Exchange Report

Seoul National University

Fall 2011 – Spring 2012

Going on exchange was definitely one of the best experiences of my life. I know it sounds cliché for someone who came back to say this, but I found that the friends I met, the things I experienced, everything just changed who I am as a person. For those of you considering an exchange, wherever it maybe, stop hesitating, because that will stop you from a life changing experience. But that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t prepare for what’s ahead.

Country Information

The culture in Korea is extremely diverse. Having been around for thousands of years, there is nothing short of marvelous trips that you can take. People are very kind, and if you need help, they will try to help you to the best of their abilities. I found that making friends was never a problem and that if you take the time to get to know them; they will reciprocate and will care for you as well.

Korean weather, I found, was different than that of Vancouver. The season are more distinct for sure. Packing for all the seasons is a must. Winters can be really cold (up to maybe -20 degrees Celsius) and summers can be nearly as high as 35 degrees Celsius. Summers are also extremely humid, while winters are dry in general.

I found that being a small country geographically; there was never enough time to explore everything within the country. I mean, it is close to neighboring countries such as Japan, China, etc, but I found that within my time in Korea, I still didn’t get to go around the whole country. Within Seoul there are many attractions you can see:

Insadong – This place is famous for Korean souvenirs. Lots of traditional buildings can be seen, and there are many activities you can take part in, one of which is the making of souvenirs! Lots of antique shops and art galleries make this place awesome for a day of exploring!

Gyeongbokgung Palace – A royal palace within the city! What an amazing site this is for awesome photos. Although not as many activities, the whole place is just magnificent. The changing of the guards which occur daily is definitely a sight to behold, as is the traditional Korean dance shown below. Visitors were encouraged to dance together which doubles the fun!
Gwanak Mountain – If you are a hiking enthusiast, we have a mountain you can climb right at the school! If combined with the right weather, the 3 hour hike (estimation, considering both going up and down) can be a sight to behold!

Seoul Lantern Festival – It is a huge array of lanterns with different shapes. They are displayed alongside the river that flows in Seoul. The lineup is really big, but I really recommend this. Here is a lantern in the
shape of an extremely popular Korean kids’ show Pororo.

Arrival and Orientation

The moment you arrive, you are expected to go to dorms by taking the limousine bus. Buddies are not required to come out to meet you, so look that up (it’s given in the manual for the school). As for orientation, before school starts, you have an opportunity to meet everyone (including your long awaited buddy!). School tours, and meeting all the exchange students and Seoul National University students happen so try not to miss it.

Accommodations

I lived the first semester with my aunt and uncle (I am Korean Canadian) since they had a room for me and I thought it might save me some money. It did, but commuting is not really that fun in Korea so I recommend getting into dorms if you can. It is really cheap (almost $100CAD/month) and you get to meet with other students often. The school cafeterias are also very cheap ($2-4CAD) per meal which makes it an awesome place to live! Lots of international food (cafeterias serve other ethnic foods) in and out of the campus, you just have to look.
Extra-Curricular Activities
I wish I had more time but I didn’t. I wanted to join a volunteer club but they were really picky with members (small member counts) and they did not match with the graduate level course load that I had initially in mind. There are lots of clubs to join though. I visited a few friends in the English Café (where Korean students come to talk in English, activities range from games, watching movies, etc.) a few times which was really fun.

Academic Details
With this section, I am not going to sugar coat it. It is hard, just as hard as it is here if not more. Since I was supposed to be doing upper division courses here, I found out when I arrived that their graduate level courses were the only courses that might transfer. At first I thought this might be okay, but it’s not. It does take a lot of your time (the expectations are really high), and I was the only exchange student in all my classes, which didn’t make it any easier. I only took courses in English although I speak Korean. Friends who are in the arts and can transfer courses did take them in Korean, but you have to be decent in Korean to do this. I do recommend you take fun courses in Korea. Some of the more leisure activities (swimming, baseball, dancing just to name a few) are offered and help change the pace of studies.

Financial Aid
I worked before going and assumed living frugally would be good enough. This was not the case. Maybe it was the fact I was living alone for the first time, but you do end up spending a lot. Sure everything from food to necessities is cheaper, but going out and buying every meal will eventually take its toll on you. Save enough, get student aid, and keep good track of your spending!!

What I wish I knew before leaving
To prepare ahead! I know its cliché, but getting everything in order will defiantly make your experience more fun. Since the exchange was a last minute decision, I didn’t have much time, and hence I had to rush all my paperwork. Getting professors to write you a recommendation can take some time, so do this ahead of time.

Get to know what courses can be transferred. Maybe it was just me, but as Chemistry major, I know the database was very minimal in the information it provided. I wish I had more time to research what courses were offered and how they would transfer, but this might depend on your school and major, so do your research!

Overall Experience
I know that there is a lot of stuff to prepare, and when you arrive, it may not be easy to get comfortable, but that is all part of the experience. Meeting good people and getting to know them was my best experience. You don’t have to do something crazy (but you can) like bungee jumping, but just grabbing a beer at a local pub and chatting might enable you to meet the best people in your life. I know I will never forget the people I met, and I still talk to them all the time. Take the time to get to know the people, and travel to get to know the place. The world is your oyster.
I need to have more pictures so here are some things I did/see/eat.

This is Everland. An amusement park outside the city (can’t remember how long) but its great! This is a view of the entire plaza (I went during Halloween so this is decorated) and a performance inside by a circus.

This was also at Everland. I am not sure what they were doing, but a cosplayer was attracting tons of attention so I got a snapshot of that.
This is a picture of Yongsan, a one of the biggest electronics store in Korea. I bought a camera lens here and a laptop all for a good price. But this place is buyer beware. Do your research before going as the vendors will state ridiculous prices sometimes to foreigners. I can’t even remember how many floors this was (at least 5-6) of just electronics, ranging from cameras, laptops, gaming gear, to phones, tablets, etc. One of the must visit places if you are a computer geek!