In the Fall of 2019, I attended Maastricht University in the Netherlands. Maastricht is a small town, in the southernmost part of the country. It exists in a unique location, being surrounded by the Belgian border to the west and south, and Germany to the east. Maastricht has a unique status for having a truly international university, and a very international city. The city is dominated by the university population, with the majority of students themselves being international. English is the *lingua franca* and therefore Dutch isn’t a requirement by any means though free language classes are offered.

**Preparation:**

**Academic details** - Exchange students attending Maastricht have the opportunity to acquire a minor degree if they choose to attend for three periods (September – end of January). There is still the option to attend for two periods (September – December) which I opted for as I needed to return to SFU to complete my degree. There were five different minor degrees offered, though these change yearly. Pursuing a Bachelor of Arts, with a major in history and a minor in political science I had several program options at Maastricht. Being in my fifth year, I had finished all of my major requirements, and thus pursued the minor program most related to political science – globalization and development. The information for all offered programs can be found on the UM website by following the exchange tab.

**Bank Details** - In regards to finances, the Netherlands is unique in that most credit cards (Mastercard, Visa, etc.) that do not originate from a Dutch bank are not accepted. This should go without saying, but debit cards from Canada or abroad are likewise not accepted. Therefore, cash (in Euros) is ideal. That said, carrying cash is not always possible or desirable and can be very expensive with vending fees and currency conversion fees, so I’d recommend opening a Dutch bank account with the bank in Maastricht, ING. This process, of opening an account, is facilitated by Maastricht University (UM) to make the process more expedient and simple. To complete this you need to email UM’s Visa Office who regulate international students.

**Cost of Living** - Overall the cost of living in Maastricht is comparable to Vancouver with the exchange rate. Eating out will be much more expensive, but grocery costs should be similar. Housing can be difficult to find as Maastricht has limited residences for rent. There are several Facebook groups dedicated to this purpose and places found through this method will, with the exchange rate, cost approximately the same or even cheaper than in Vancouver. Should you want a safe option, you can stay at the Guesthouse with UM, though this will be an expensive option, and can often end up with shared bedrooms, poorly kept communal kitchens, and high noise levels.

**Travel** – Flights don’t directly go to Maastricht, so your destination will likely vary. More flights go through the airport at Amsterdam, though Brussels in Belgium or Eindhoven in the Netherlands are closer. I flew to Frankfurt in Germany, another option. Amsterdam, Brussels, and Eindhoven are on a train line with Maastricht and therefore are easily accessible from the airports but depending on where you land a bus may be more
prudent. A common bus service in Europe is Flixbus. Flixbus is a discount bus line that will usually give you the cheapest travel costs, but also require travelers to pay significant attention. Drivers will often speak little or no English, the bus may make unexpected stops, and routes can often be significantly early or late. Flixbus is useful because as I said it is the cheapest method, and it is also the most flexible enabling almost last minute cancellations and routes to nearly any city you could require.

**Transportation** – Maastricht is a relatively small city, and depending on where you live, you may not need to cross it much. Most students have bikes (full time and international) to get around, though I was able to get away with walking everywhere. To get a bike you have a few options, you can find a second-hand bike for sale on several Facebook groups or you can rent one from Swapfiets which costs roughly 12 euros a month and they handle any replacements or repairs for free though you need a Dutch bank account for this. Public transportation is an option for farther destinations using something called an OV-chipkaart which is similar to a Vancouver Compass card. I used the bus only twice since the size of the city doesn’t really necessitate it.

**During:**

**Arrival and Orientation** – There are several introductory events for Maastricht University, though interestingly none are strictly run by the university itself. There is a weeklong event called the Inkom, which is put on by all the post secondary institutions in the city and is for all intents and purposes a massive party (not necessarily an alcoholic one). The event takes place all over the town (this is a good time to have a bike) and hosts events during the day like fitness classes, city walks, and barbecues for example. During the nighttime there are other events held, so the you’ll have a lot to do. The Inkom is not explicitly for exchange students, but rather for all new students. This means that you won’t see a lot of the people you meet during it again after. It is also a fairly expensive event, and requires you to arrive two weeks early, but I participated and had a great time; I also met some of my favourite people from Maastricht there. The International Student Network (ISN) is a European student union for exchangers and it hosts its own arrival week celebration after the Inkom. Its considerably more affordable, as you can choose which events to attend and pay for, and the people you meet at these events will be fellow exchangers meaning you’ll form great friendships here. I did this event as well, and between Inkom and the ISN arrival week I felt like I had a solid social base going into the start of classes. The faculty of your choosing will have their own welcome day as well, to show you the location of classes and to explain their format but by this point most international students have found a social group.

**Academic Details** – Maastricht University follows a similar format to SFU in that there are lecture and tutorial components. The only notable difference is that tutorials are twice a week and are student driven, meaning each tutorial is led by a different student in the class (you will have to lead at least one). Usually, there are pre and post discussion
tutorials, the pre at the beginning of the week and the post at the end. The function of the pre discussion is to skim the topics of the weekly readings and theorize about the what to expect or what to look for in your reading. The post discussion is more akin to a typical tutorial at SFU, just discuss what you read though usually in relation to the learning questions from the pre-discussion.

Country Information – The Netherlands has weather largely similar to Vancouver, lots of rain. I also found it a bit colder. Within Maastricht, I recommend checking out Sint Pieter mountain (its more like a tiny hill by Canadian standards) as it provides a great view of the city and surrounding countryside. In terms of trips, the previously mentioned ISN organizes large exchanger trips that will do most of the Dutch highlights for a weekend, most of Belgium for a weekend, a day in Luxembourg, etc. These are fun since they’re large group trips, and they’re organized for you (so long as you pay).

Reflection:

Reinvent yourself – I’m not the most social person ever, and you don’t have to be either, but I still found a wealth of relationships and great friendships. All it took was for me to make the effort. The Inkom and ISN arrival week were great for meeting people and introducing myself. If you’re normally a little shy like myself, then think about this as an opportunity to reinvent yourself, which is what I did. Most people don’t know anyone else there, and you’re allowed to be whichever version of yourself you want, so feel free to step outside of your comfort and be a more confident you.

Sometimes you’ll be sad – This is just part of being away from home for a long time. Exchange is amazing but honestly you’ll feel homesick and lonely sometimes; its just part of life and the experience. That said, a lot of other exchangers will feel the same, and if you’re comfortable talking about it, your friends abroad or at home will be happy to talk about it.

Learn about yourself - Its also important to know yourself, or as in my case to learn more about myself. Sometimes you need time to yourself, and sometimes you need to be with people. It’s a useful skill to know what you need at a given time and this experience helps teach you that.

Ask for help – Almost everyone I met abroad in Europe was a kind person, and people will be willing to help you. Sometimes you may feel afraid to ask, but the people you meet will be veritable sources of information. Where to go for municipal registration day, what cities are good to visit, just ask for help and people will be more than willing to tell you.

Photos:
Maastricht has beautiful colours in the Fall!
Myself and some of my exchange friends from Italy, Finland, and Switzerland at the ISN gala night
Downtown Maastricht is split by a river, and there are three connector bridges. My Mom came to visit, and this is us on the central bridge
A rare picture of me studying in the sun. This is the field next to the University Guesthouse, one of the residence buildings.