Introduction

I exchange to the National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) in Taipei for their 2014 spring term. NTNU has a different term system as all other Taiwanese and Chinese Universities. They only offer two official terms per year. The Spring term usually starts a week after Chinese New Year (usually between late January and mid-february), and Winter/Fall term starts in early September. They also offer a short summer school between two terms. I am a business student, but I chose the Department of Computer Science and Information Engineering at NTNU. NTNU is not a partner to SFU business school; therefore, it is a pretty good destination for collecting some elective credits. NTNU is well-known in Taiwan for its good reputation (tell a local person that you are from NTNU, and you will see).

Preparation for exchange

Information:
When you are trying to get your Taiwanese visa, it can be difficult if you are holding a Chinese passport. So, you should try to apply as soon as possible. Once you get your visa or entry permit if you are a Chinese, you need to check how many days you are allowed to stay in Taiwan and make sure that you will be in Taiwan till end of June for the spring term. If you are able to learn some Mandarin ahead, it is going to be very helpful. I would suggest to get Lonely Planet and learn some useful phrases and local culture. In general, NTNU is great destination for an exchange term; however, do not overestimates the condition of the dormitory at NTNU. I strongly recommended to rent your own place if it is possible.

Packing:
I would suggest pack mostly t-shirts and shorts, but bring at least one thick clothes and a pair of pants. It gets cold in the winter season and sometimes after rain in the spring. Bring your camera if you want to travel around. Taiwan is only a small island, but it has lots of different landscapes at different locations. Views are just amazing. If you are serious about working-out, you should also bring your own
supplements (it is hard to get good ones in Asia) and leave a budget for gym membership outside school (school gym has a wired schedule, and equipment aren’t that great).

**Travel and Transportation:**
Travel in Taiwan is easy because of its well-developed transportation system. Taipei and Kaohsiung has subways known as MRT to the locals. If it is possible, rent your place around Taipei main station. This station has direct access to MRT lines, bus lines, inter-city bus lines, Taiwan rail (TRA), and high-speed rail (HSR). In another word, it is only missing an airport. Living close to Taipei main station is very convenient especially for travelers. It is very easy to get around in Taiwan, and people are friendly; however, you need to make sure that you book your tickets and hotel rooms far ahead because Taiwanese like to travel during weekends and holidays especially if you are planning to go to the top tourist attractions.

**Financial details:**
The cost of living is very low in Taiwan compare to Vancouver except rents. In general, food is very cheap in Taiwan (especially at night market), and they have very good quality. If you are planning to rent your own place, prepare to pay at least CAD 550 per month and very likely more. Traveling would also raise your living cost by quite a lot. So, plan your trips wisely. Good news is SFU gives out decent amount of scholarship if you go to NTNU. Don’t forget to apply early. You can use credit cards mostly everywhere inside cities, but bring more cash if you are traveling.

**During exchange**
You can arrange pick up from the airport with NTNU once your exchange application has been approved by NTNU. Orientation is quite useful. Like I said, accommodation at school is not very good. I would suggest to meet other exchange students from your dorm and rent at some other places together. Be careful with your rental contract. Contract are usually for at least 6 months, but you can bargain with your landlord if you wish to rent for shorter time. However, contract under 6 months does not hold any legal bond on both parties in Taiwan. If you wish to know more, NTNU offers legal consultancy for accommodation.
Academic details are the same from SFU, and there is nothing hard to understand. An advantage of being an exchange student at NTNU is that you are allowed to take any courses you like regardless your faculty at NTNU. You can ask for a permission code from professors if you cannot get into certain courses. NTNU also offers a Mandarin program at Mandarin Training Centre (MTC), but this program is separate from regular NTNU term and quite time-consuming. So, you will have to confirm with the international and MTC office in advance for the schedule. Despite this minor inconvenience, the MTC program is extremely well-known in Taiwan, and your Mandarin level will improve dramatically through the term.

The International office at NTNU also setup many activities for all exchange students. You can sign up on activities that you are interested and meet people through the activities. International office is an important resource for all exchange students, and they are very helpful when you encounter with problems.

**Country information**

Taiwanese culture is very complex because of its history, and it is also different from region to region. Taiwan has many characteristics from Chinese culture, but it is also heavily influenced by Japanese because it was once a Japanese colony before and during WWII. Post-war period, Taiwan was still tight with Japan because of their trading relationship. Nowadays, despite many are against China in Taiwan, Taiwan is getting closer to China. Taiwan has a slower living pace compare to North America and other Asian countries, and I found that many foreigners are having hard time to adapt to this pace.

Taipei is the most international and modern city in Taiwan. You can learn a lot of modern Taiwanese culture in Taipei. If you have time to discover the city, there are also many hidden spots that you can learn about Taipei’s history and traditional Chinese culture. Eastern Taiwan has fantastic views, especially at the Taroko National park and Hualian city. You can also learn a lot about local aboriginal culture in eastern Taiwan. Central Taiwan has the most well-known tourist attractions Sun Moon Lake and Ali Mountain (locals call it Ali Shan). Yushan National Park is also
located at central Taiwan. If you are planning to climb Yushan, the highest peak in Taiwan, you will have to apply ahead for permission. Compare to other places, western Taiwan has less to see, but some small city that is well-preserved such as Lukang is worth visiting. Southern Taiwan is completely different from the north. Southern Taiwan tend to have a even slower living pace than Taipei, and people is speaking a different language that we called Taiwanese. It is different from Mandarin, and it is actually a dialect from southern China. Southern Taiwan has great ocean views and beaches, and it also has wild parties if you know your way.

Taiwan’s islands are also fun to travel to. They are harder to get to compare to other places in Taiwan, but I would strongly recommend to go to these islands. Kinmen and Matsu have many historical sites from Qing dynasty and the cold war. Penghu Archipelago has wonderful beaches and seafood and is a top destination where Taiwanese have their vacation. Green Island is known for its fantastic view and water sports. Lanyu Island is known for its aboriginal inhabitants and diving. If you want to get away from all the crowds for a few days, Lanyu Island could be your dream spot. Turtle island at Yilan and Little Liuchiu Island at Kaohsiung are two other small islands that you can travel to, but they are very small. You also need permission to go to Turtle Island.

Reflection and after exchange

I have learned so much about Taiwanese culture through my exchange term. I like to travel during my free time; however, I found that it is very hard to plan trips with other people. I have already saved money for travelling; so, I decided to travel mostly by myself. I realized that people around me are not always reliable. It is important to prepare for different situations. One of my professors from NTNU told me that I should go travel and experience Taiwan, and I would like to say the same to other exchange students. I think it is very important for you to try new things that you haven’t seen or things would not try normally.
(watching MMA bout at Taipei Luxy nightclub)