Act One: Preparation

Maastricht is a quaint and cozy city that sits in the southern Dutch province of Limburg. I recommend flying into Amsterdam and taking the train down to Maastricht upon arrival because it doesn’t necessitate transferring trains via Brussels. Relative to Vancouver, it is very small in size. An hour by foot will take you anywhere you need to be, but biking is the main form of transportation. The city encompasses a strong international and student vibe. There was a lot to look forward to and my preparation began with packing.

I recommend packing with the thought of what you want to bring back. I allocated enough space in my luggage prior to leaving to bring back all my souvenirs. In terms of what to pack, the weather patterns in Maastricht are comparable to Vancouver. Hence, a reliable rain jacket is highly recommended. The weather requires cold and warm attire during the Spring semester. In January, it was as cold as 0˚ Celcius in Amsterdam and in June, 34˚ Celsius in Maastricht. Furthermore, you do not need to waste value space and weight on toiletries as they can be easily purchased. I travelled with one large luggage, one carry-on luggage and a backpack which was sufficient.

Debit and cash are the main forms of payment in the Netherlands. Credit cards are less frequently issued and used to prevent citizens from taking on large debt. I opened up an ING Debit card at the Brusselsepoort branch, closest to the Guesthouse. They require you bring your passport, proof of enrollment (obtained by visiting the Student Services Centre), proof of accommodation and a Dutch phone number (Vodafone offers a Europe wide 2GB data plan for 15€). It took two weeks to receive my card in the mail because my information was randomly selected to be reviewed by the head office. However, my roommate from SFU walked out with a usable temporary card before the official one was mailed. If you plan to open an account, please bring enough cash to last you a couple weeks to ensure sufficient funds.

The cost of living is slightly higher than Vancouver when accounting for the exchange rate. Clothing retailers and restaurants are expensive relative to Vancouver. Purchasing groceries and learning to cook yourself are great life skills and significantly reduce costs. I recommend tracking and budgeting your expenses to ensure you aren’t overspending your funds other the course of your exchange.
Act Two: Exchange!

The best place to meet other students studying abroad is the Guesthouse. You are not required to live here, but I believe it offers the greatest value in terms of developing friendships and living in a social environment. Orientation is the first school related event after I settled into my accommodation at the Guesthouse. SBEs’ orientation is two days. The first is composed of learning about the school and city from various representatives and going on a city walking tour with your designated SBE student leader. The second day teaches you about the Problem Based Learning (PBL) system through being assigned a topic and participating in the session with the group from the previous day. Following the session is a welcome drink where the school provides food and a few beverages of both the alcoholic and non-alcoholic variety. I highly recommend attending both days because you will meet many new people. Many of the friends I made were established early on and further developed at the Guesthouse.

The Guesthouse is a former hospital that has been repurposed as a student dormitory. The three buildings are C, P, and M. The C building is composed of single rooms and is known for their parties and relative uncleanliness. They have common rooms which are great for hanging out with your floor mates. However, they do have a shared kitchen that often goes uncleaned. The P building is mainly composed of shared rooms, but also has more expensive single rooms. The building is generally quieter and more difficult to meet people as there is no common room. The main benefit is having your own stove and mini fridge in your room. The M building room booking is handled through SSH not Maastrichthousing as with the C and P building. This building is much more upscale and yet cheaper. You must book your room early because they fill up fast. I lived in the P building and my experience was awesome. I enjoyed the social activities in the C building and could return to a quiet sleeping environment in the P building. It served as a great medium between being social and having time to myself.
Maastricht University is known for their use of the PBL learning system. This system is prominent within SBE. PBL entails tutorial groups of students essentially teaching course concepts to each other. Lectures are much less common and generally are replaced by tutorials unless the course is heavily quantitative. In these two-hour sessions, groups of students prepare a discussion style presentation to further develop the classes’ understanding. The key to these sessions is that students prepare to participate and engage in the material. It will require a significant amount of work per week because the entire course is only eight weeks in length. There are six periods throughout the year. Periods 1 and 2 as well as 4 and 5 are the regular course periods that you enroll in depending on if you study in Fall or Spring. Periods 3 and 6 are skills periods that are not obligatory for exchange students. You will have full control of which two courses you want to take per period. There is a database of courses and which days they will occur on the university site. I recommend planning this out prior to enrollment to ensure you are able to allocate days to travel. You are typically only allowed to miss two sessions per class during the period. If you miss more than that you will have to complete an additional assignment. In terms of grading, it is on a scale from 0-10 and you need to obtain a grade of 5.5 to pass and receive credits. I strongly recommend staying on top of your work because the courses are only eight weeks and it is difficult to catch up.

When you aren’t studying, there are other more exciting activities to partake in. ISN is the Erasmus organization that organizes many student events over the course of your exchange. They organize events that range from themed parties to weekend trips to nearby countries. ISN organizes a fun event every day for the first week that you should participate in to meet other exchange students. You may feel the need to burn off all those high caloric beverages after a couple weeks and you have several options. The two closest gyms to the Guesthouse are Il Fiore Healthcentre and Mac SportsClub. I chose Il Fiore because it closer in proximity. It was formerly a church and now operates as a gym. The cost is 24.95€ per month and you will also notice other exchange students working out. The school does promote their partnered facility and sports teams; however, these are located far away on the other side of the Maas river. One event you cannot miss out during the Spring semester is Carnival. Everyone dresses up in crazy costumes and parties in the streets. Schools and businesses close for a few days and everyone enjoys this celebration. So, whether it be ISN events, working out, attending classes, or fun holidays, there are so many ways to meet people.

Shot of my Presentation Skills Course tutorial on my last day of classes.

This is my amazing roommate Tom and I at a farewell BBQ.
Act 3: Reflection

My experiences on exchange have been life changing. This was my first time travelling outside North America and by myself. Maastricht University has shown me value of the PBL system. I further developed my presentation skills and comfort speaking in front of others. Furthermore, I have been extremely fortunate to travel across 16 countries and meet so many amazing people. One suggestion to pass time while traveling is listening to podcasts. Find a podcast that you find interesting and value adding. One I recommend is by Tim Ferriss because he interviews experts across many disciplines, asks great questions and recognizes patterns between successful people. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to travel across countries so close in proximity yet see how different the culture and people are. However, most importantly I have learned a so much about myself. My goal prior to going on exchange was to gain perspective and I have exceeded all my expectations. Living in a foreign country with countless new variables in my life forced me to think critically and find solutions to problems I encountered. From missing flights, yes plural, to deciding what to cook every night, I realized that I have the capability to look after myself. Once you realize you have the capability to handle all these situations you have so much more confidence in yourself. A few pieces of advice I would give to perspective students is to keep an open mind and be prepared to deal with the worst-case scenarios. You will not regret your decision to study abroad!