My exchange took me to the University of Stirling, Scotland for spring semester 2013. While planning and preparing for my exchange I followed the guidelines and suggestions given to me by the Study Abroad team at SFU, which got me along very well. As soon as I got new information about my acceptance that allowed me to sign up for my preferred modules and housing I did, meaning that I got my first choices for all of my classes and my residence, and was therefore much less stressed. Once these things were out of the way I could focus on planning for other parts of my exchange.

Traveling to the United Kingdom is relatively easy, although Stirling itself does not have an airport, Edinburgh does. The University of Stirling has a wonderful thing called Stirling Direct, a taxi service explicitly for students coming from the airport to campus. If you are at all worried about finding your way, this is an excellent way to travel, although the train and the bus are just as easy if you are comfortable with them and prepared to do a bit more planning. One tip, you can pay for your bus ticket with bills and inexact change, because all buses are equipped with a float! However, if you are traveling on a larger service you may need to purchase your ticket from a ticket window at the station, do double check. I flew into London and spent a few days there before heading up to Stirling by train, a cheap trip if you book your tickets well in advance. When you’re putting together your travel pack with your passport and documentation, make sure you include your acceptance letter to Stirling, your letter confirming your place in residence, a bank statement proving you have funds, and if possible a return plane ticket.

The weather in Scotland during the winter is not unlike Vancouver’s, although slightly colder. What I missed most out of the clothes I didn’t bring was extra hoodies. The fact that I was missing some of my clothes from home was not an issue though, because if you know where to go, purchasing clothing in Scotland can be relatively inexpensive. That goes for most things; Stirling is a university city and caters to students. If you do your research, shop at Tesco and Primark and are willing to trapse about with your shopping for a bit you can save a lot of money, which means more for cheap flights to the continent and buses down to London or up to Loch Ness. As long as you keep converting prices in your head for the first few weeks, you will realize what is a good deal and what is not, and what is more expensive than at home. Cash is great to use, it may be slightly disheartening to take out money the first time and have it halved in value, but paying for things with cash gets you out of credit card fees and helps you hold on to money.

The University campus is large, but not frighteningly so, more to the point it is beautiful, complete with castle and loch. For the most part, accommodations are located together across a bridge on campus, although you may have the opportunity to apply for housing in town. Make sure you get up the mountain behind halls; it is called the Dumyat and the views are incomparable. Your orientation will be easy, and is well handled by the Stirling team, but I will try and touch on a few things that I found unclear or unusual. When I went to Stirling I was taking the equivalent of upper division classes and was used to four hours of seminar per-week. My syllabus had two, two hour times per week listed so I assumed I had to be at both, but in actuality you sign up for your preferred time and only have two hours of class per week! Make sure you pay attention to that, it will be explained, but in my opinion
was the most confusing thing. Classes themselves are small, and although time spent in them is small, it is crucial and work done outside of class will amount to about 2 extra hours per week if not more. Readings are done differently in that each student will read something different in order to add something unique to the in class discussion. This means that you must do your readings, or suffer complete embarrassment. It also means that you must pay attention to readings the instructor singles out as important, because although you may not be asked personally to read them, they will most likely be central to understanding the topic and the ability to achieve a good grade on exams and papers. Don’t be surprised if your module is graded 50% paper and 50% exam, even in arts. The marking scheme on whole is harder, but stylistically stick to what you know from SFU and you will be just fine.

Although doing well is important, and a huge boost to confidence, make sure to take advantage of extra-curricular activities! I loved everyone on my floor at halls and everyone I met from other buildings, but hardly any were actually from Scotland. They were my first friends and some of my best, because you are all sharing the same experiences of being away from home and trying to understand a new academic system, not to mention a culture and way of life your friendships with your hall mates will be fast, important, and sincere. I went in search of Scottish friends by joining ultimate Frisbee, a sport I had played in high school, but had not participated in since. Stirling is Scotland’s university of sport and while their excellence is undeniable, their passion for sports means that you will be able to find something for you no matter what your level. Your team is not just a way to make some casual friends and get exercise; they are your family just as much as your hall mates! With Frisbee I traveled around the UK with some of my best friends in the world having a blast and playing some excellent Frisbee. While at school, social events are a huge part of any team and theme nights out are frequent. If sports are not your thing, don’t worry; Stirling has a huge amount of other clubs and societies that cater to every interest. The clubs and teams put on a fair similar to the one we hold at SFU, which allows you sign up for a give it a go week.

Exchange has been the best part of my university experience. Not only did I have a blast and make friends that I will have for the rest of my life, but because of it I have grown academically and as a person in general. I am more comfortable with myself, able to make friends and communicate with strangers, my exam writing and presentations skills have increased, and I made some extremely helpful academic contacts, as well as invitations to return to Stirling to do my masters. I do miss being in Stirling, but thanks to technology I have been keeping in touch with friends and will continue to do so until I can get back. I’ve been trying to use my desire to go back and my newly acquired skills to drive myself to succeed here at SFU and so far I’ve been successful. Go forth! Travel and explore and learn something about life and yourself at the same time. Exchange is what you make it and if you are willing to take some risks and step outside the box socially you will find yourself having possibly the best experience of your life.
Campus in the spring

Stirling from the top of the Dumyat during a storm
Frisbee team on tour in Manchester and Aberdeen
Around Stirling: The castle, Stirling Bridge, and the Wallace Monument