During the Spring 2015 semester I studied at Sciences Po in France, at the Menton campus. I am an International Studies and World Literature student at SFU. I had to pack for all weather because I was traveling throughout Europe in three seasons. Be realistic about how much you want to buy when you get there; I planned to buy some clothing and shoes in Europe, but buying new clothes meant I had to choose what to throw away or leave behind. It might be good to leave some room in your suitcases if you’re planning to buy anything you want to bring home. You can also send a suitcase home if you’re planning to travel afterward. I used a company called First Luggage because it gave a discount to British Airways customers, but there are other options as well. If you’re flying, make sure you look at the limitations for carry on and stowed luggage. I bought shampoo, toothpaste, etc. when I got there, but if you’re bringing liquids it’s generally best to put them in your stowed luggage.

I would definitely recommend planning weekend trips and traveling during breaks if you can. You may only get to go to the region once in your life, and you should take advantage of it while you’re there. At my university, exchange students were only allowed to have half the classes that full-time students were, and I definitely took advantage of the extra time. The full time students joked that we were just tourists, which was honestly true. I stayed on the Riviera in France and took day trips along the coast as well as overnight and even week-long trips to other parts of Europe including Italy, Catalonia, the UK and Switzerland. It was amazing to see how many diverse places there are in such a relatively small area, especially compared to Canada! Even though many people speak English all over Europe, I felt as if I should have made more of an attempt to practice different languages before going on trips. I had phrase books, but I would have liked to use them more. It’s best to book airplanes, coaches or long-distance trains in advance because they can be a lot cheaper. Planes are a lot faster and sometimes even cheaper than trains, but going through security can be a bit of a hassle. If you take shorter, cheaper plane flights (something like Easyjet or Vueling), make sure your luggage fits the requirements. If it’s too heavy, or you can’t fit everything in one suitcase, or you have something you can’t take on the plane (someone I knew bought a Swiss Army knife as a souvenir), you may have to pay a lot to check your luggage at the airport. If you know you have to check your luggage, I would recommend doing it when you book the ticket, because it could be a lot cheaper than it would be last minute at the airport.

I was able to use my Mastercard in the majority of Europe (at least where I was traveling and staying), and there were usually ATMs available to take out cash. Quite a few countries in Europe use the Euro (not all), which made traveling easier because I didn’t always have to do currency exchanges. France is not cheap, but it wasn’t exceedingly expensive compared to Vancouver. I stayed in the university-affiliated housing and the rent was very affordable; my room was only 250 Euros a month (about $370 Canadian), although others payed more. Eating out can be a bit expensive if you go to a nicer restaurant, but you can find good deals at the grocery store or at fast food restaurants when you’re traveling (I found some pretty good falafel places!). The UK tended to be about twice as expensive as Vancouver, but France isn’t too bad if you’re careful about what you buy. I also knew some people who went across the border to do their shopping in Italy because they said they could find better quality food for less. The Riviera is a tourist and retirement destination so it can be expensive.

On the day I arrived, the campus was closed to students. Luckily the caretaker and the administration were there and helped me find my dorm, which was actually in town and not on
campus. Since I arrived in the Spring semester, we didn’t have much of an orientation. We had a meeting with the head of the campus and the administration and a student group had a meeting for new students, but for the most part the other students showed me everything. It was a small town and a small campus (about 200 students and just one building), so I wasn’t too worried about not having a huge orientation, but I would recommend doing an orientation if you can because it would help with meeting people and learning about your campus and city.

I know some people who rented apartments in Menton for not too much. I stayed in the dorm, which I liked because I met lots of people that way. Dorms were reserved for first year and exchange students. There were two women’s dorms; one had about 20 students living in it, and the other had 9 (I was in that one). I liked staying in the smaller dorm because it meant I got to know everyone a bit better.

Sciences Po’s styles of instruction, course organization and grading are very different from those at SFU. Lectures are every two or three weeks, and are around 3 or 4 hours long. My French language class was the only one that was every week for 4 hours each week. Grading is out of 20 for each project or exam, and for the final grade. The grading is harder than it is at SFU; a 12 out of 20 is considered a decent grade, and a 16 is excellent. A 20 out of 20 is nearly impossible to get. You can also take arts and sports electives. I took kayaking and sailing on Fridays, but I asked to take it without credit so that I could take weekend trips sometimes. If you miss a class more than twice, you fail that class.

France is an extremely diverse country in terms of weather, culture and just about everything else. The Mediterranean coast is warm even in January, while Paris is farther north and inland so it’s much colder. Menton is a tourist beach town with a lot of Italian influence, so there are lots of gift shops and pizza restaurants. A beach in Brittany is more similar to English beaches. Every place I’ve been in France has something special about it. I spent a month traveling through the country. I stayed in Albi, Nantes, Dol-de-Bretagne, Paris and Lyon. They were all wonderful, but if I had to choose I would definitely go to Paris again!

Menton itself doesn’t have a ton of nightlife (you can hang out at the beach), but it’s a train or bus ride away from Monte Carlo and Nice, and lots of people went there if they wanted to go out at night. The student society organized some trips to Nice and Monte Carlo to see the symphony and the opera for student prices. There are also some beautiful walks and hikes, especially along the coast. I also joined a rowing team and some student-run school clubs.

Exchange was the first time I lived away from home, so I learned a lot just from shopping and cooking for myself every day. The language barrier was a bit of a challenge, although many people spoke English (which made me feel a little badly about not speaking other languages very well). My French improved a lot as well. While traveling you have to be careful of pickpockets, or of people trying to take advantage of your lack of knowledge and language skills. I felt especially vulnerable as a young woman traveling alone. But most people I met were kind and helpful!

When setting up a new bank account, I wish I had done a bit more research into how much a full wire transfer would cost. Friends told me it was expensive, so instead I took out money from my home account every few weeks and put it in my French account, but it cost me every time and it would have been easier to transfer a lump sum at the beginning. That being said, I’m not sure how much that would have cost. I also wish I had known ahead of time that only two of my courses at Menton would count toward my program at SFU (courses are more limited than in Paris), although I probably still would have chosen that campus!
Don’t be afraid to try things and go places (as long as they are safe of course). A weekend trip may seem expensive or complicated to organize, but it also may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I kept telling myself that I won’t remember that $100 that I saved or that day I didn’t have to bus for 10 hours, but I’ll remember the amazing city I got to visit for a couple days, or that delicious gelato that I tried. Make sure you stay within your budget of course, but weigh the benefits of saving money, time or energy against the benefits of having new experiences. And remember that all the experiences you have, even the ones that aren’t amazing, will teach you a lot. Traveling alone and living in a foreign country can be hard at times, but if you keep a positive attitude then you will have a wonderful and fulfilling exchange semester!