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While I was pleasantly surprised to find Utrecht of similar size and climate to Victoria, it had a completely different feel. Its streets are lined with numerous cafes and bars crowded with people relaxing, with a large emphasis on the word relaxing. The Netherlands has one of the highest part time job employments in the world; and I would say this also applies to their schooling system. While the university was not easier than UVIC, there was defiantly a reduced amount of time spent on the campus. This was great and allowed for more time to get to know the other students and explore the city and surrounding areas.

While Utrecht is small in size compared to most cities it was an easy city to get to know and I instantly became very comfortable finding my way around on my bike. Getting a bike was easy for me as I came in the second semester and the first semester students were leaving and therefore selling their bikes for reasonably good deals. The city center is small and where all the action takes place, while the surrounding areas are filled with parks where you can get a game of soccer started or have an evening BBQ. The ESN (a student organization for international students) at Utrecht University was also a great outlet for international students to get to know the city, and they even held some events outside the Netherlands, such as skiing in the French Alps during the week break between semesters. While the ESN made exploring the city easy the Short Stay Housing (SSH) made finding an accommodation simple.

The housing program that Utrecht set up for international students was great and allowed me to choose between several housing options differing in price, number of roommates, and location. I ended up in Kruisstraat, which was just outside the city center and only a fifteen-minute bike to campus. Through my accommodation I met several people who I am still in contact with today, and will be friends with forever. It was with these friends that I explored the Netherlands and surrounding countries. While there were twelve in my apartment, an overwhelming amount at first, we all become extremely close. This lead to us coordinating a weekly dinner with all the roommates that would feature a different country's cuisine each week. We also managed to get ten of us to Italy and six to Paris during some of our time off.

It was on these trips around Europe with my roommates that I had some of the best adventures. From eating the best gelato in Florence to getting lost on trams in Rome, they are some of my best memories. It was also easy to travel around Europe since there are many cheap airlines and busses that make it affordable for students. It was also very cheap to make your own meals and I found the cost of food to be below that of Victoria not only in Utrecht but also in the many cities we visited. Another affordable resource we used was airbnb, which is an alternative to hostels where you can rent a room or apartment directly off the person who owns it. It is a great way to travel especially when in large groups as you can rent full houses.

The experience was also very interesting culturally since all my roommates were from all over the world; in my apartment we had students from Turkey, Latvia, Romania, America, Portugal, China and Belgium. It was interesting to compare what we all thought of Utrecht and the differences we learned about our countries. I ended up learning a lot about the Netherlands but also about many other countries around the world.

Overall I think the exchange was the perfect break from UVIC, allowing me to travel and do school at the same time. I would highly recommend it to other students as you get to see the different lifestyles of university students around the world. It is also a good way to make lifelong friends who you can travel to visit in the future!



