

Last September when I left for England I had no idea what that adventure would hold. I spent a year at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England studying Political Science and Philosophy. It was probably one of the most challenging and amazing years of my life.

When I left for England, I had no idea what to expect, I packed a lot of sweaters, and got ready to drink a lot of tea. Honestly though, I was relatively unprepared for what I was going to experience. I had travelled to Europe twice previously and when people asked me if I was scared to move to another country I thought to myself "how different can it be from travelling there?" as it turns out it was very different. You do not realize just how accustomed you are to your comfort zone until you throw yourself completely out of it. When you travel you drift on the outside of the culture when you move there you have to find your way in.

The first and probably most challenging aspect of my exchange was finding a place to live, I opted out of living in on-campus housing as I felt that I did not want to live in residence again after having already done it in first year. In a lot of ways this was a good decision and in other ways it was not, but I'll get to that. In Canada when students look for housing we usually deal directly with a person renting their basement suite, apartment etc., we find these people through friends, family or online generally. In the UK you have to find housing through a letting agent, basically a realty office dedicated to rentals. Also, British students generally find their housing months in advance, not a couple weeks before school. The first letting agent I walked into told me I was crazy to be looking for a room at this time of year and that I'd never find anything. Luckily the next one was more optimistic and within two weeks I had a cute little room in a Victorian terrace house in between the University and the city. However, there were a lot of hoops to jump through and a lot of unexpected fees to pay to get to that point. The first was a bank account, to rent a house in England you need a British bank account, to get a British bank account you need a permanent residence in England, a bit of the chicken and the egg situation. However, eventually I found a bank that would let me open an account and my English life got rolling from there. It was totally worth the struggle in the end but you just have to be prepared for the experience and be very persistent and determined. Also, for anyone wanting to live off campus in England, you need a British guarantor who has lived in the UK for the past five years and has good credit to sign for you or you will have to pay rent six months in advance.

The benefit of living off-campus was that in Norwich you generally are lucky enough to live in a house, which means you usually get a nice little garden and a decent sized living space. Also, if you don't feel like reliving your first year in residence than the on-campus housing can be tough to live in, as generally you will be living with a bunch of local first years and sharing a kitchen and living space with them. The positive side to this is that you get to instantly meet people and easily build friendships the negative side is that first years tend to be a bit louder and messier than older students and from my friends experience I heard that could be rather annoying.

Once I settled in my new home and started school things came increasingly easy, I met friends, other international students as well as British students and I started to get accustomed to living abroad. The most basic tasks suddenly became somewhat of an adventure for me, such as going to the grocery store as it was full of food that I had never had or seen before. Each little experience was new and while finding out things that in Canada you would have taken for granted such as “How do I get a social insurance number” could sometimes be a hassle it was all a learning experience. It made me realize how easy you have it as a citizen and gave me an all-new appreciation for how hard it must be to be an immigrant.

One of the most comforting things I found on exchange was meeting other exchange students, who were experiencing the same problems and could relate to the fact that you were home sick or did not understand the bus driver’s accent. However, I’d definitely suggest avoiding spending your whole time with a group of other international students because this is a comfort zone in itself and you won’t really be a part of the culture until a local immerses you in it, showing you not only what their culture is like, but also introducing you to the city you are living in from a locals point of view, which gives you the chance to visit attractions, pubs or shops that you never would have thought of on your own or with other visitors, plus, its really great to be able to go back and have people to visit.

This opportunity to live in another country pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me more willing to go up and talk to a random stranger, either to ask for help or simply to make a friend in class, it gave me a confidence that I had not had in Canada. Being alone abroad forces you to seek others for help and also to find friends and be confident enough to approach people.

I am very happy that I chose a European country to go on exchange to as it gave me the opportunity to visit so many other places and experience so many other languages and cultures. Within Europe you can travel from country to country so easily, inexpensively and quickly that it’s easy to say “I’ll just go to Paris for the long weekend” without breaking the bank. My one regret is not challenging myself to live in a country where I did not speak the language as I feel that coming home with knowledge of another language would have been a great benefit to me.

A great experience I had while on exchange was a University trip to the European Parliament in Brussels, which also granted me a certificate that I would not have had the chance to do in a Canadian University. As politics is my area of studying this was extremely interesting, as well as having the opportunity to have a university funded trip to Brussels of course!

After my exchange I spent a month travelling in Europe visiting Spain, Germany and the Netherlands. During my exchange I was able to visit Scotland and Belgium. It’s a great opportunity to travel so if you can afford it time and money wise do it, you never know when you’ll be back! I was able to get a part-time job in Norwich to save

up for this trip, if you can get part time work its great because you also meet a lot of locals and I made some of my closest friends through work.

Attached are some pictures of my exchange.



Hammersmith, London



Norwich Market



Norwich Riverside in the Winter



Sheringham, Norfolk Coastline



My house and garden in Norwich



Flea Market in Norwich