special bonuses for students that may appeal to someone who doesn't mind a little extra bureaucracy.

Upon arrival in Strasbourg, it was clear that the university is very experienced in helping international students. The Office for International Students at IEP organized two weeks of activities before classes started for arriving students to meet each other and get to know the city, including tours of landmarks, large group dinners and other excursions. A "stage de français" was also offered to help students brush up on their French skills before classes start, and although I doubt it would help much if you aren't already relatively fluent, I found it was a good way to get back in a classroom mindset and it also helped me meet new people before actually taking classes with them. The orientation also helped with filling out the paperwork required to actually register for the university, obtain your student card, buy the obligatory insurance, and register for exams, which was all very helpful and I probably would have been lost without it.

My accommodation in Strasbourg was quite comfortable. I had never lived in a dorm before, but I found that my room in the university's Paul Appell housing block had lots of storage space and met all my expectations. The bathroom may even have been better than I expected - despite being very small it never felt cramped - and it was very convenient to have one in my room rather than sharing. The bed was not particularly comfortable and the provided linens would probably be inadequate during the winter, but a quick trip to IKEA and the mall close by solved that problem easily. The kitchen was a little unfortunate, being entirely made up of only two hot plates and a sink, but was acceptable for making simple meals.

The classes at l'Institut d'études politiques were completely different from what I'm used to seeing at SFU. Each class is made up of a two hour lecture, only once a week, with absolutely no assignments, testing or grading of any kind before the final exam. This may sound easier than a class filled with evaluations and term papers, but I found that the professors in Strasbourg covered far more material in just their lectures than professors at SFU and I think I worked harder to prepare for my exams there than I have ever had to at home. These exams are also all oral - students choose a topic at random from the professor and have ten to fifteen minutes to prepare a ten minute speech about their topic for immediate presentation to the professor. It's also important to be aware that the grading system in France is very different from what we have in Canada: exams are marked out of 20 and 18/20 is typically the maximum grade for French students, with 10/20 being the lowest passing grade. This was stressful, but most professors are aware that there are international students in their classes and will be slightly more lenient with their marking. I also wasn't told before arriving that international students who are returning home to start school again in January can move their exams to be before Christmas, and by then I couldn't change my flight to be in December, so I missed the beginning of the Spring semester
at SFU. So even though exams are in January, you can do yours sooner and come home for Christmas if you have permission from SFU! I wish I had known that before booking my return ticket home.

However, having no assignments definitely freed up a lot of time to really appreciate French culture and travel. The orientation tour takes you to many of Strasbourg's most important landmarks, such as the Cathedral or Parc de l'Orangerie, but it's also fun to explore some of the shopping streets in Petite France (Grand Rue has many interesting little stores) or walk along the canals. Germany is also a short walk away - it only takes an hour to walk across the Rhine to the town of Kehl, which is fun to visit for cheaper groceries and the privilege of saying you've walked to Germany. You can also take advantage of Kehl's train station to get cheaper train tickets within the state; Heidelberg is very close and makes a great day trip when the weather is good. Strasbourg itself is very central so it's quite easy to travel by train, or take advantage of cheap RyanAir flights when you have a holiday to experience more of Europe!

Looking back on my exchange, I think I can firmly say it was one of the best experiences of my life. I learned so much, both about political science and about myself, in such a short amount of time. Some miscellaneous advice for students about to go to Strasbourg: talk to other students (international and French), travel as much as you can (you may never have the opportunity again!), check store hours carefully before going out (they often close for long lunch breaks and everything is closed on Sundays), and request internet access in your room as soon as possible (and buy an ethernet cable so you can use it). All in all, Strasbourg was a wonderful experience, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.
The fountain in l'Orangerie.

Covered bridge and 14th century towers.
The Cathedral from a side street in Petite France.