

Exchange report

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My name is Andrea and I am currently a fourth year French Major at Uvic. Last year (in my third year of studies) I did an exchange to Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier, France, which lasted both first and second semester. I was on exchange from August 31st 2012 until June 21st 2013.

I was fortunate enough to have e-mailed and met with a few returning exchange students who had attended Paul Valéry the year before. It helped to talk directly with them, since their experiences were fresh and they had lots to share. I am also really glad that I met with the advisor from the French department to discuss transfer credit as well as what level of courses I should take while overseas. The equivalent of a bachelor's degree in France takes only three years to complete, therefore speaking with an academic advisor from your faculty is always a good idea to ensure the best chance of having your courses transfer back to Uvic.

Packing for a year may seem intimidating at first. I had people ask me – where do you even begin while packing for a year abroad? I made sure I had clothes for every season, as I heard it can get a bit chilly from time to time even in the south of France during the winter. If I could do it again, I don't think I would pack as many clothes as I did, because I ended up paying a bit extra bringing home extra suitcases filled with clothes I had bought throughout the year. That being said, I was happy I had packed enough to get me through the first little while because I found that was the busiest time getting organized for classes, etc. and I didn't have much time to go shopping.

Because I stayed in Montpellier for the year, I had to open up a French bank account with the university's partner bank (LCL). Since I had been told that this would be necessary, I went to my bank at home and asked them for useful information I will need to provide to the French bank once I got overseas. I also learnt how to do "International Remittance" which allows money to be transferred from Canada to most other countries. I was very happy to have a French bank account because that way I wasn't getting charged international fees and could use my card as I pleased.

The cost of living was actually quite similar to Victoria, although you have to factor in the European exchange rate of course. I lived in a residence, which, unlike Uvic, is not located directly on campus. Each residence (cité universitaire) is composed of about 7 buildings. I debated for a long time while filling out my application for the exchange program whether to stay with a host family, find my own apartment, or live on residence. I am so happy that I chose residence! It was the best way to meet French students and a lot of the friends I am still very close with lived in my building. The residence, although not located directly on campus, was only a ten-minute walk to the university. It was about five minutes from another university campus, which allowed students from different schools to live in the same residence and created a very dynamic atmosphere. My building had a communal kitchen, which was where you would run into people from your floor and

that is how we all became so close. We would often organize little get-togethers there like our “soirées crêpes”.

I paid about 230 Euros per month for rent, and there is also the possibility of being partially reimbursed from a government organization called “la CAF”, for part of your rent if you are proven eligible. To facilitate this process, I would recommend bringing your birth certificate (or a complete photocopy) and apply for this grant as early as September because it can take a long time to be processed. Unlike the bus pass at Uvic that is included in our tuition, if you want to ride the TRAM you must buy the pass yourself, which could cost up to 35 Euros per month for unlimited use. One thing I regret is not buying a bike as you can find second hand ones quite cheap. That would have saved me not paying for the TRAM and would have been a good way to get around. Otherwise, I found that I wasn't spending more on day-to-day things like groceries, movies, or going out with friends than I would have been here in Victoria.

Once I got to the school, we had an orientation where we were explained how to register for classes, which is done in person upon arrival. We were also shown some of the main buildings on campus. The cafeterias there are amazing! You could get a full three-course meal for only 3 Euros and 10 cents.

Classes are quite different in France than they are in Canada. You get a mark out of 20, and it is rare to see a mark higher than 18. Anywhere from about 12 to 20 is a good mark. For my exchange, I needed at least 10.5 in each class to pass the course. I didn't find that too challenging except in one class in which I had to participate in the “catch-up exam”. In France, since course marks are mainly based upon one or two evaluations, there is a chance to re-take an exam for that course to raise your mark. I liked the fact that there weren't too many essays to write throughout the year, although that could be a bit problematic when it comes to the final essays since you don't get as much writing practice. But I found if you do your readings and stay up on all your work throughout the year things will most likely go well come final exams.

I absolutely love the city where I was living. The population is mainly students thanks to the many universities and colleges. The nightlife is really neat as well with lots of unique bars and street acts going on at all hours. There was never a dull moment in Montpellier! What is so nice about France is that you can buy something called “La carte jeune 12-15” which costs fifty Euros but gives you reductions for an entire year on any SNCF train. I found I travelled mostly by train because it ended up being the cheapest and simplest way. I would take off often on weekends and go and visit the parents of a friend of mine I met before I left on exchange. That friend of mine was attending Uvic on exchange from the French university that I was going to. She is back at Uvic this year and we are even in two classes together! It is so neat to be able to talk about our exchange experiences in each other's cities, and now be living in the same city.

While I was there I got to explore so many cities in France like Toulouse, Nîmes, Marseille, Lyon, and many more. During longer breaks from school I also took trips to Barcelona, Spain as well as Florence, Venice and Milan, Italy. One weekend, I paid only 35 Euros for a round-trip flight to Belgium to visit friends who I'd met while they were in Montpellier on exchange. I was so lucky to have

made so many amazing French friends and be able to be constantly speaking French. But it was also really neat to meet people from all over the world!

The year I spent on exchange was the best year of my life. I went into it not really knowing what was ahead of me, and I never knew I would meet so many amazing people who would teach me so much. Although it may be a bit discouraging at first dealing with the culture shock and being away from everything and everyone you know (believe me I had my fair share of ups and downs and first), just remember it does get better and your life will change for the better and you will grow so much as a person from pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone. I would tell anyone going on exchange to make the most of every moment; I never would have thought a year could go by so fast! See as much of the country and surrounding areas as you can, try as much local food as possible and make friends everywhere you go. Oh and take tons of pictures, you'll be so happy you did!









