Exchange Report

Thammasat University
Bangkok, Thailand
Faculty of Economics
Spring 2018 (Jan-Jun)

BEFORE EXCHANGE
Planning for Exchange

Start early. Make sure your passport is valid for the time you plan to be abroad. Look into the processing times for your student visa. Make sure you have the required prerequisites for courses or it may turn out to be much harder. Contact the host university early about school activities, trips, and respective dates; you are required to attend two activities. Consider taking an empty trekking backpack. Space is needed by the end of your trip. Buy a converter if it is not the same. Canada is 120V; Thailand is 220V. Converter is necessary. Adaptor is not; most outlets can fit standard Canadian ones. Keep a digital copy on your phone/computer. It comes in handy when you need your passport number or when you're checking into hostels, or when you're renting a motorbike.

What to Pack

Don’t take much. Toiletries, very little clothing, shoes, travel pillow, a book or two maybe. I packed a hammock and a headlamp because I knew I was going to camp, trek, and go to the beaches. Bring your sunscreen from home that can be taken through customs. Don’t bring a water bottle. You are better off buying a bottle of water and refilling them at water stations. Bring real bug spray! Yes it is toxic, but so is sunscreen, and we need sunscreen! Bring enough for yourself and even a small travel size one. Mosquitoes will eat you alive.

A rain jacket sounds like a good idea, but most of the time it will be sitting in your closet when you need it. No sleeping bag. No sleeping pad. Maybe a sleeping liner for hostels. Maybe bring a small towel but many places like hostels, hotels, and Airbnb’s will provide you with one.

Bring a power bank. Bring a voltage converter to convert your voltage so your electronics don’t die on you (Thailand fried my macbook motherboard which cost $1100 CAN to repair. Shortly later my macbook charger died, which costs $100 CAN to buy).

Transportation

Flight to Thailand is long. Bring a travel pillow! You’ll also need it for other travels during your exchange. Bring a pen to fill out your departure card on flight.

When you arrive in Thailand, You have two options: 1) buy a bus ticket at a vendor (ask around, should be near exit), 2) take a taxi. If you are taking a taxi, buy a ticket for a taxi at the vendor near the exit to (or just ask “Taxi with meter”). This will get you a cab with a meter so you don't have to haggle for a price. Typically they are cheaper. Make sure your driver takes you to your destination and not a few blocks before. You pay for the ride, so don’t let them convince
you otherwise that the corner is okay. The walk to your place may not be as straightforward as you may think. I got lost for a couple of hours trying to find my Airbnb.

**Finances**

Bring about 80,000 ($3,260) baht with you. You will be safe with it, I assure you. Thailand is safer than you think. Taking this much with you will save you from going to ATMs and paying fees (220 Baht/transaction). TAKE CARE OF YOUR DEBIT CARD. If you lose it, Western Unions are helpful (I helped out a couple who lost both of their cards). Typically your cost of living in Thailand will be cheaper than Vancouver, but if you’re drinking everyday and eating big meals, you can be spending over 2000 baht per day. There is a liquor store across the Mad Monkey Hostel (google it). This is significantly cheaper than stores and 7/11.

**DURING EXCHANGE**

**Arrival & Orientation**

Arrive at least a week or so before classes to get settled in, find the school, find some food, get to know the area, etc.

Orientation claimed to start early but started late. You’ll get used to this. Its Thai time. Bring your passport. Make friends! Most people use Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram, and Line to communicate. It’s nice to have a exchange group chat too.

**Accommodation & Living**

I decided to start my semester living at an Airbnb and then later move to an Exchange hub (Amarin Mansion). I wanted to live on my own, get out an explore, meet locals and travelers, and then move to Amarin where I knew most of interactions were going to be with other exchange students. This was one of the best decisions I made. I had two completely different experiences.

You’ll find street food and restaurants everywhere. Sometimes they don’t have predictable hours, so just be flexible with your options. Part of living in Thailand is getting a really good massage. Go to Chaidee Massage. They are amazing! Get the Thai Balm massage for 1.5hrs. Good stuff. Amarin is close to a 7/11 and 4 places to eat. It’s really hard to leave that place when everything is so close to you. Make sure you get out of your comfort zone to try more food. Amarin is also about a 10 minute walk to Pata Mall and about 10 minute drive to Central Plaza Mall. It is good to know some basic phrases to get around respectfully. Know that entering into temples, you will need to dress appropriately. Having a sarong helps because you can use it as a skirt or as a shawl. Living at Amarin and at the Airbnb both were the same distance to Thammasat. You can pay for a taxi bike to take you to school for 40 baht. Alternatively you can walk to the ferry terminals which are approx 10-15 mins walk and then take the ferry across the river, which costs 15 baht. Taking the ferry is really nice but after a while, you will find it more convenient to take a taxi bike. Thammasat has two exit/entrances. Tha Phrachan and Phra Arthit. Both are also ferry terminals. Thammasat is also close to Khao San Road, which is a party central if that’s your cup of tea.
Ask the Taxi driver if they can take you to your destination. Not every driver will want to drive you to where you want to go. Just say ‘meter’ and they will say yes or no. If you want to haggle, know that dropping the price down by 50 bahts is not that much, so don't be cheap for no good reason. That is their livelihood.

Thammasat has a really great cafeteria with good food selection and unbeatable prices. Many locals like to eat there. Thammasat lacks water stations, so you have to buy water bottles.

Around the area: Adhere 13 Blues Bar, Rambuttri Road, Samsen Road, Brown Sugar Blues Bar, Bombay Blues, and more. There is also the Grand Palace, Reclining Buddha, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Museum, and Wat Arun nearby. Make friends with locals and they will show all the hidden gems in Bangkok.

**Travels**

There is a departure card provided in your flight. Fill it out and keep it. You will be asked to show it if you are applying for a re-entry permit, multi-entry permit and visa extension. Re-entry is about 1000 baht. Multiple re-entry is about 3800 baht. Plan in advance to know if you need a re-entry permit. Once you apply for it, know that it is valid according to your visa, so apply after you have extended your visa or when you first arrive to take advantage of the time you have to re-enter the country.  

Plan to ride a motorbike abroad? Drive slow at first and get the hang of it. After renting it, make sure you record a video to document the condition of the vehicle at the time of renting it. Take pictures too. You may be asked if a particular scratch was there before you rented it or not. If you can’t prove it, you will be charge several thousands of baht to cover the parts.

**Academic Details**

One of my lectures was 3 hrs long with 10 min break, and the other two lectures were both 1.5hrs long. My classes were held Wednesday to Friday. Lectures conducted with powerpoints. Lectures are in English. I was not able to buy a textbook for one of my class and wasn't able to buy one online, so the teacher let me borrow his book for the semester. Teachers are very friendly and approachable. Grading is quite flexible. Exams account for most of the grade, but some courses will have assignments too.

Make sure you also participate in at least two school activities. This is a requirement for exchange program. I participated on a class field trip to Rayong. We visited two local communities to learn and speak to leaders who manage local resources and encourage sustainable practices. I also joined a trip to the Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall where we learned lots about the history of Thailand, Bangkok, the monarch, and Thailand’s arts and culture. Remember to apply for any volunteer requirements for when you return to SFU.

**Country Info**

Amazing culture full of great food, colours, friendly people, rich and deep history, religion, and beautiful places to see. The weather is typically above 25 degrees celsius between my semester Jan to Jun. There are periods of rain, but they don't last long. Just run into a 7/11 for shelter or buy a plastic poncho. Transportation to get around the country is very easy and affordable. Typically trains are cheaper than flights, but take a lot longer. While travelling
around, I never encountered a situation that made me feel unsafe even when locals would tell me to be careful, I still felt comfortable everywhere I travelled. For hostels, Thailand is full of choices, but it is best to book them when you arrive in person rather than booking online. You will be charged more online, albeit not significantly, but if you’re on a budget, it’s helpful to know this in advance.

People of Thailand are one of the sweetest people I’ve met. They will go out of their way to help you and make sure you are comfortable and full. They really appreciate when you try to learn their language. As such, make sure you learn the respectful feminine and masculine parts of speech. Ka is Female. Krup is masculine. Say it at the end of everything!

Some of my favourite dishes: Khao soi, tom yum, som tum, pad thai, egg noodle pork soup, fried chicken, grilled pork on stick, kao ka gai, fried rice, morning glory, fresh sea food, and so much more.

Some nice places to visit while in Bangkok: Khao San Road (party), Pat Pong Night Market, Chinatown, Skybar (great city view, expensive cocktails), Bobae Market (wholesale), River View Restaurant (amazing view), Chatuchak Market, Lumpini Park, TEP BAR (cool music performance and fancy cocktails), Flower Market, Wat Arun, Grand Palace, Wat Kalatanamit, and 12x12 Cafe (music).

I recommend: Railay Beach, Koh Pha Ngan, Koh Tao, Kanchanaburi, Khao Yai National Park, Khao Sok National Park, Chiang Mai, Pai, Chiang Rai, and Ko Mak. When you’re on an island, make sure you try scuba diving. My best experience was on Phi Phi island in the Andaman Sea. So beautiful! Koh Pha Ngan is know for the full moon party. It is a very big party on the beach with no shortage of drunk people. Please make sure to not take any valuables with you. Also make sure to drink slowly, especially if you’re drinking buckets. Those buckets are VERY strong.

Please, please, please, above everything, please reduce your carbon footprint and environmental impact. Don’t litter. Just because you are travelling and on exchange doesn’t give you the right to litter everywhere. Even when it is inconvenient, take your bottles and garbage to a bin. Throw your cigarette buds in a garbage or a butt pouch. Thais should not be responsible to clean up after you. You are! I cannot stress this enough. One of the most heart wrenching things I saw was going to a beautiful island with trash everywhere. This is trash that is left behind on top of the plastic pollution that washes up on to shores daily. This is the sad reality of our planet and the consequences of tourism. On this note, if you can, try to reuse your plastic water bottles by refilling them at the blue fill-up stations around Bangkok. It costs 1 baht to fill. A bottle of water at 7/11 is about 20 baht. This will start to accumulate very quickly.

**AFTER EXCHANGE**

**Reflection**

Academically, I learned a lot about the economy and about natural resources. Learning about this in Thailand was helpful for me to better understand the conflict between indigenous peoples and governments specifically back in Vancouver regarding energy projects. It is a very tricky topic because there is a valid need for a stable economy. Countries need to be able to utilize their resources for their populations and also be able to attract investors to fuel the
economy and thus provide a good quality of life for the people. However, resources are not always allocated equally, efficiently, or sustainably, which is why so many rural people have to fight for their rights to live off the land and continue to be the stewards of the land. The one academic challenge I faced during my semester was registering for a course that had three prerequisites that I didn’t have. All three prerequisites were math focused, which is not my strength. I was confident enough that I could learn something new and challenging during my semester, but in hindsight, I should have registered for a different course. My financial management course was so difficult. After my midterm, I decided to withdraw.

Personally, I learned so much more about life, myself, people, and the world. I can write a short book about all the personal insights, changes, and developments I went through, but I’ll try to summarize it as best as I can. This ‘life’ knowledge is exactly why I wanted to experience a semester abroad. It is hard to put it all into words, but in short, I have so much to learn from people around the world. The world is so small and there are so many possibilities that can manifest in your life if you just step outside of your doorstep. I have met people on this trip that have moved me so profoundly and those interactions and connections mean the world to me. Many of those people reminded me that when I’m having a rough time in my life, to remember how many opportunities there are around you. Having travelled on my own allowed me to problem solve better and become so much more confident in the choices I make. This trip also made me see how fun and exciting it is to talk to people who are traveling the world. It has motivated me to get home and meet more foreigners, travellers, and exchange students. Some of the challenges I faced had to do with my romantic life, financial situations, and comfort.

It can be difficult to maintain a long-distance relationship while abroad, because you are experiencing so many new things. A trip like this can change you and your relationships can sometimes change too or suffer as a result of these personal experiences. Romantically, I learned that love is flexible and abundant in the world. There are 7 billion people in the world, so meeting someone you really like is bound to happen. I sure did! During my exchange, my relationship opened up, which allowed for more freedom to meet people. This not only allowed me to travel more freely, but it also allowed me to try something new with my relationship. Opening a relationship is extremely difficult, but it can be very interesting way to learn something new about the way you think and perceive relationship. This can be very stressful at times and I don’t recommend it lightly, but if you want a challenge, go right ahead. So, try to be open minded and safe and live by your own moral codes rather than by society’s rules or what people say. Take risks to be vulnerable with others (safely), because It can actually turn out to be beautiful, memorable, and meaningful. Be you and be compassionate to others, always.

Financially, I got too excited and spent a lot of money early on. I wasn’t paying attention to the exchange rate and thus was spending irrationally. I learned to budget when I was low on cash. I learned to curb my desires to shop for things that literally have no long-term value and rather save and invest in things that did have value, like weekend trips. And I learned to say “I’ll figure it out” because in stressful situations, you need to remind yourself that despite the hardships you face, they won’t last forever. Soon you’ll be okay, so don’t stress too much. Hakuna Matata!

Comfort is not always good. Comfort of being at home, sleeping in, not leaving my room, etc, hindered my adventurous curiosity. In moments of comfort, we are not challenging
ourselves. Always challenging ourselves is unnecessary, but finding a balance between comfort and risk is important. Having spent time at the Airbnb at the beginning of my semester allowed me to explore more on my own. When I moved to Amarin, I got lazy. Get out of your comfort zone!

Throughout my trip, I never really felt homesick. I knew that my semester abroad was going to pass by faster than a shooting star and that once it was over, I would be wishing I was still in Thailand. Reminding myself of the impermanence of the moment helped me stay present in Thailand. I did however, miss my cat VERY much. I tried approaching hundreds of cats in Thailand but very few reciprocated my curiosity.

**What you wish you knew before you left**

I wish I knew that I would have hated taking a financial management course while in Thailand. I wish I knew that withdrawing wasn’t the end of my academic career.

I wish I knew that packing sentimental items was going to be a problem for when I had to pack to go home. I wish I knew where to go to ship things back to Canada affordably.

I wish I knew I could have communicated to my partner to give me some space while I was abroad. I wish I knew that I would need space to grow independently and personally.

I wish I knew that bringing my laptop to Thailand was going to cost me $1000 to repair after the voltage killed my motherboard. I wish I knew I could have waited to get home to pay for the repair. I wish I had bought a voltage converter.

**Advice/tips for other students**

Bring runners, the clothes on your back, hygiene stuff, converter, and travel pillow. The rest is unnecessary.

If you get sick and need medication, go to the Thammasat medical office for free meds. Don’t drink in a taxi. Don’t buy animals. Don’t visit Tigers. Don’t ride Elephants. Buy a sim card at the airport. Have a fruit shake everyday. Smile to everyone. Offer your food to everyone. Say yes to opportunities and adventures. Triple check the dates when buying plane tickets. Don’t drink tap water. Stay hydrated.

Don’t complain. Don’t litter. Have a blast. Be you.
Chinatown, Kanchanaburi, Rayong, Khao San Road
Skybar, Thammasat Uni, Fried Noodle with Chicken.
Koh Phi Phi, Railay Beach, Erawan Falls, Koh Kut, Khao Yai National Park, Khao Sok National Park