Introduction

One of the toughest decisions when it comes to studying abroad is deciding where to go! With all of the exchange partners offered by SFU there are many options to choose from. For my study abroad semester I chose to attend Bocconi University located in Milan, Italy. There were several factors that influenced my decision in choosing where to study abroad. Firstly, I am an undergraduate in the Faculty of Business Administration, so I chose to look only at the preferred business partners when looking at schools. The courses offered matched better with my program than most other schools, I knew how to speak a little bit of Italian, and I am interested in working in fashion so Milan seemed like a great location. I had initially intended on attending during the fall semester but deferred it to spring; my study dates were from February 2012 to July 2012. Exchange was an amazing learning experience and hopefully this essay will help you with planning and get you excited about studying abroad!

Preparing for Exchange

Preparing for exchange can initially seem very stressful with all of the details that go into planning but it definitely is all worth it once it all comes together. Making use of all the resources provided through SFU and other sources (friends, family, etc) significantly helped to make the process smoother. For starters, attending the nomination session put on by SFU provided me with a lot of useful information and things that I may not have even considered - the checklist provided is a really great thing to look over! One of the biggest things to sort out for my exchange was securing the funding. I was able to do this through working, and applying for student loans. I would recommend talking to family and preparing a detailed budget to make sure that you will have enough money because you don’t want to run out while you’re there. Milan isn’t the cheapest place to live but it really isn’t that much different than Vancouver. While money was a big concern for me the most important thing is getting a visa. Fortunately this process is really not that difficult; I left mine somewhat last minute because I wanted to know first about receiving student loans and so forth. The Italian consulate is located downtown and the staff members at the visa office were very helpful. I went in a couple of times before submitting my application to ensure I had all the documents. Once I submitted it, it only took about a week before I was able to go pick it up. That being said, if you can try to do it early – it will save you a lot of stress!
Another suggestion I have concerns searching for flights; I recommend shopping around online. I was prepared to pay around $1300 for a roundtrip flight to Milan but ended up finding a one way ticket to London for under $300! I changed my travel plans a bit and ended up saving a lot of money by doing so.

**During Exchange**

So after all the months of preparation and planning the fun begins! I chose not to participate in the introductory Italian crash course offered by Bocconi so I arrived in Milan for the second orientation date (just before classes started) as opposed to the first. I had several reasons for this. Firstly, because of the cheap flight I found I had to leave for London on Jan. 31, 2012. Secondly I already knew intro Italian after taking it at SFU. Thirdly, I didn’t want to pay more for my housing, so I chose the shorter contract and couldn’t move into residence until February 12. This worked out great for me, however, I would suggest arriving early if you can and taking the crash course if you don’t speak Italian. It was a great way for people to meet; I couldn’t believe the kind of friendships that had formed in the couple of weeks before I moved in!

Living in Arcobaleno residence in Milan was a lot of fun, its great always being with students and it was really easy for me to make friends even though I moved in a bit later. I also didn’t want to deal with the stress of not finding a property to rent in Milan so I decided to go with residence. The downside is that it is a bit far from campus and the city center, and it is a little overpriced. If I could do it over again I would still live in student housing, but if I was staying for two semesters I probably would have tried to find an apartment in the city, just to have a more authentic Italian experience. I met a lot of students who chose to stay in apartments and really liked it; they were closer to the city center and paid less than student housing in some cases.

Regarding the academic side of things, Bocconi offers some pretty interesting courses as Milan is Italy’s center of things like design, fashion, and finance. One big difference with a lot of the courses as opposed to those at SFU is that there are often classes where the final exam counts for 100% of the grading. There are not as many group projects and assignments as business courses at SFU (although this varies a bit depending on the subjects you study). The spring semester also runs longer than SFU but we got a month off for midterm break – which means a month of travel when you have no midterms!
The campus is also really nice and new but there are a few annoyances such as the old computers in the lab, having to sign in to use them and print, and having to sign into the library. Overall I really enjoyed my classes there; they weren’t really difficult, they were interesting, and I had some great professors and great students to work with.

As for the city itself, there aren’t necessarily a lot of touristy things to do in Milan. However, Milan is great because the location is so central to other countries in Europe that you can travel to lots of places at a low cost thanks to airlines like Ryanair and Easyjet. I visited places like Barcelona, Corfu, Budapest, Krakow, and more. It’s also easy to take the train to other parts of Italy or surrounding countries. Some great places to visit near Milan are Lake Como and Cinque Terre; they are beautiful and just a few hours away via train!

**Reflecting on my Exchange**

Through the process of exchange I’ve learned so much; not only about myself but also about other people, history, and culture. I went into exchange not knowing what to expect. I didn’t know anyone else going to Bocconi or even Italy, I had never been to Milan before, I didn’t have specific plans of places I would travel too, and everything was kind of an open book. Personally I think this is the best way to do it; I ended up travelling to some places I never knew I wanted to go and meeting people from all over the world. If you go in with specific expectations of what exchange semester will be like you may be shocked when things aren’t what you anticipated, so go in with an open mind. Of course studying abroad isn’t without its challenges. There are little things that can be frustrating like not knowing where anything is, not being able to communicate with people as comfortably in their language, not being able to find certain favourite foods, or just missing family and friends. If you end up experiencing this usually talking it over with someone helps and remember what a great opportunity exchange is, so make the most of it!
In front of the Duomo – Milan, Italy

Lake Como, Italy
Quad Safari – Corfu, Greece

Lisbon, Portugal