Hello! I'm a fellow SFU student who participated in the Study Abroad exchange between Maastricht, Netherlands and SFU. I am a History major in my third year and went on exchange in during the Spring 2012 term, a term which will probably be the most memorable in my university career. If you are interested in the experiences that I had while living and studying in a new country, I hope this is all very informative for you!

Preparing for this exchange wasn't a relaxing experience. There is a lot of planning involved, from making sure you have all the files and folders set for pre-departure to your first days in the new city and planning how you’re gonna get there. Things I would recommend are:

READ. EVERYTHING, especially EMAILS. All those essential appointments, pre-departure meetings and whatnot, make sure you have them all planned out, written down and memorized! I had to leave work mid shift because I realized at the last minute that I was supposed to attend a meeting for Study Abroad! It was not a fun experience.

I also had applied for the program earlier in the year (during the January 2011 application) but I missed it because I didn't know I needed to get my references submitted before the deadline! Whoops.

Basically, the best thing you can do for yourself is be super organized and plan ahead. Don't leave things to the last minute, even though its sometimes really hard not to! It will end up paying off in the long run anyways.

I planned out my arrival to Maastricht pretty well. I took a shuttle from the airport in Belgium to my hostel (it was only around an hour driving) and stayed in the hostel for two nights before moving into my dorm. One thing I should have planned out was how to get my stuff from the hostel to the dorm, but I ended up making a friend who helped me out! It ended up working out fine.

The guesthouse I stayed in was C-building, which is probably the closest out of the guesthouses to the university and also the most rambunctious. We often had security guards patrolling the corridors and keeping an eye on the hallways with security cameras. Parties were banned and having an excess of 20 people in the common room was forbidden. Besides the slight 1984-ish atmosphere the guesthouse was very clean and quite hospital-like. The guesthouse supplies you with the basics: Bed, dresser, desk, internet. They also give you your own dishes, which I recommend keeping track of since people in the corridor didn't like washing dishes too much.

University life is kind of similar to how it is at SFU. Students are quite relaxed about exams but still very through in their studies. The courses are almost self taught in a way so there is a large degree of independence in the method of study. The university wasn't all work though, many social activities were also planned through the school that included pub crawls, dances and trips to other cities, which were quite popular among the students.

Since I was a Canadian citizen I was pretty lucky since I skipped out on the 500 euro student visa cost. Instead I got the Working Holiday permit, which is much cheaper but requires that you do all the legwork on your own. I went back and forth to so many people looking for someone to help me out with my permit document (I would go to the school, but the school would send me back to city hall and vice versa). Eventually I got redirected to someone with the school who actually knew how to go about getting a working holiday permit. It's not exactly as it says on the instruction sheet, since City Hall requires that you get your residence permit at Eindhoven before you register with them. To register for an appointment at Eindhoven you also need to speak Dutch. The whole process is very complicated, but if you find the Visa office at the Student centre off the bat and have the correct documents it should be less of a hassle.

I cannot emphasis this enough, having a credit card was pathetically overrated in Maastricht. Basically, two of the most important services that I needed did not accept credit cards: the supermarkets and the train station machines. Because of these essentials not being available for credit cards, I highly recommend carrying cash or opening up a bank account. ING offers services in English specifically for students, so setting up an account is very straightforward. I recommend getting an account open and money wired over quickly, because it always sucks to be short on cash.

While in the Netherlands I did a fair bit of local travel (mostly to Eindhoven for residence documents). I went to Amsterdam and saw a concert there, and went to Keukenhof tulip gardens which were very lovely. The weather in Maastricht was killer cold for the first few months, before warming up to something more tolerable. I ended up buying a lot of clothes for the sole purpose of staying warm! The Dutch are generally pretty relaxed and friendly people, and the only weird cultural experience that I had was the week long binge-fest that is Carnival! People get dressed up, parade around town, get drunk and have fun. It's really neat and really weird.

Another thing that took getting used to was the opening hours of stores. All stores close at 6pm every day except Thursday, when they are open until 8pm. There isn't any 24 hour shop or emergency ration station besides a vending machine in guesthouse, so always make sure you have what you need.
Bicycles are the most important form of transportation in Maastricht. They are super cheap and it's really easy to get around on one, you can cross the city from one end to the other in less than 20 minutes on a bike! There are a bunch of services where you can buy a bike, like the facebook page Buy/Sell a Bike in Maastricht and Jules and You. I bought my bike from another student in the dorm, they aren't too difficult to find generally.

The tendency for people when they first arrive at Maastricht seems to be to make friends fast, which is an excellent idea. Keep track of events by Universalis and ESN Maastricht! Keep an ear out for trips other people are going on since they are often with these or other student organizations in the area. Orientation is another great way to meet people, since everyone is in the same boat as you are and eager to make some friends.

I think right now what I can say that I've really learned during this trip is that nobody is going to look out for me but myself. It's really a taste of independence in a way, since you are on your own for so much of it and there isn't anyone to rely on. But it's a great challenge and a whole new experience. Try speaking some Dutch, even though most people in Maastricht know English fluently. Participate as much as you can, stay ahead in your studies, and you should have a wonderful and smooth experience!
This is Maastricht University College! It used to be a monastery before it was fixed up.
Maastricht has a lot of nice canal buildings like this one!
the river mass separates Maastricht in two. The bridge that connects the two sides is over 1000 years old!
My guesthouse room in C-building. I had a roommate who I shared half the room with, which was an arrangement that worked out very well!