My Exchange Experience 2015
Maastricht University (School of Business and Economics)

Spring 2015 – February-June
When I first got accepted into my host institution, Maastricht University, I was extremely excited but it wasn’t until October came around that I eventually asked myself “so, what now”? There are actually a lot of preparations to do before exchange so I highly recommend making sure to read all the emails sent by the host university and also from the SFU exchange office. There are a few important deadlines to keep in mind which include course registration and visa application. I can’t stress how important preparing for these are because I underwent a lot of stress from rushing my applications last minute.

When planning for the course registration, Maastricht does not offer a very wide selection of courses like SFU. You are not allowed to take courses outside your faculty, and they do not list the times/exams of the courses until the semester begins. I would suggest going into their course database for that semester and looking at the certain dates of the courses you would like to take. The database provides the days of the week the courses take place and a course description. Also when doing course registration, make sure to tick off your preference for no night classes, as night classes are after 6pm so it would not be a good fit for an exchange student schedule (there are a lot of events to attend).

For the visa application, the host institution emailed me in the beginning of November or the end of October. They required me to send them digital documents such as passport, proof of financial means, consent forms, etc. I was also be required to send physical documents (signed forms) which I sent by courier because I was short on time. One of the challenging parts of the visa application was the proof of financial means. They gave me different options such as asking the bank to write a specific letter (make sure to do this early) then sending the digital copy of that. Another option (which I did) was wiring money to the visa office to prove I had enough money to stay in the duration of the exchange (6000CAD). This actually worked well for me because later on when I set up a bank account with ING, they refunded the money back to me in that account so I had enough money to last the trip.

I packed relatively light because my flight with KLM only allowed me with one baggage + carry on. I planned on buying bed sheets as well as other necessities in Maastricht to save space in my luggage.

For the flight there, my parents helped me book it very early on in September as it was cheaper. The mistake I made here was booking the return flight because although it was cheaper to do it that way- later I regretted not having the time after my exchange to explore Europe even more. I flew into Amsterdam then took a 3-hour train to Maastricht with one transfer at Utrecht. There is alternatively another way which takes around the same time but via Brussels, Belgium. Many times when we did traveling we would depart from Belgium because the air tickets were cheaper.
During Exchange

Upon arriving into Maastricht, the ESN people (exchange program coordinators) were very welcoming and friendly. They took my bags and drove me to the guesthouse where I was staying. For accommodation, I chose to stay in the guesthouse UM C building where there is a communal kitchen and bathroom because I wanted to get the full dorm experience. The guesthouse is fairly close to Maastricht university depending on which faculty you are in because the campus is spread out across town. Luckily for me, the school of business and economics (sbe) was a 20 min walk and 10 min bike ride. I really recommend staying in the guesthouse at the C-building and also the M building because I think its easier to meet lots of different friends there.

ESN plans a lot of the social activities there such as pub crawls, Dutch dinner night, various European city tours, cantus, city walks and much more. Their office is located right inside the guesthouse so it is very easy to buy tickets for the events.

For orientation this was on the 28th of January for me and many people were in sbe so it was a great place for me to get to know my fellow peers. They gave us a Maastricht bag full of goodies like phone cards, pens, and welcoming documents. The orientation was done in a very large lecture hall and various professors came to speak about the school and their learning program. Something different about Maastricht university is that they implement a problem based learning system (PBL). This means classrooms are fairly small and more interactive. There are more facilitations rather lectures.

The grading in Maastricht University is fairly hard. They have a week of retake exam period for the previous period after the semester because the fail rate of these exams is that high. Which means exchange students beware and make sure you study for your exams!

Lastly, Maastricht is a very convenient place to travel around Europe. Although you do need to take a train first to the airport (which can be tedious), train tickets are super cheap to Belgium (7 euros online) and so are the tickets to other countries. The main search engines I used were skyscanner.com, as well as airbnb.com. I traveled with mainly 3 other girls which I enjoyed much better than a big group of people because it is really hard to make everyone happy in a huge group.
Reflection After Exchange

You hear this all the time but it is so true what other people say about exchange. It was the best experience I have had by far and you really gain a lot of new perspectives about life. It puts you in obstacles that you will have to face yourself and because there is so much time on exchange for you to reflect, you get to know yourself a lot better. Especially for me being very sheltered here in Vancouver, exchange allowed me to become more independent (first time living by myself) and finding ways to enjoy being alone. You will meet some of the most amazing people there and create lifelong friendships. The hardest part for me was leaving and time flew by super fast. Traveling around Europe was like a dream- everyone had so much free time and it was super carefree.

My personal advice is to book your flights early because it can get pretty hectic booking with others. It also becomes a lot cheaper when you book in advance. I had good experiences with Ryanair despite what others say. One thing I do not suggest is to book a super early flight just to save 20 euros. It is not worth the hassle of sleeping over at the airport. Another tip is to buy a hot water boiler (it is worth it)- makes life so convenient for coffee or tea in the morning. Lastly my suggestion is not to worry about making friends and do not book your return flight unless you have some internship you have to go to afterwards. You will never get that amount of free time to travel around Europe again when you come back to Vancouver (work, school, etc).

Have lots of fun and just be open minded about everything- you will be surprised by it!

The River Maas – Across the river is the train station, more restaurants and movie theatre!
Some photos around the small town. Vrijthof is approximately 20 minutes from the guesthouse – lots of restaurants, shopping because it is city center.

Photos of my room - I think I chose the 19sq foot one which in my opinion was too big.
Carnival celebration in mid February at Maastricht! Everyone gets dressed up in crazy costumes in the city and you get a week off of classes.