Write your Exchange Report

Introduction

- I did a spring semester exchange to Maastricht University in Maastricht, the Netherlands. Being a Psych major, I did my exchange in the Faculty of Psychology & Neuroscience (FPN). The semester lasted from the first week of semester February to late June/early July (depending on the courses you choose).

Preparation for exchange

- Where to begin? Try to ask as many questions as possible to UVic students who have gone to UM on exchange before as well as students from UM who are currently on exchange at UVic.
- Housing can be difficult to plan, especially if you are trying to get a non-Guesthouse spot, or if you can’t move in until a few days after you arrive, so if you can make connections or couch surf, look into it as soon as possible! The only hostel, the StayOkay, is quite nice, but not cheap (20euro per night).
- You can check Maastrichthousing.com for places to rent. It costs 35euro to open an account, but it is worth it (or contact me if you’d like to talk about it and you can use my account!).
- Getting a cell phone and plan is really cheap in the Netherlands. In the city centrum, look for a phone shop where you can find one for as cheap as 16euro (if you really want to use your current phone, unlock it while in Canada). Go with Lebara or some other company with a free SIM card. You can buy credit in a lot of stores including grocery stores. I paid 20euro for phone credit during my entire 6-month stay!
- For luggage, bring:
  - As big of a bag as possible (you will want to bring back more stuff than you may expect!), and
  - A small carry-on bag: check the restrictions on at least RyanAir, and maybe other European airlines. This will be extremely useful when you are travelling within Europe.
- Make sure you have a credit card with a chip. However, most places prefer cash, or a chipcard that you can get over there. Grocery stores don’t take credit cards at all! I found it helpful to ask my bank to raise my daily cash withdrawal limit before I left, so that I could take out more cash at a time and pay fewer withdrawal fees.
- The cost of living is about the same. It takes a while to adjust to the euro, but you’ll appreciate tax being included in the prices, and how the euro is common to so many European countries (not so true in Eastern Europe).
- I had my Dutch passport already, so I can’t offer any info on residence permits or Visas.

During Exchange

- I arrived late at night, when it was dark and cold, and I was tired. I do not recommend this! At the very least, have very clear instructions on how to get where you are going, and make sure you have cash. Maastricht is quite small, and most things are within
walking distance, but the Guesthouse a relatively longer walk from the main train/bus station.

- People speak English very well, so don’t be afraid to ask for help!
- You need a bike! It is the most freeing thing to have a decent bike and be able to go anywhere, at any time, in less than 15 minutes! I miss it so much. Try marketstuff.nl. Otherwise, you can go to Jules & You in the city centrum and pick one out. A lot of people say you should look for a bike that is no more than 50 euro, but I’d say 60-80 euro is a good idea, because you’ll use it so much (I used the bus about 3 times total). Get something that is comfortable, and comes with back & front lights (legally, you need these). Almost no one wears helmets – it is very safe to bike there, and often there are separate roads for bikes.
- The weather is very similar to Victoria, just a little colder (while I was there anyway). Be prepared for rain, and the occasional snow. In the summer it can feel hotter because it gets muggy (being away from the ocean).
- I found the academics a bit easier than U Vic, simply because you only take 2 at a time, and there is less time spent actually at school. There are a lot of readings, but the important thing is to skim for the info related to your learning goals. I think they might go easier on exchange students, as well...
- You’ll learn all about Problem Based Learning in your orientation week. It is a cool system that allows you to meet more people (although personally I’m not sure you learn any more than using conventional methods).
- Apparently they are making the language courses free now, so definitely take advantage of that!
- Social activities through the school are usually put on by the ESN – Erasmus Student Network. Erasmus is basically the European exchange system, although it essentially includes all exchange students. ESN activities are mainly loud drinking fests and the occasional travel days (with lots of drinking). Not exactly my thing but a lot of students really enjoyed it!
- Travelling within Europe is a must! Monitor for cheap flights using the Skyscanner or Kayak websites, and try to go before May for best prices. Contact me for travel suggestions & recommendations! There are just too many cool places to list here, and it’s quite safe too.
- Within Maastricht, I would recommend climbing to the top of Sint Jan’s Church on a nice day, exploring Fort St. Pieter (sort of a large field/park, but also a historic fort which I never went to), the Stadspark (city park) in the spring, going to Bisschopsmolen for pastries and seeing the old flour grinder, and listening to the Stadhuis (town hall) bell at noon. There are lots of festivities that come and go in the Vrijthof (main square) as well, including random things like polo, travelling amusement park rides, and temporary public art. If you’re there in the spring semester, you’ll have to experience the week-long Carnaval (Feb) and their national holiday, King’s Day (April).

Reflection After Exchange

- It may be a huge understatement, but I learned a lot about other cultures! It was really cool to open my mind to other ways of thinking and speaking. I also learned about my own country, and came to appreciate certain things about Canada more.
• I learned a lot about responsibility and organization. Travelling, whether alone or in groups, isn’t easy and it takes a bit of research, but it is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding activities!
• Don’t be afraid to spend money while abroad – by not taking that weekend trip you might save 200 euro, but in the long run it’s adventures you have that you’ll remember, not the money (that being said, still make sure you don’t completely run out of money over there!).
• It’s so important to stay healthy while on exchange, and keep doing things that you enjoy doing at home (for example, I felt much better when I started jogging again).
• Try everything – new activities, new foods, new travel destinations.

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