Hi! My name is Leigha, and I’m a fourth-year History student. I went on exchange to the University of Stirling in Stirling, Scotland in Fall 2010. Stirling is a really beautiful area situated between Edinburgh and Glasgow, with the stereotypical rolling hills. It’s definitely a great way to get the full blast of the Scottish experience!

Preparing to go to Scotland was a bit haphazard – the United Kingdom gives conflicting reports on what you need to be able to get into and stay into the country, so to be safe, I applied for a six-month student visa. If you are a Canadian citizen and you’re staying abroad for six months or less, this step is not necessary! Save yourself the time and costs, although if you plan to do a lot of international travel, having a student visa will help you through borders with more ease.

However, regardless of how long you’re staying in the country, you’ll need a passport, proof of enough finances to live in and leave Britain without being a drain on the economy, and proof of enrolment at the University, so make sure you keep your documents tucked inside your passport each time you enter and re-enter the UK. (Travel within the UK – that is, to England, Wales, and Northern Ireland – is pretty uninhibited.)

Whether you land in Glasgow or Edinburgh on your way to Stirling, you have the option of using a shuttle service. If you land at a peak time, this can cost as little as £20 (about $34 CAD) – or as much as £60 (over $100) if you don’t! I received confirmation that it would cost me £20 before I left, and ended up paying £60 upon my arrival, so be prepared to shell out if you use the shuttle service. Taking a taxi from either location to Stirling will cost you more, but one option is to take the train into Stirling, so look at all your options if money is an object.

I lived in university accommodation off campus – ten minutes by bus to campus and a ten minute walk to downtown! I definitely recommend living off campus for anyone who wants to experience Scotland’s pub culture, but living on campus is very scenic and a five-minute walk to classes. I had a friend who lived on campus, and both options are great – living in five- or six-person flats with people from all over the world really helps you to adjust to a new culture!
My flatmates were all Canadian, American, and German exchange students, and my friend lived with two full-time British students, a full-time student from Germany, and a Korean exchange student. You’ll make your first friends in your own home regardless of which residence you take! Given that the University’s orientation programs aren’t as strong as the orientation programs SFU offers, living in university housing is easily the best way to settle in with new people.

I definitely recommend going to the train station in Stirling as soon as you get into Scotland and buying a 16-25 youth pass. It costs £26 (about $45) for the year, and gets you a discount of 33% on most train trips you take within the entire United Kingdom. As Stirling is an hour away by train to both Edinburgh and Glasgow, and London is only five hours away by train, I guarantee this pass will serve you well.

In the city, you can buy a four-week bus pass for £20 (about $34), or a seven-day pass for £7 (about $12). If you take the bus more than four times per week, this pass will pay for itself in no time – regular student fare is just under £1 ($1.70) each way! However, even if you live off-campus, walking to the university only takes 45 minutes each way or takes 20 minutes with a bicycle, so look at other options to save you a bit of money.

I spent a lot of time traveling when I was in Scotland – I made multiple trips to London and went to Edinburgh about once a week for day trips. The Highlands are also easily accessible by train – make good use of that train pass! Though Stirling is beautiful and quaint, it is certainly small, and ultimately it can be seen in a couple of weeks. Northern England is accessible in a couple of hours and you’re well-equipped with Edinburgh and Glasgow airports so close for international travel. Make good use of your time abroad!

Stirling’s weather is incredibly volatile – it can be a beautiful day one hour and absolutely pouring the next. Wear lots of layers and prepare for strong winds! Scotland was berated by a fierce winter storm that almost stranded me in the country for all the cancelled flights and trains during the last month of my stay, so prepare for anything.

Culturally, Stirling lives up to the Scottish reputation of drink, noise, and sport. Football (soccer to us) is a national obsession to the point of trouble on occasion. There remains
some sectarian rivalry around football, particularly in the Glasgow area – on game days, you need to be careful about what colours you are wearing and which team you are rooting for, sometimes at risk of your personal safety. I chose to stay neutral on the issue of football, but I was a strange example – you’ll get caught up in the spirit almost guaranteed if you befriend a Scotsman.

Even if you do stay neutral regarding football, it’ll be tough to avoid pubs – after 8:00pm, nothing in Stirling is open that doesn’t involve a crisp pint and a drinking song or two. Do enjoy the pub food – it is well worth it! (I recommend avoiding the haggis, personally, but hey, it’s all part of the experience!)

I found the city of Stirling somewhat culturally lacking due to its size, which contributed to my frequent (and joyful) pilgrimages to Edinburgh. If partying and alcohol consumption is not necessarily your scene, Stirling itself may not have a lot to offer for you. But Stirling is extremely well-situated for travel, and I was able to find what I was looking for within a short few hours.

Stirling is also not strong in terms of its academics – it was frequently joked that the University ought to be renamed ‘Central Scotland Polytechnic’ due to its general shortage of guidance, support, or academic focus. Its resources simply do not compare to SFU’s – it was a relief for me as an aspiring scholar to return to the comfortable stacks of SFU’s library. The University of Stirling only has 9,000 or so permanent students, and as a result its access to resources is not as high as more populated universities. I do not recommend Stirling for people who are seeking an experience in higher education as the primary goal of their semester abroad, but it is an excellent choice for someone who goes into the situation with a globetrotting mindset.

I spent a significant amount of time in Scotland pining for Vancouver and my friends within it … and as soon as I returned, I spent weeks mourning the loss of Scotland. Culture shock goes both ways. Eventually, you adjust – it’s tough not to grow eventually fond of your position when constantly experiencing new things. When I got back from Scotland, I was a different person, my friends were different people, and trying to figure out how to fit back in after living somewhere else for so long proved far more difficult than I would have expected. Remember – it’ll pass. Take a deep breath, surround yourself with good people, and it’ll be okay with time.

Several months after having been back, I still pine for Scotland, but moreover I long to travel the way I did when over there. I grew accustomed to halfway living out of suitcases for four months, and now needing to be rooted in one place makes me feel restless. Be prepared for the fact that your time abroad will change you – it’ll make you a more cultured, broad person, and your perspectives will inevitably change. It was, for me, a mixed blessing. Vancouver seems smaller to me after time abroad.

Whatever you do, make sure you jump in with two feet. Immerse yourself in the Scottish experience! I reiterate that the best thing you can do is travel, travel, travel. Good luck deciphering the Scottish brogue!