Exchange Report

Details:
- University of Cologne (Cologne, Germany)
- Communications Major (SFU), Faculty of Arts and Humanities (Cologne)
- October 2017 - February 2018 (Winter Semester)

Preparation for Exchange

Planning:
Make sure you do the necessary research and read through things carefully! At the time I applied, I had already done it once before since this was my second exchange semester. It was definitely less stressful than the first time. However, use the Study Abroad advisors, that's what they are there for - to help! I recommend to write down all your findings and organize them into folders (application, immigration, courses, etc.)

Academic:
Researching courses were kind of a challenge. However, to register for courses, similarly to SFU course registration, is through an online portal. Depending on what faculty you are in, you can pick a wide variety of classes. They send you a guidebook well in advance to understand the courses they offer. Make sure to attend the Arrival Orientation as it contains helpful and useful information that you will need regarding people to contact and transcript of records for the end of the semester.

Packing:
Packing for half a year (or longer) can be tricky. In my case it was longer, since I had two exchanges. In my experience the best way to do this is by making piles for each type of clothing (underwear, pants, long sleeves, cardigans, etc.) Then make piles for summer and winter. I had brought two luggage (paid for an extra) because it is necessary! Plus, you'll probably buy clothes while abroad. I put summer and winter clothes in both luggage (in case something happens to one of them, like the airport losing it, etc.). Cologne, the northern part of Germany, in the winter can be pretty cold and rainy, just like Vancouver. Keep that in mind when packing. Leave out toiletries, as you can always purchase them there, and it adds extra weight.

Travel & Transportation:
The flight is long, and can be uncomfortable in Economy (9-10 hr flight). I recommend bringing things in your carry on to entertain yourself (books, games on your phone, etc.). Typically long flights like this provide a selection of movies as well. I also brought sleeping pills which helped me sleep for about half the flight which was nice. When you arrive, most likely it’ll be in Frankfurt. From there, you’ll have to catch an ICE train (really fast trains) to Cologne Central Station. From there, depending where your accommodations is, another bus, tram or train. You’ll have to buy a ticket of course, and the ticket from Frankfurt to Cologne can be pretty expensive (~€50 - €90 which is ~$80CAD-$120CAD). Or if you know your arrival time and want to buy a ticket around that, you can buy one earlier for cheaper at GoEuro.com. Once you have registered online and have followed the required steps with the Uni, you can get your University Card which is also your transportation card. There will be people you can ask for help if you need, at the University.

Financial:
In Cologne, I found that many places don’t accept a card. In most grocery stores, and clothing stores such as H&M, cards are accepted. However, if you want to go to the bakery or have a kebab, you will need cash. It’s a good idea to have cash on hand when you arrive until you can open a German bank account. This is also a good idea because you can live like the locals do and avoid unnecessary international charges. Generally speaking, the cost of living is equal to or less than living in Vancouver. Except for rent, groceries are typically cheaper. I spent approximately €25-€30 each trip, and made about 2 trips per week.

During Exchange

Arrival and Orientation:
Once you arrive, you will experience jet lag for sure. I recommend arriving a week before Orientation, which is a week-long full of information essential to your stay and study. This means you should arrive two weeks before classes actually start. I was already in Europe so when preparing for this semester, so it wasn’t a big change. However, I did arrive a week before my classes started. The first week allows you to rest a day or two after arrival and to unpack. I was able to head over to the Stadt Koln office to complete my visa process (~€60), however these requirements could change by the time you go to Germany. As well as open a bank account (I’m not sure which one is best, as I continued to use my Dutch bank card since it worked in Germany too) and register with the city as well (which also happens at the Stadt Koln office). Not to mention a little exploring of this new city that will be home for the next
5-6 months. Then the next week you will have orientation, which is very important, not only for information but also to meet other exchange students!

**Accommodation and Living:**
I was living in Kalk, which is in Cologne but about 20-minute tram ride from the University and center. (Note: You need to register at the city hall within that residence, mine was Kalk) It’s nice with the University Card as a transportation card too because you can explore and go places within the North-Rhine Westphalia. It’s also a great way to get around and know the city better, and live like a local! If you do decide to live outside the center, make sure the tram/bus ride is between 15-20 minutes. It sucks to have to go longer in rain, wind or any other kind of inconveniences (Note: living outside the center can be cheaper than living in the city like my accommodation was) I also recommend getting a phone card there. It makes contacting friends and getting around (data for navigation, so you don’t get lost) a lot easier! And it’s cheaper than getting a phone plan in Canada, e.g. a month prepaid is as cheap as €15.

**Academic Details:**
The Germany grading system is a different grading system than SFU. Grades aren’t measured by percentage, but through numbers 1-5, 1 being the highest. The point 4.5 is just a pass, anything lower is a fail. Lectures are between 1.5-2 hours depending on the course, and also depending on the course they can have seminars between 30-45 minutes (it’s like having a tutorial). I recommend just doing the readings, because there is little class time, and most of the time, they are mainly related to the exam. It’s easy to do well, take advantage!

**Country Information:**
The Germans are known for being kind of cold, compared to the friendly people of Vancouver. Many people find that weird. I think overall Europe tends to be colder. It comes off as rude sometimes, however, don’t take it that way. They just like things straightforward with no misinterpretation. Once you get to know them, they are more friendly! Bikes are way more popular than in Vancouver, but not as popular as in the Netherlands. If you are there during this time you will experience an event called Karneval, which is a huge deal in this city. The whole city takes a week off, dresses up and parties on the streets. In my opinion, this event is good for one time and one time only. It can get pretty crazy, crowded and cold. I recommend going to cities while there like Freiburg, Berlin, or Hamburg. The weather is similar to Vancouver, however, it feels colder. One minute it’s rainy and cloudy, the next it's blue skies and sunny.

**Social & Extracurricular Activities:**
By the university, there are a lot of good and cheap student restaurants and bars. TripAdvisor is good for finding good affordable student pricing food too. The restaurants by the Rhine River have the good German cuisine to enjoy when the sun is out. Cologne is famous for the Dom, which is a historical church, that was bombed in WWII but still stands today. There are also art museums, a sports museum, and my favorite the Chocolate Museum. I recommend googling them and checking the site to see which ones might interest you.

**Reflection After Exchange**

**What I Learned & Challenges I Faced:**

I tried to learn German, but it is a very, very, very hard language. I would say I have basic elementary skills, as I am able to carry a simple conversation and of course basic mannerisms, like thank you, you’re welcome, etc. Most people in this city speak English, particularly the younger generations, because Cologne is a very international city. One challenge I faced was learning to understand other cultures and their habits. For example, people here are a lot colder and I found it difficult to get to know people on a deeply personal level. However, I did manage to make some other international friends. Some advice for future students is to be open-minded to trying new things and opportunities because you never know where you will end up. I would recommend going around with the tram, since its free with your uni card, and check out the surrounding areas. You are already in another country, go one step further and just explore as much as possible and say yes to everything (most things that seem safe, use your judgment). Step outside what you might be used to and I can guarantee you won’t regret it!

**Photos**