“It is better to travel ten thousand miles than to read ten thousand books.” – A Chinese Proverb

Last year around this time, I made the most spontaneous yet best decision of my life - I applied for study abroad. I never thought too much about going on an exchange despite hearing amazing stories about it because I never understood what people meant by “it was a life changing experience” until I experienced it.

In September 2013, I had the opportunity to go on an exchange to Yonsei University in Seoul. I still remember when I first got nominated for the exchange I was ecstatic and I downloaded an app to count down the days, but as the day of departure got closer I started to get nervous because I have never been away from home, I wasn’t sure how I would survive in a foreign country without knowing the language, I was worried about delaying my graduation if I couldn’t get into the courses I needed, and most importantly leaving behind what I had.

While preparing for the exchange I watched v-logs posted by previous Yonsei exchange students to figure out how to get to the dormitory from the airport and what to expect at the dormitory. From personal experience, I would suggest to not pack heavily as things in Korea are relatively cheaper than Vancouver and many things could be found in Korea very conveniently. I started packing one month before departure and I thought that was a good amount of time. (It's better to start earlier than later in case you forget something important)

Upon arrival, I remember my first impression was “Man, how am I going to survive, everything is so FOREIGN!” I was initially worried about getting to my dorm; however the transport system was extremely convenient. I took the limousine bus from the airport to Ewha University stop (which is closer to dorm than Yonsei University stop) and it was a short 5 minute walk. You can purchase their transportation card at any convenient store at the airport. The T-money card works on all of Korea’s subway, train, taxi, bus and even convenient stores. On the bus ride there I met other exchange students who were also heading to Yonsei and became good friends as we talked about our love for k-pop. Making friends is also not an issue in Korea as they have mentorship programs and other activities that are meant to connect students.
School is pretty similar to Vancouver where professors teach in English and with lecture notes. Every course has a pretty similar format—homework assignments, midterm, group presentation/report, and final. However, attendance is very important so missing 3 or more classes will result in an automatic fail. My suggestion is to try to plan out a schedule where you can get Fridays off (if you want to travel). One thing I regret the most was spending too much time on school work during the first month when really the purpose of studying abroad is about exploring and experiencing. I would also suggest travelling as much as you can when you’re there as you probably won’t be planning to return in the near future. (Not because you don’t like it there, but because you will be either 1) Broke or 2) Travel elsewhere)

In Seoul, you will never have to worry about not having anything to do as it is a bustling city with plenty of entertainment (there will always be something for everyone) such as: norabang (karaoke), casual drinking bars, festive events, cute themed cafes, Jjimjilbang (bath house), hobby classes (cooking, dancing, singing), and night clubs. A challenge for me when I was there was the language barrier. Many people in Korea do not speak English hence to get around I relied heavily on body language and my friends who could speak the language. Another thing that I regret was not learning a little bit of Korean before going. Since there weren’t many English menus, it was like a surprise every meal—sometimes it was a good surprise, and sometimes not so much. Nonetheless, it was very exciting not knowing what to expect and being forced to try new dishes. Before I continue further, I should warn you about Korean’s and their love for spice. Most of their dishes will indeed be very spicy, so always check before you order.

Reflecting back on this journey, this is one of my best Beedie moments. It made me realize my strengths and weaknesses, my limits, and my life goals. I learned to become independent and proved to my parents that I am capable of adapting to a new environment and to survive on my own. Even though I would get major homesick sometimes but I will always try to enjoy my time there because I think about the reasons why I am here and the money that I spent to be there. The best way to cure homesickness is to have a good chat with your family and friends when you’re missing home.

My word of advice to everyone going on exchange is to not be afraid. Meet new people and don’t be afraid to ask people for help, people there are very friendly. While I was on exchange I was faced with a lot of different difficult situations but through each challenge I was able to grow and learned some good life lessons. I am grateful for this opportunity as I have met friends all over the world, experienced things I never thought I would, and most importantly made me appreciate home that much more.
안전한 비행 되세요!
Have a safe flight!

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