Exchange Report

Host University: Korea University – International Summer Campus
Country: South Korea
Dates: June 2019 – August 2019 (6 weeks)
My Program: Business major, English minor

Preparation for Exchange

I never really considered exchange until I reached my last year of my undergrad, when I realized I would probably never come across a chance to study and immerse myself in another culture again. To narrow down the schools to apply to, I used the following criteria: term length, classes offered, and class schedules. I knew I wanted to go during the Summer since it worked with my SFU classes and work schedule, but I wanted to be gone for at least a month. Since I’m in my last year of studies, I also had to make sure the program I chose offered classes I could transfer back, so I used the Beedie Exchange Credit Database to help with that (although I understood that exchange credit evaluations were not guaranteed). Lastly, class schedules were important to me because I wanted to have enough time in the afternoon/evening to explore the city and neighbouring areas. It was really helpful that Korea University had their courses offered and syllabi posted on their websites early on. I also attended an information session at SFU for Korea University, where I was able to ask questions to the representatives of the school.

Since I hold a Canadian passport and my stay in Korea was less than 90 days, I did not need to apply for a visa. However, I recommend that students double check with the Consul General of Korea in Vancouver for the most up to date details when confirming what documentation is needed. In terms of what to bring, I heard from friends and colleagues that
Seoul would be hot and humid during the Summer, so I packed according to that. I was also told to pack light, since I’d end up shopping a lot, so I brought two check-in luggage half full (and they were definitely full on the flight back). I also bought an adapter for the Korean outlet and an extension cord so I could power all my devices with the one adapter. Late July/early August is also rainy season, so I made sure to bring an umbrella and a pair of waterproof shoes.

I ended up booking a flight on Korean Air, since I wanted a direct flight from Vancouver to Incheon. Once I got there, I took the express train to Seoul station, and took the subway to my Airbnb. I recommend getting a taxi though, especially if you have more than one luggage, since the subways in Korea have lots of stairs and elevators are not always the easiest to find.

For finances, I brought a small amount of Korean won to get me through the first few days, and Canadian and American dollars to exchange. I later found that my credit card company offered fairly decent rates, which were sometimes better than the rate offered by the cash exchange kiosks. However, even though the major stores accepted card, many of the smaller stalls don’t. Some shops even offer a discount if you pay with cash instead of card. Overall, cost of living in Seoul is cheaper than Vancouver, especially in terms of transiting and meals. The subway is about ₩1250-1350 per trip (about $1.50), and you can get meals for ₩4000-8000 depending on where you go.
During Exchange

The program started with Orientation, where faculty and staff came to talk about the school, Korean culture, and what to expect. Fun and interactive performances were put on by the school’s cheer team. After, we split off into groups to go on a campus tour. I highly recommend signing up for the KU Buddy program, as you’ll be assigned a buddy who will get in contact with you before Orientation for any questions you may have. They also put up events throughout the term with your whole buddy group.

I stayed at an Airbnb the whole time, as I wanted to see what it would be like living alone. The Airbnb was two subway stops away, and getting to and from school took about 15 minutes. The transit system is Seoul is very convenient, with subway and bus stops found all throughout the city. The last trains and busses are earlier than in Vancouver, but a taxi is never hard to find and are fairly cheap too.

Classes were four days a week, which I really liked since I had time to explore outside of Seoul on the weekends. I recommend going to cities like Busan, Jeju, Boryeong, Daegu, and/or Jeonju, although out of that list, I only visited the first two and wish I made time to visit the rest. I also signed up for classes in the morning and early afternoon, so that I could go around Seoul in the evening. The afternoon was the hottest part of the day anyways, so it was nice that I could spend that time in the air-conditioned classrooms. Grading for the two classes I took were done differently, but all that information can be found on the syllabi that are posted on KU’s website.
There are tons of things to do around Seoul. I found myself in Hongdae and Myeongdong a lot when I felt like going shopping or having some street food. There are also many karaoke rooms, or *noraebang*ngs, that you can rent out with your friends for cheap. During the evening when it was nice and cool, I would walk or bike along the Han River with good company. Since Seoul has lots of mountains and viewpoints, hiking during the evening to see the city lights is a popular activity too.

*Reflection & Advice*

My first few days getting around Korea was tough, especially since I arrived a few days earlier and hadn’t known anyone yet. I felt uncomfortable asking for help, since I knew my pronunciation was bad and lacked the confidence to say the basic phrases I learned prior to my trip. Looking back, I realize that I didn’t have anything to be afraid of, as I learned that the majority of Korean people are kind and understanding. My advice to others would be to remember that you’re also on exchange to experience a different culture, so allow yourself to be immersed in it and take down the barriers that can prevent you from doing so.

I also ended up visiting some areas several times, thinking I had lots of time to go visit other places throughout the term. But time flies! There’s so much to do and see around Korea, so plan your time wisely and keep searching for new and different things to do.

Lastly, Seoul is humid during the Summer, so here are some tips to get you through the heat. Get yourself a handheld fan at Daiso. It really helps! I regretted not getting one sooner.
Also, bring a water bottle. There are water stations around the school, and in some stores around the city too where you can fill these up instead of buying water every time.

Overall, going on exchange was a life-changing experience. I got a taste of what it’s like being independent, living alone, and what I’m like when facing a completely different environment. I also got to meet people from different backgrounds from the program, and develop good friendships from an international standpoint. I strongly recommend it to anyone!

*Photos*

From left to right

1. Korea University’s main entrance and campus
2. Lotte World trip organized by the program
3. A friend and I in *hanboks* (traditional Korean clothing) at Gyeongbokgung Palace
4. Me at a meerkat café. Animal café’s can be found all around Seoul!
5. Gamcheon Cultural Village in Busan
6. Udo Island, a short ferry away from Jeju Island