My exchange from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 was in Strasbourg, France at the Institut d’Études politiques de Strasbourg (Iep). I’m in the French Cohort program, so an exchange to a francophone university is mandatory for my degree; although going to France is not. However, unlike the usual program, I am double majoring in Political Science and French. Throughout this report, I will discuss the preparation, my experience and my reflecting thoughts on this exchange which has been a life-changing and unforgettable event in my life.

The preparations for leaving for France are not the easiest of administrative nightmares since the French system is extremely bureaucratic. The long-stay studying visa was free of charge for me as per an agreement between Canada and France but required some time to collect all the right documents and submit them well before my flight to France in order to receive my visa. This was not, however, my residence permit which I had to apply for once I landed and took about 8 months to receive. Moreover, the administrative steps needed to apply for student residence and for the school are not easy and involves sending registered mail to France and monitoring the situation to ensure everything is on course. All things considered, keeping on top of things will make all of this
much easier, so be prepared. In terms of getting there, Strasbourg is not the easiest nor the most complicated. It has an international airport but with limited destinations. I flew to Strasbourg via one connecting flight through Amsterdam which was very lucky. This connection no longer exists, so my recommendations for cheapest and easiest travel is to fly to Frankfurt, Germany and then take the train (TGV) to Strasbourg. The other option is to fly to Paris and take the TGV in.

Since I was staying from September to June, I packed a variety of clothing for all conditions, especially a good winter jacket and boots. The weather is fairly mild and can be hot with not very much snow in the winter; but the wind is brutal from November to March, I would strongly recommend a windbreaker. I only brought a large suitcase, a carry-on suitcase and a backpack. This was almost enough for me to bring back all the stuff I brought back from France, although, I did have to send a parcel home for bulky items. Strasbourg is a smaller city but it does have a variety between cash and credit. Nevertheless, there are some setbacks, the university student card can be used as a payment devices for cafeterias and laundry but can only be charged by French bank or credit cards therefore opening a French bank account could be useful as it is also required for applying for CAF (student subsidies for rent).
The cost of living is cheaper than Vancouver thanks to the student pricing in France, cafeterias are cheap and lots of cultural events like plays, ballets, concerts or even the movie theaters are heavily reduced for students with carte culture. Other things like public museums are free with presentation of French Student ID. Despite these benefits, buying groceries can be expensive, particularly fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat. Eating out can be pricey as well if you don’t eat at places that are targeted for students with an average of 30€ for a meal. Travelling is a mixture of reasonable to outrageous. Trains are usually very expensive (get a student card) and it’s possible to find flights as low as 25€.

My exchange started in late September with the exchange orientation and a time period of two weeks into the semester to test out courses before committing to signing up for them. I liked this format very much since some classes were not what I imagined them to be. The only criticism is that as a two-semester exchange student, you have to register for your second semester courses during the first semester which doesn’t allow you to try them out first, but if you arrived in the second semester, you are still allowed the two-week grace period.

The French style of teaching is not my favourite and takes some time getting used to. French professors haven’t adapted much to 21st century teaching styles and usually dictate their lectures without any visual aids or mandatory readings. This leaves exchange students, like myself, rather lost by all the references to French politics and European Union history which was never relevant until I studied here. Additionally, as this is a political institute, there are not many courses available for visiting students that will let you receive French language credits. The online education platform (ENT) is also terribly difficult to use and takes some time to learn how to navigate although most professors don’t use it for their courses. The majority courses are solely graded on the final exam which can be either a written or oral exam. There are tutorial-style courses attached to some bigger courses called “Conférence des methodes” but they are not mandatory for exchange students and
contain additional work other than the final exam for the course.

The French lifestyle is very different from a North American one, but easy to adapt to over
time. Life is slower there, and convenience for consumers is not high on the priorities for French
society. Everything is closed on Sunday except restaurants, movie theaters and museums. This is
incredibly frustrating at first as you always have to consider buying groceries the day before. Other
inconveniences included everything closing by 8:30pm and 2 hour lunch breaks for most businesses
(including the post office). However, it is also good to take it easy, Strasbourg is a very walkable and
bikeable city and going anywhere from your accommodations is about 30 minutes. The city is also
full of canals which are pleasant to sit by in the evening with friends and some good wine, bread and
cheese. Moreover, Strasbourg is a university town with one of the biggest universities in France so
there are many events, restaurants and clubs that cater to students. The region of Alsace is uniquely
different from other French departments as it has a strong Germanic flavour and makes it exciting
and quaint change to the French character. It’s famous for its good wine, beer, cheese and foie gras;
everything to make you gain a few pounds if you’re not careful.

The school also has lots of extracurricular activities and clubs that could be relevant to political science studies or simply for fun like the Bureau of Arts. The annual sports fee for the university is extremely reasonable at 25€ and the carte culture at 7€ for the year (as mentioned before) cuts down ticket prices to movies, plays, operas and concerts to a mere 6€ or less.

Strasbourg is also on the border of Germany with an easy 15 min tram and bus ride to go to Kehl on the other side of the Rhine River. Kehl is not particularly an exciting town but groceries is Germany are substantially cheaper. I would make 1 or 2 trips a month for things that cost a lot more in France.

Alsace also has “La route des vins”: a route between all the vineyard towns that line the foothills of the Vosges Mountain Range. An incredibly beautiful thing to see by bike on the weekends and to enjoy wine tastings and some French countryside.

All in all, after my exchange, I feel like I have learned and matured from my stay abroad. Strasbourg will always hold a special place in my heart. Additionally, it’s the friends you make that create the experience and I made many from all over Europe and the World. French culture is also
something that grows on you overtime and gives you a new appreciation for good food and good company. This was really jumping off at the deep end in terms of living on my own for the first time and it was a liberating experience. If I had any words of advice, it would be to have a great time, throw yourself out there, and travel when you can because there are always new and exciting opportunities around the corner, doubly so when you are on exchange.