My Unique, Life-Changing International Exchange Experience

Where: Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, CANADA.

“Courage is the power to let go of the familiar.”

Raymond Lindguist

There is no question about it; your upcoming exchange experience will be one to remember for the rest of your life. Many people go through the initial stages of learning about the possibilities of going on exchange but from what I understand, plenty of CSU students lose the courage within themselves and decide not to go through with the application process. I almost fell into that trap! The first thing I have to say is don’t lose interest. Although the initial stages of application are daunting and somewhat painstakingly slow, maintain your courage and find the power within yourself to let go of the familiar and embark on exchange!

My name is Ryan Todd and at the time of my exchange experience I was 19 years old and I had just began my third and final year of studying Adventure Ecotourism at the CSU Thurgoona campus. I had heard a lot about the exchange program but never thought that I would be brave enough to travel outside of Australia, alone, for 6 months on exchange. I was wrong! Congratulations on making it this far into the application process and I strongly encourage you to follow my footsteps and stick with your decision to embark on this once-in-a-life-time opportunity.

There was a lot of unclear information on behalf of CSU regarding accommodation and visas, two of the most important things to consider when travelling abroad. Don’t get me wrong, the staff involved with the international exchange program were also extremely helpful and supportive. This report is designed to provide you with factual information on what you will need when embarking on exchange to Lakehead University. I will try to answer all of the questions you may have. There are a lot of things to consider but please don’t let this report overwhelm you. Good luck with the rest of the application process and I hope that you take the time to read this report thoroughly as it will help you out immensely when preparing for your trip.

Pre-departure

The most daunting, stressful, yet important part of the exchange program. By now the application process has probably already started to overwhelm you. You will probably hear many different opinions on various aspects during this stage. You are probably thinking about passports, visas, vaccinations, what to take, what to wear, and most importantly does it really get to -30˚C? Let me assure you it does! I will talk about the weather a bit later but for now I will focus on the documents you will need in order to be able to get into Canada.

First of all, don’t be afraid to ask questions! Ask your parents for help because they will most likely want to support you in any and every way they possibly can. Plus they are more likely to have knowledge on important things like insurance and what to look for in a policy. Parents can also help to take some of the load off your shoulders. Mine did a lot of the research for me because I was overloaded with assignments. It might make me sound lazy, but I can assure you, if they hadn’t have helped me out there is no way that I would have been able to do everything on my own.
Passports

So let’s discuss passports. To start with, a passport is essential! To get a passport you simply go to any Australia Post branch and ask for a passport application form. This form can also be found online but you must go to the post office to submit the application. Once you have obtained the form make sure you read over it and get all of the documents you need. You will then have to book an appointment back at the post office for an ‘interview’ which is just to make sure you have all of the correct documents. It will cost you $200 and will take 3 or 4 weeks to obtain.

Visas

Visas annoyed me a lot. I was told so many different things by so many people and honestly, there must have been an even split between the people who said I need one and those who said I didn’t. If you are studying in Canada on an exchange program for less than 6 months you do not require a study permit. Over 6 months, and I think you require one. Obviously you are going to fly to Canada, but depending on which countries you go through you may also require visas for them. If you are going through the USA on the way to Canada and on your return to Australia you are again touching down in America you will require an American visa. This is where it gets confusing. If you have a flight that touches down in America on the way to Canada but you don’t go through America on the return trip (maybe you have got an around-the-world ticket) you will not need a visa for America. There is a 90 day waiver period when travelling to the US. This means that once you have touched down in America you can stay there for 90 days legally without a visa. You are probably thinking well I am not going to be in America for 90 days if I land there on my way to Canada and you would be right, BUT, the 90 days begins as soon as you touch foot on American soil, whether you leave the country or not. You can see why I was confused! If you are going through San Francisco and Chicago on my way to Canada, and my return flight went back through San Francisco.

An American visa also opens up opportunities while you are at university. I am glad that I got the visa because I was lucky enough to be asked to go on a 9 day dogsledding expedition in Minnesota, America. I got asked if I wanted to go just 2 days before they left, so I said yes! If it wasn’t for my US visa I probably would not have been able to take this once-in-a-life-time opportunity at such a short notice. Plus when you think about your whole budget, $120 is honestly only like spending 5 bucks on a coffee and muffin, quite an insignificant amount of money when it comes to the overall cost.

Please understand this…

Things will seem to go so slow during this stage of the application because Lakehead is very unreliable and you may be stressed out because of assignments and everything, but trust me, it is all worth it in the end. This was definitely one of the most difficult stages of the entire exchange experience apart from saying goodbye and overcoming homesickness so be prepared during this stage of the process for the thought “why am I doing this?” Find that voice, pull him out of your mind, put him on a golf tee, pull out your driver, wind up and hit it as far away as you possibly can. If it makes you feel better or if you are not a golfer, I recommend the ‘Happy Gilmour’ manoeuvre. If he manages to live and then comes back to find you, ignore him!
The exchange staff at CSU are very easy to talk to and very supportive so if during this stage you are ever at that point where you are thinking of throwing in the towel, go and talk to one of them about it! Also speak to your friends; they will probably be jealous of you. When I went through this stage I had friends think I was crazy and could not believe why I wouldn’t want to go on exchange. Lakehead uni is very un-reliable as you will probably discover during your experience, and they are very slow at sending things to you. Aggressive is not the word I am looking for, but emails that are to the point and that express how your are feeling may, and only may, give you the response you are after.

Tips on keeping organised
Keeping organised during the pre-departure stage is extremely important. I had documents that I needed to take on the flight, some for my personal emergency plan, others for my passport, and others that were to stay at home with my next of kin. I simply put each set of documents into a plastic sleeve and wrote on the front of it what they were all for. It worked a treat!

Make sure you photocopy all of your important documents including your passport, travel itinerary, travel insurance, and letters of acceptance from both universities. Leave one copy at home with your next of kin or a responsible adult and also take one copy on the flight with you. Another thing that is very important to consider is being able to prove your financial state to customs. I heard that because you do not require a study permit, the border protection agency may question your entry into the country. This happened to me when I first arrived in Canada. I was fine when I showed the officer my letters of acceptance from both universities but if I had have got a different officer who was not so happy they may have required more proof. Also, know where you will be staying the very first night that you arrive in the country. I heard rumours that customs like to know that you have a place to stay because they do not like people, especially internationals, sleeping in the airports or on the street. On my flight over I took bank statements, a signed letter from my dad stating that he was willing to support me financially if I got into trouble, my travel itinerary that most importantly identified that I had a return ticket to prove that I was leaving on a specified date and would not overstay my permitted time, copies of my passport in case it was lost or stolen, and most importantly a copy of my personal emergency plan. You should also register with the Australian Embassy in your host country which can be done online at www.smartraveller.gov.au/

Vaccinations
Vaccinations... arghhhhh! Some good news, for those who are not a big fan of needles like myself, you are not required to get any vaccinations before going to Canada. I see you wiping the sweat off your forehead! If you are directly out of school your Tetanus is probably still up-to-date, but if you have been out of school for a while you may want to ensure that you are up-to-date when it comes to this vaccination. Apart from that, no vaccinations are required for Canada, although if you do have a round-the-world ticket you might want to investigate that a bit further for the countries you are visiting outside of Canada and Australia.

Accommodation and supplies
Also a part of the pre-departure is working out where you are going to live while you are at uni. I would recommend living on campus. There are Town Houses and Apartments that are self-catered, or if you are after a catered option there are dorms and additional meal plans. I lived in the South Apartment. I have included 2 maps as appendices. Appendix 1 is the bus transit route and I have located the closest grocery store that has everything you need and it is also very cheap. It is called Superstore and is about a 15 to 20 minute walk from uni. I recommend taking your backpack to carry your groceries back. On that map I have also included the location of Value Village which is 2 stores like the Salvation Army (or op-shops). You can get awesome deals there if you need any more warm clothes. It is worth going into the store every week because I heard of uni students who got top quality down jackets for $20! Plus you will be able to get things for your room like sheets and pillows.

Appendix 2 is a map of the campus. Both of these maps you can get at uni and also online. I just thought it would make it easy for you if you had a place to start and knew where things kind of where before you arrive in Canada. It was definitely a great adventure trying to locate the
grocery store. Adventures are something I love, but I know some people just like to know where things are so if you are one of those people, there you go. On the campus map I have drawn on the routes to the main parts of the campus that you will go to when you first arrive. It took me about a week to remember where things were so it doesn’t take long but like all new things, it can be a bit overwhelming. I have also located the international co-ordinators office on that map.

I also found that Lakehead say you will receive an acceptance package in the mail that will have information on how to apply for a room and everything… well you don’t! I had to email Wendy Bons and ask her how I go about applying for residences. I eventually received an email in reply with an attachment of the residence application document. If it wasn’t for this I wouldn’t have received an application form on campus. I asked Lynn Furze about applying for on-campus accommodation and at first I was told that yes, I could apply, then I found out that you can’t apply for on-campus accommodation until you receive the acceptance package which never came. So if you want to live on campus you will need to get into contact with Lakehead University in order to obtain an application form. Speak to your exchange co-ordinator (Lynn Furze) about how to get into contact with the university.

Power

Another thing to consider is power. The best way around this major obstacle is to get a power board that has about 4 plugs in it then buy an adaptor (worth about $10). This way you can charge your laptop, mobile, camera battery, and iPod all at the same time. The adaptor for Canada is the same as the one for America. You don’t need any fancy power converter or anything, just a plug.

Insurance

Insurance is a big thing and travel insurance can be very expensive and you need it! Try to get an insurance policy that has medical coverage along with the required assets coverage. When I was originally looking at travel insurance a fully comprehensive plan was going to cost a minimum $800. This is where your parents will definitely be able to help out.

With a lot of research and looking around I was eventually able to get my travel insurance through the Commonwealth Bank. I had to apply for a credit card which at first I really did not want, but trust me, you will want a credit card! Just quickly because I know insurance is a boring topic, the credit card cost $200 for one year but the travel insurance came free with the credit card if I purchased my plane ticket using the card. In the end that worked out much cheaper than purchasing travel insurance alone, plus I got a credit card out of it.

Another lot of compulsory insurance is the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP). There is no way around this, so basically you are up for another $250 no matter what… This is obviously health insurance, but it only covers you in Canada so if you go into the States make sure you have insurance that will cover you. Your travel insurance will most likely cover you for this but only if you purchase it for the full 6 or so months that you will be over in Canada.

Be prepared for it…

Be prepared for anything and everything! If something doesn’t go to plan you are bound to get frustrated and maybe even a bit scared, but stop and think about it for a little bit. When you are thinking about where you are and what you are doing, consider why you chose to do this in the first place. Take that experience and look at it from another perspective, embrace it, enjoy it, and realise that everything you experience during the whole process of exchange program will make you a better person, more importantly it will add to the excitement of the trip and will give you yet another story to tell when you get home.

The only reason I say this is because on my flight over to Canada I went through the United States. I first stopped at San Francisco where I had to go through customs and check into the US. From there I flew to Chicago where I would only have about another 2 hours flying until I got into Ottawa. My flight was cancelled from
Chicago to Ottawa and I had been put on another flight at 8am in the morning. My luggage was checked on to go all the way through to Ottawa so I was unable to pick it up. I didn’t have any US money, or spare clothes except for a jumper that I had in my carry on luggage, it was below zero outside and I had to spend the night in a city that I had never been to before. All of that combined with the fact that I didn’t know anyone made for a very stressful, scary but exciting experience.

I was scared to start with because I did not know what to do but then I sat down and just took it in. I decided that I could stay annoyed with the unhelpful and somewhat rude American’s at the airport, or I could embrace the experience. I thought about what I was doing and realised that this little mishap was actually one of the most important personal challenges and experiences that I had faced to date. I changed my way of thinking and made the experience a memorable one. I also learnt that if you are not going to carry money for each country that you are transiting make sure you have a credit card! I paid for my room that night and breakfast the next morning on the credit card which I later claimed back on travel insurance.

Things to take

**Carry on luggage**

Through the story that you just read I learnt that you need to take more than simply snacks, water, and valuables like your laptop onto the plane with you. If you are going over to Canada during the winter season like I did I would definitely recommend taking a very warm jacket on the plane. If you don’t have a warm jacket, don’t buy one before you leave, I will explain why later. Just take at least 2 jumpers with you on the plane depending on how much you feel the cold. It is also a good idea to take gloves and a beanie along with a spare pair of underwear… it gets a bit unpleasant wearing the same underwear for 3 days if your bags get misplaced! On that note, it is also not very nice to have no brushed your teeth for that same amount of time so I would also suggest taking a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, and a cake of soap on the plane with you. Then at least if you have to stay in a motel you can have a shower, and clean your teeth so you at least feel a bit cleaner while you wait for your luggage to arrive.

Also take some form of entertainment like an iPod and a book. I also took my journal on the flight with me. Take snacks like nuts and muesli bars, but not fresh fruit… it will not get through customs on the other side. Apparently you can take nuts with you but make sure you declare everything!

Also, you are not allowed to take any liquid that is over 100ml through customs; that includes water. Don’t worry though, the funny thing is you have to empty your water out before you go through customs but when you are on the other side you can fill your water bottle up from the bathroom taps to save you from having to buy water on the flight. Make sure you take at least one drink bottle with a very wide opening otherwise you will not be able to fill your bottle up from the small taps in the bathrooms.

**Clothing**

So you might be thinking -30˚C, cold, need lots of warm clothes… well yes, but no. Definitely take a couple of warm jumpers but 5 is definitely enough. I took 5 jumpers but found that I really could have gotten away with 3. I ended up buying a Lakehead University hoodie while I was over in Canada; you have to have some sort of souvenir! Plus, if you find you need more clothes there are plenty of shops close by.

Speaking of warm clothes; if you do not have a good winter jacket save your Aussie dollars and buy one over in Canada. If you are not familiar with the prices of winter jackets you are usually looking at a minimum of $200 for an ok jacket and up to $500 for a good one in Australia. I got a fully waterproof and very
warm ski jacket for a measly $80 in Canada! Everything, well outdoor clothing and gear, actually is so much cheaper in Canada. I also ended up buying myself some skis, boots, bindings and stocks during my time in Canada because I am a keen skier and I only paid $520 for the whole package. Once again, if you are not up with prices of ski gear you are looking at $500 alone for a good pair of boots in Australia.

Thermal underwear is always a good thing to have. Personally I only wore it when I was on a camping trip/expedition but it does not take up much space in your bag and is definitely something to consider.

Long pants; I was comfortable walking around in -30°C in a pair of track pants only because I don’t feel the cold on my legs as much as some people. There was one day when I walked to the shops and the wind-chill factor was -42. That day I still only wore a pair of track pants. But be careful, because the cold can be very very dangerous. If the wind-chill factor is below -50 any exposed skin will freeze in under 30 seconds. I am not speaking from experience thankfully, that is something I learnt in one of my classes. On the occasion when I walked to the shops in the -42 wind-chill temperature I was fully covered up with a neck warmer that came up to just below my eyes and a beanie that came down to just above my eyes. By the time I got back to uni I had icicles on my eyelashes and eyebrows and my neck warmer and beanie were frozen. If you think you can endure something like that I recommend giving it a go, but be extremely careful. The photos below were taken that day…

The next most important thing is footwear. I would suggest taking one pair of waterproof hiking shoes, a pair of joggers, and a pair of casual shoes to wear out, plus I threw in my thongs because I can’t live without them, but anything more that that I think is simply taking up space and is unnecessary. Just take lots of warm socks for those cold days. Although I found that I did not get cold feet at all and I only wore one pair of socks all of the time except for when I was on a camp but that is a totally different story to everyday life.

Believe it or not, by the end of March and into early April it is warm enough to be able to wear shorts if you are game enough. By early April the average temperature is around 8°C compared to the start of May when it was still well below zero during the day. So if you plan to travel after university which I am guessing that you will, I would suggest packing summer clothes aswell.

Uni supplies

To begin with, don’t get so excited that you forget to pack all the essential supplies for uni. Although this is not such a big deal because they are easily purchased in the country if you do forget them but it is something to consider when packing. Some may say that it is something you can just get over there but I brought the bare essentials including pens, a couple of pencils, a calculator, glue, highlighters, a ruler, and scissors all in a pencil case. It saved a bit of money and it didn’t take up much room so I thought why not.

Memoir

A journal is definitely one of the most valuable things that I took on the trip. It was actually given to me as a Christmas gift. I never wrote in a diary or journal prior to the trip so it is something that I would have never thought of bringing. I have been able to record my entire experience from the initial flight over, through my period of homesickness, and most importantly I can remember the fun times I had and also what I learnt while I was on exchange. I would recommend this to everyone!

Photos

An essential for those sad times and also to show new friends what it looks like where you live and go to university. People might also be interested in seeing photos of your family and friends. I loaded mine onto a CD before I left. Another thing to do is to put them onto your laptop then you don’t need to take any CD’s. They are great reminders of home and something that should definitely not be forgotten.
Other

A sleeping bag is also definitely a good idea if you have a good one. It can be used for extra warmth if you ever need it and if you do get stuck in the airport for the night or somewhere when you are travelling around it would be good to have. Although, if you plan to stay in hostels you will probably find that you aren’t able to use your own sleeping bag because it might bring in bed bugs. It is one of those items that only you can decide whether or not you want to bring. I brought mine and I used it when I went winter camping but there is always a gear lab where you can hire out gear if you ever need it.

A personal first aid kit is also a very very good idea! I had a little incident one morning when I was putting the dishes away and I accidentally knocked a bowl off the drying rack and it smashed on the floor. I tried to step out of the way so it wouldn’t smash on my foot, instead it smashed and I ended up stepping on a piece of the broken bowl. That happened at about 6am just before I was going backcountry skiing as an elective for one of my courses which I will speak more about later. I had a pretty big cut on the bottom of my little toe and if I did not have the first aid kit with a piece of gauze in it I would probably have not been able to dress it enough so that I could go skiing that day. Also if you are going to be travelling around by yourself it is always a good idea to take a first aid kit just in case something happens. If you don’t have one I would recommend getting one before you go. On that note, be sure NOT to take any drugs such as pain killers or things like that… not a good idea! Also make sure if you have nail clippers or scissors that you don’t take them on the flight with you because security WILL confiscate them.

Laptops… I had a difficult time deciding if I should take a laptop or not. I do not own a laptop; I have a desktop computer so there was no way I was going to try to lug that over with me. My dad owned a laptop so I decided to do a swap with him for the time I was in Canada which worked out well. I would recommend taking a laptop, unless you want to do every single bit of work in the uni computer labs… I know I can’t work in those environments, plus the internet on campus is free.

Prescription medicine

You are allowed to take prescription medicine over but just be sure to take your prescription, along with a letter from your doctor to be safe! But things like painkillers, probably a good idea to leave them at home and just buy them over there if you need them. Be sure to check that you have also taken all of the painkillers out of your first aid kit just to save yourself from being questioned by customs.

Things to leave behind

Clothing

I don’t mean go naked… gosh…!

It is easy to over pack especially if it is your first time travelling to Canada and such an unbelievably cold place. If it is possible, I would recommend getting someone who has been to Canada in the winter to help you out when packing. You want to make sure you take enough clothes to be able to stay comfortable but know that you can always buy more clothes when you get there. The university has a swimming pool on campus so it might be a good idea to bring your swimming gear. I made the mistake of taking 2 towels when I really only needed one but that is a personal preference.

Also shoes, if you are a shoe lover well I am sorry to say but you just won’t have the room to take them all. If you have a good pair of winter boots with removable liners they could be a good addition, but are definitely not an essential. If you need winter boots for any reason just ask around, someone will lend some to you. If not, keep your eye out at Value Village, I picked up a pair for my Winter Camp for $10, then I just donated them back to charity when I had finished using them. This saved weight and space in my luggage so that worked well for me.

Uni supplies

Ok, so I said do take the essentials, but something that is a definite waste of space and
weight is paper, that’s something that is easily purchased over in Canada. Also do not take any text books because most likely you will have to purchase some while you are over here. On that note, text books and readings are expensive but an essential! Reading packages were a downright rip-off but I needed them for my classes, especially when you have to submit summaries of each reading each week. Unlike CSU, they do not put a copy of the reading packages or text books on reserve so you have no option but to buy them. 2 reading packages cost me over $100 so be warned!

Loved ones

Although it might be hard, family and friends won’t fit into your suitcase. Sorry to say but they must stay at home when you leave. But, I do encourage you to talk to them about coming over to visit... there are advantages that I will explain later! This leads me onto talking about homesickness and how to minimise the downtime as a result of this inevitable factor.

**Keeping homesickness at bay**

It is almost guaranteed that you will experience homesickness while you are on your exchange program; all I can say is embrace it! You will discover that your friends and family mean so much to you. All you want to do is be alone during these times which is perfectly fine but try to talk to someone, preferably someone you are comfortable talking to. You may have already made some close friends who you can talk to in your host country but if not I would suggest talking to someone back at home. This is also where your photos will come in handy! I found that during this time although it was good to reminisce on the fun times and everyone back at home, try not to let it get you down too much. I remember at the beginning of my exchange experience I went through an intense period of homesickness. I recall writing in my journal that although I am felling down and lonely at this point in time I will look back on it in a month and would just think what was I wasting my time worrying about that for? It is true... I did go through that stage of thinking what on earth was I thinking at that time, but that was to be expected and yet again, it is all part of the experience and will just make you stronger.

One piece of advice I would give is that if you are homesick or are finding it difficult to get motivated to do your uni work, go and do some research about the country you are in. Use this time to find out about some interesting places that you could go and visit after you have finished uni. I did this and it made me so excited to finish uni which honestly probably turned out to be a bad thing because I got too excited to be there, but I found that it helped me to get motivated to do my work so I will be able to finish uni and can look forward to travelling and seeing some amazing places.

**Secure your valuables!**

So how do you go about this? Well I bought a small pouch called a money belt that goes around your waist and under your clothing. I used this to put my passport, money, and credit card in; 3 of the most valuable items you will most likely take over with you. All of my other valuables including my camera, laptop, and journal I took on the flight as my carry on luggage. Make sure you don’t leave your carry on luggage unattended at any time. I had one lady ask me if she could leave her carry on luggage with me while she went to the bathroom. I said that was fine. Some might say I shouldn’t have done that but it is difficult to say no in that situation. I would probably even suggest trying to get out of those sticky situations by saying; sorry I need to go to the bathroom aswell or something random like that.

I like the saying “trust nobody” and I would suggest that you adopt this approach when travelling alone, especially for the first time. If I was that woman I would definitely not have left my bags with a stranger... lucky I am a nice
person and did not hide any drugs in her bag or anything like that. As we have seen in the news over the past couple of years if you leave your bags unattended at any time there is every possibility not only that you will get valuables stolen, but someone might just decide to plant some sort of drugs in your bag, so just be careful. Another good thing about the money belt that I was talking about earlier is that if need be, you can sleep with it on or under your pillow for added security. You can never be too safe when travelling!

Luggage restrictions

I heard many different opinions on the luggage restrictions; one person told me I could only take one bag, another told me 2 bags at 21kg each, then the other person told me that I can take as many bags as I like as long as they are under 20kg each. The best way to find out the restrictions for your airline company is by looking on their website.

I flew with United Airlines and they allow you to check on 2 bags each a maximum of 23kg. Then you can take one bag on the flight plus a laptop bag. There are no weight restrictions to what you take on board the flight, just a size restriction; it has to fit in the overhead luggage compartment or under your seat.

Luggage restrictions also change when you get into Canada; with Westjet you are allowed to check on 2 bags at 23kg each, carry on 2 bags of 10kg each, and you can also check in a set of sports equipment; so skis, boots, and poles for the skiers. But then when you are flying back to Australia you will have to pay excess baggage, unless your parents come over with only one bag, then they can check on your ski gear under their name and you won’t have to pay the excess luggage fee! Another reason to get your parents to come over for a while…

Essential travel

So, it has come to that point where you are beginning to think about booking your flight. They say don’t book your flight until you find out for sure that you have been accepted by the host university, in this case, Lakehead. Fare enough, but by all means research your flights. This is also one of the most frustrating parts to the process because at this stage you will probably be at the very end of the university year which means assignments, assignments, and oh, more assignments! Very stressful! Once again, I asked my parents for help during this stage because there was no way on earth that I was going to be able to research flights when I had something like 10 assignments due within 4 weeks. That, combined with your parents saying you had better book a flight soon because the prices are going up every day, but thanks to the extremely unreliable Lakehead University exchange co-ordinators you still have not yet received your acceptance letter, makes you want to give up more than ever! Once again, maintain your courage and find the power within yourself to let go of the familiar and embark on exchange!

I only received my letter of acceptance from Lakehead University during late October I think it was. I can’t remember exactly but I know I did not have much time at all to organise everything. To get the cheapest fare, obviously you have to book early. Just a warning, unless you want to take the risk of booking your flight prior to receiving your letter or acceptance, be prepared to fork out at least $3,000 for your return ticket if you are going over for the January to April semester like I did. This is peak season for travel to Canada thanks to that wonderful white stuff called snow (or white gold).

I booked my flight over the phone through a company called Student Flights. You can look them up on the internet. I found that they had the cheapest flight to Canada for the time that I was flying. I can’t tell you much about other prices because my dad did most of the research for me.
The best idea is to just look around, whether you do it yourself, or whether you get your parents to do it for you, but that is the only way you are going to find the cheapest airfare. When my Dad was booking his flight he found the US to be the most expensive route no matter the season.

**Flying tips**

As soon as you book your flight go online and choose your seats. I have included a picture that I got from the internet that shows the general set up of the aircraft’s seating arrangements. I have marked on it the best seats to choose if you want plenty of leg room. I am positive that is one of the things you will have wished for after being stuck in economy class seats for 14 hours non-stop. The seats that I have identified give you enough room to stretch your legs out fully whereas with all of the other seats you will have to sit with your knees basically touching the seat in front of you.

![Picture of aircraft seating arrangements with marked best seats]

It is a good idea to get up and have a bit of a walk up and down the isle every hour or two, otherwise you will find that after sitting down for that long your legs will almost cease. Not a nice feeling that’s for sure!

The debate over a window or an isle seat? Which one to take? Those people who fly regularly tend to choose an isle seat because when they want to get up and go for a walk they do not have to climb over the people beside them. But then again, you have no view out of the window and you are staring down the isle and probably thinking, gosh I wish I could see out the front windscreen… sorry, but that isn’t going to happen unless you are the pilot.

Personally, I have always enjoyed the window seat. Some say that you don’t see much out of the window and it is not worth sitting next to. Well I think it is better than staring down the isle unless you have good looking air host/hostesses. I like to look out of the window especially when the sun is rising or setting, it is something different to see the sun rise or set from the air! Obviously the downside to the window seat is having to climb over people beside you when you want to get out.

Another tip, if you get one of the very front seats this is no problem at all because there is so much room. You can also change your seat preference more than once. If you decide to select a window seat I would suggest going back onto the internet a few hours before your flight leaves and look for a row of seats at which no one is sitting and change your preference to a window seat on that row. Then cross your fingers and hope that no one sits in that row and you will have the best of both worlds!

Another thing is air sickness. Personally I don’t get it but some people do so I don’t know much about ways in which to stop this. I know for sure that you can get air sickness tablets, but I honestly can’t say how effective they are.

**Relationships**

All I can say is that you don’t realise how much your friends mean to you until you are halfway across the world. Saying goodbye may not seem like a difficult thing at the time because you will probably be overcome with excitement now that you are finally going on exchange; well that is what I found.

I think it is important to take the time to say goodbye to family and friends before you are waiting in the airport waiting to board your flight. By this I mean it is important to spend the last couple of weeks just enjoying the time with your family and friends so when it is time to go you are prepared and excited to go.

If you know someone in Canada like a past exchange student that you became friends with I would suggest contacting them and see if you can stay at their place for a little bit before you start uni. Although you might feel a bit anxious asking if you can stay at their house I can almost guarantee that they will say yes. I was fortunate enough to be able to do this. I stayed in Ottawa for about a week before I flew to Thunder Bay to start uni. It was such a relief having someone pick you up from the airport then you won’t feel quite so lost. This will also give you a chance to adjust to the weather conditions and start to get your sleeping patterns back to normal again.
There is also a ‘Buddy program’ that the university apparently offers. The key word here being apparently! Lakehead promotes this program in a brochure that you will probably receive. This program hooks you up with someone from Lakehead and they are your ‘buddy’, so someone who can help you out, show you around, and someone to talk to if you have any questions. It sounds like an awesome program but it is something that you have to really investigate because they don’t automatically hook you up with a buddy, not even after you say you are interested… so if you really want to be involved with this you will have to continuously ask them when you get over there. By the time you eventually get a ‘buddy’ you will probably have already made friends, or at least know a few peoples names. Once again this just shows how un-organised Lakehead really is, but you will get used to it.

Campus

Getting there…

Once again, frustrating! You would think being an international exchange student someone would come and pick you up from the airport to make you feel welcome and to take you out to the university… well I was told that there is no pick up service during January because it is not the start of the year. Yes, I was a bit ticked off when I found that out aswell! So just a prior warning, if you fly into Thunder Bay during January don’t expect to be picked up from the airport, instead make sure you have $20 handy for a taxi ride, and in your evaluation at the end of your program be sure to mention just how unwelcome you felt because of this and hopefully in the future things will change. But fingers crossed, I might have changed things for you and you might actually get picked up at the airport, so I would recommend asking anyway.

Campus layout

As I mentioned before, I have included a map of the campus layout in Appendix 2. Coming from Thurgoona I felt lost when I first arrived because Lakehead is so much bigger. I would suggest getting a tour of the campus when you first arrive. You could shoot an email through to the international co-ordinator (Wendy Bons) when you first arrive and let her know that you would like a tour. If you decide to live on residences when you move in you will get an orientation package and in that you will find the contact details for the orientation co-ordinator. This is who gave me my tour, and although I did not remember where everything was right off the bat it definitely helped me in settling into uni. You can also ask them for a map of the campus and ask them to take you to the LUSU office so you can get the bus route map… this is the other map that I have attached in Appendix 1.

Oh, and the underground tunnels that you have probably heard about by now. If you haven’t, the university has a series of connected underground tunnels so you don’t have to go outside on those freezing cold days… although they only connect the main part of campus so you will still have to walk back to accommodation in the cold. They make for some fun little adventures if you feel like exploring the campus some more.

Recreation on campus

During the winter Lake Tamblyn (on campus) freezes over and you can ice skate on it. There also is what is called ‘The Hangar’ which is a big indoor sports facility with a running track, gym, swimming pool, indoor rock climbing wall, and a synthetic grass oval where they play indoor soccer, rugby, Ultimate Frisbee and basically any other sport you would usually play outdoors on a grass oval. There is also a tennis court for the summer months, but obviously during winter it is covered in snow.

There is also a telemark ski club that you can become involved with. I did, and it cost $5 to join and $5 each week to hire gear. They take you to Loch Lomond on Friday nights where you buy a lift ticket for $16.50. This gives you skiing from about 7pm – 10pm with a one hour lesson at the start of the night. So for just over $20 ($25 the first night) you get 3 hours of skiing, a lesson, and gear… very very cheap, and a whole lot of fun!

You can also join the Ice Climbers Association (I think it was called) for about $80 and you can go ice climbing with them. I didn’t get the chance to do this which is a bit unfortunate but I had fun anyway!

Social activities

For the party people there is a bar on campus, and Thursday night is bar night. Just so
you know the legal drinking age in all of Canada’s provinces (states) is 19 apart from Quebec where it is 18, and obviously the legal drinking age in the US is 21. If you live on residences you can also become involved with res sports along with the house bonding activities. The RA’s organise some social events but not many. There was also an activity called WinterLude which not many people got involved with. I was one of the few people who went to it and we played Boccee on snowshoes, I got to try telemark skiing on campus, and there would have been faculty snow sculpture building if it wasn’t -20˚C outside. There was also a guitar hero competition for those who love video games, and trivia which I found out I really suck at, but hey it is all part of the fun! Apart from that you can just go out and make your own fun, there is a nature trail alongside the McIntyre River, the river that runs through the campus. Or you can always go down to Lake Superior, or organise fun events with mates.

Getting around while at uni…

Unless you can justify buying a car for the 4 months that you are at uni you will have to find other modes of transport. Everyone has two arms and two legs... they come in very handy especially when you are living on campus. Believe it or not, it is possible to walk everywhere! It is only about a 15 minute walk to Wal-Mart and the Superstore, and 20 minutes from campus to a big shopping centre. You can also walk down to Lake Superior for something to do one weekend. I had intentions of doing that but I ended up going there with one of my classes. It would probably only take 30 or 40 minutes to walk down there and there is a pretty cool trail that follows the Lake around.

Another suggestion is to purchase a pushbike but I found that during winter it would have simply been to cold to ride so I was happy walking. You can also try to make friends with people who have cars and they will be more than willing to take you places if you ask.

If you decide not to live on campus you can purchase a U-Pass (bus pass) as a Lakehead University student for $75 if you think you will use the public transport system a lot. Otherwise you can just use the bus system and pay $2.35 each time. There is also a number of different passes that you can buy such as a 20 ride pass for $31, or 10 tickets for $17.50. Personally, I only rode the bus twice while I was in Thunder Bay and that was only to get downtown for the class that I mentioned before. And obviously the other option is to catch a taxi but that is the most expensive option!

Holiday Travel

I really want to leave this part up to you to research, not because I am lazy, but because apart form it being a good procrastination activity and a motivational tool I think it is fun to find out for yourself where the best places are to go. As you will discover, in Canada everything is awesome, nothing is ‘best’, but I will talk a bit about it anyway.

Travelling is one big adventure waiting to happen; all that is needed now is you! Remember I mentioned before that my dad came over to visit me after I finished uni? Yeh, cool, it is good that you are actually interested! Anyway, an idea of something to do a for ‘holiday travel’ after you have finished uni is to hire a motor home or a car. That way you have the freedom to see what you want, when you want. If, no sorry, it should be a when, not an if... when you travel through the Rockies I think that hiring car is the way to go rather than a guided tour because there are so many little towns and ski resorts that tour companies don’t go to. Often these smaller towns are the ones with the most spectacular and unique sights. But if you don’t get the chance to
hire a car I would still recommend taking a tour of the places that interest you.

On that note I must mention that while I was studying at Lakehead heaps of people asked me what I was doing when I finish. When I told them that I was going to BC (British Columbia which is on the West coast where the world renowned Rocky Mountains are) they all said that’s awesome. I asked for their suggestions on what I should do while I was there. I was determined to go skiing at Whistler no matter what, but apart from that I was told that you won’t be disappointed over in BC. I kept on getting told that if you are in BC you will love every minute of it, and if you don’t get the opportunity to see one thing it doesn’t matter because everything that you do get the chance to see will be awesome. There is so much to see in Canada. If you are a skier like myself or snowboarder it is possible to ski any day of the year at Whistler Blackcomb because there is a glacier that obviously stays frozen year round so you can ski on that in the middle of summer from what I have heard. The best thing about skiing in Canada is the price of it! On average, lift tickets cost about $40 - $50 per day. Night skiing at Loch Lomond, one of 2 ski resorts very close to Thunder Bay, is only $16.50 on Friday nights, no word of a lie! It is also common to find ski resorts that only charge $30 per day for a lift ticket. Whistler is the most expensive that I found at $80 for an adult, although it is less for us students.

As I mentioned before, wherever you are in Canada you are bound to enjoy it so I say don’t worry about planning to do anything while you are at uni. By this I mean don’t organise anything before you get there because most likely people will just offer to take you places or invite you to go on a dogsledding expedition 2 days prior to their departure if you are lucky enough. Plus you will most likely have plenty of time to travel around either before or after uni.

If there was one place that I would recommend going to see that would definitely have to be the Rocky Mountains over in BC. Just look on the internet and you can get a sense of how spectacular they are. Also Niagara Fall’s is a must see. Around Thunder Bay you should check out Sleepy G, Kakabeka Falls, and Eagle Canyon. Kakabeka Falls freezes over in winter, that’s how cold it gets… see the photo below if you don’t believe me.

Anyway, I could talk for ages on different places to go and see from what I have been told but I will leave it at that. Something to think about and something that will hopefully get you excited when that little voice is saying “why am I doing this?”, or when you are feeling homesick, or can’t get motivated to do your uni work. Good luck with the research, but if you do want more information on places to go and see feel free to shoot an email through to me at: ryanetodd@hotmail.com

I just didn’t want to give it all away… I have to leave something extra to add to the excitement of your upcoming exchange experience!

Kakabeka Fall’s… frozen!

Subjects

Yes, you are actually going to study but don’t think that means it is going to be boring, in actual fact, with the subjects I chose I was excited to go to class every day, well most days anyway! If you are studying Outdoor Recreation like myself you won’t be disappointed when you go to Lakehead. A comprehensive list of subjects can be found at the following web address: http://bolt.lakeheadu.ca/~timetab/index_tb.html Just select the term you are going to study for and then select your area of study.

Plan as much as you like but some subjects won’t be offered so make sure you have some approved backups! During my application process I got 8 subjects approved by my course co-ordinator, 2 of which didn’t end up running and one didn’t work out for me because it had a field trip that ran well after uni had finished. As
much as that would have been a fun subject to do, I did not want to have any commitments after my exams were over because I wanted to travel around in the last 7 weeks that I had in Canada. As you can see it is definitely a good idea to get twice the amount of subjects approved than just getting the bare minimum. Imagine if I only got 4 approved, I could have only been left with one subject… that wouldn’t be good!

In saying that, you can always pick up extra subjects when you get to the university. You just have to make sure you email your course coordinator back at CSU and get their approval. Being an exchange student this is even easier and it is even possible to pick up subjects after the cut-off date. Take my dogsledding subject for example, this was literally half way into the term, a good 4 weeks after the cut off date for picking up any subjects. The professor and I sat down and typed out an email to the registrar and I was accepted into the subject the next day. This doesn’t mean that because you are an exchange student that you are going to get special privileges but I did find that the professors would do the best they possibly could to make things work out for you.

If any of the subjects which you choose to do have any pre-requisites they will be waived. You will need the approval of the head of school for any changes in your schedule and also if you have not been enrolled in all of the subjects that you need to be by the time you arrive at Lakehead you will need to do this as soon as you arrive. You can do this online, but if it won’t let you because it says the subject is full just go and see the head of school and they will approve the enrolment for you.

When you start your classes you will soon discover that referencing is a big thing at Lakehead. Thankfully they use the APA referencing style, the same as CSU uses, but they are very strict on it. If you have troubles don’t be afraid to ask for help, your professors will guide you to the referencing guide or even give you a copy of the requirements.

As I said earlier, you will need to purchase the readings and they are quite expensive so maybe try and find someone in your class to go halves with in the reading packages. That will probably be difficult considering you probably won’t know any one in your class to start with but you never know.

What did I study?

I thought I would mention the subjects that I took while on exchange so you can get a bit of an insight into why I was excited to go to class every day. I took Outdoor Education Practices, Outdoor Skills And Theory II (OSAT II), Expedition Management, Nature Based Tourism, and at the last minute I picked up Doglsledding.

What were they about?

Outdoor Education Practices was a very fun subject where we did a lot of hands on learning and became involved with a couple of Outdoor Education class sessions. This is the subject that I went downtown for where we did a bit of a community exploration to find out how Outdoor Education can be incorporated into the Thunder Bay community. It was also the subject where I had my accidental 911 incident which you will hear about later. It was fun but it also involved a lot of work and reflection papers.

Expedition Management was another awesome subject. As you can probably guess it was all about expeditions and how to plan an expedition. The class was full of guest speakers coming in and talking about their expeditions and involved very little formal lectures. You also have the opportunity to plan an expedition for your major assignment which is a lot of work. I chose to teach a lesson instead. No where near as exciting but it was a whole lot less work.

Nature Based Tourism was interesting but no where near as fun as the previous two subjects. It was all about, wait for it, nature based tourism… It is one of those subjects that I just need to do to get credit for what I was supposed to be doing back at CSU. It involved 3 case study style assignments where you focused on one Nature Based Tourism operation. I was required to initially research my chosen company for assignment one and then assignment 2 was assessing the sustainability of the operation followed by an assessment of the ethics of the company for assignment 3.

Outdoor Skills And Theory II, sound fun? Well you would be correct! The class was focused on learning about and experiencing the winter environment. We learnt a lot about snow and ice and how it is formed along with winter living. We also were required to complete 2
electives and could choose from dogsledding, ice climbing, back country skiing, a cross country ski race, ice fishing, and telemark skiing. I chose to go ice fishing and backcountry skiing which were both so much fun. We also had to make a personal craft project which was a lot of fun; I made a pair of ‘bling bling’ overboots to use when winter camping! We also went on a 3 day traditional winter camp which meant not taking tents and building tarp or natural shelters. We also learnt how to light a fire with traditional Flint and Steel which was great fun. A must do subject for the lovers of snow and winter!

My shelter Quinzhee

Personal craft project - ‘bling bling’ overboots.

Finally Dogsledding. I only became involved with the subject because one of the students broke her ankle just before the 9 day expedition and couldn’t go on it. I was in the right place at the right time and was asked if I wanted to fill her spot. If you ever get an opportunity like this, don’t say no! Seeing as though I went on the expedition I had to complete the required assignments for the subject. Thankfully the professor was very easy going. Something very funny about this subject is that I officially completed it in 31 days… believe it or not!

So as you can see, I had some very interesting and fun subjects… that’s why I was excited to go to class every day!

Money, money, money…

University fees

Ok, so you are told before you leave that the university fees stay the same while you are on exchange… hmmm, no! You still get charged HECS as usual for the subjects that you are enrolled in back at CSU but for some reason my HECS amount increased because the subjects for some reason went up to the next band level… so HECS was an extra $600! I am unsure whether this was across the board but it was something that was a bit hard to believe when I had been told that the fees will stay the same.

You will also have additional fees called Ancillary fees for the subjects that you are enrolled in at Lakehead. This fee is $41.94 per subject, once again something that you just have to pay. There may also be additional expenses for field trips or elective components depending on the subjects that you chose.

Accommodation

Living on campus is quite expensive but it is all part of the exchange experience. Accommodation in the apartments was $2,864 Canadian for just under 4 months (one semester). That ended up coming to about $3,500 Australian after the exchange rate and credit card fees. Remember apartments are self catered, and you also have to do your own cleaning of the entire house. If you are a clean person like myself it can be a bit frustrating living on campus at times, especially if you are living with other people who don’t care if the house is a pigsty. If you can find a house off campus you can definitely save a lot of money but you probably won’t meet as many people. Plus living on campus is convenient and close to the shops which is important, especially when you have to walk everywhere.

Centrelink

As you probably know by now you continue to receive your youth allowance while studying abroad which makes things so much easier! Just be sure to tell Centrelink that you are going on
exchange so they can register you before you leave. It is a good idea to do this a couple of months in advance because you will need to provide them with some evidence (your letters of acceptance and maybe travel itinerary). If you need to go back later at least you will have time. Also do not expect to continue to be paid rent assistance because they don’t pay it for rent outside of Australia.

While I am on the subject of Centrelink, I would advise filling out a form that allows someone to provide Centrelink any details that may have changed, for example if you open a new bank account. I would advise asking your parent or guardian to be this person. You can obtain a form from your nearest Centrelink office. It is a bit of a hassle trying to do this when you are already over in Canada, and yes, I am speaking from experience.

Exchange rates

For current exchange rates visit http://www.xe.com/ I would suggest keeping an eye on the exchange rates when it comes time to taking money out. If you watch it continuously for a couple of weeks you will notice that it rises and then lowers, as soon as you see it starting to dip again is the best time to go and take more money out because you can be pretty certain that it is not going to go up any more. When I first converted some money back in Australia the exchange rate was at only about 82 Canadian cents for every 1 Aussie dollar. That ended up being very low because for the whole time I was over in Canada the exchange rate was up above 90 Canadian cents for every 1 Aussie dollar.

What is the exchange rate?

Just in case you have no idea about exchange rates I will try to explain it briefly. When you go over to a different country, obviously they all have different currency so they will not accept Australian money therefore you will be required to exchange your Australian money for, in this case, Canadian Dollars. The stronger the exchange rate, the more foreign currency you will get when you exchange your Australian dollars. So when the Canadian exchange rate is 93c for the dollar it means that for every Australian dollar converted you will receive 93 Canadian cents. The higher the exchange rate the better which is why you should keep an eye on it when you need to take money out to ensure you get the best value for your money.

Tips for saving money

Don’t eat, don’t party, don’t enjoy yourself, and don’t go on exchange… hmmm, well that is definitely not going to happen!!!

The best way to save money in the first place is to take large amounts of money out of the bank at a time. If you are watching the exchange rate and get it when it is high you will save money especially when you are taking large amounts of money out at a time. This also helps to reduce your Australian bank fees, well not reduce them, just reduce the number of them.

So how much are the bank fees? They vary with the bank, and also where you use your Australian bank card. It is best to go and speak to your bank about this because they will be able to give you more information. But I found that every time I used my Australian key card at the teller machine I was charged between $12 and $20 for a single transaction! You are thinking holy Dooley? Exactly, that’s why you try to reduce the number of times you use your keycard. I would suggest speaking to your bank about the fees because they will be able to give you accurate information that applies to you.

One way to save money on your grocery bill is walk to the shops… you can only carry a certain amount of groceries back! I found that carrying a basket was a good gauge to how much I could carry back. Once the basket was full that was it. It also helps you resist those temptations such as desserts every week! Notice I said every week… obviously you have to treat yourself once in a while!

Other than that, look around for bargains, check out things online to get an idea of what something is worth, and even try flashing your student card. Experiment and see what happens, there is no harm in also asking “is that the best you can do”?

Keeping your money secure

Personally I would recommend opening a bank account when you get over to Canada. It is extremely cheap and ensures that your money is secure. There are also plenty of banks within walking distance of the university so you can do this in Thunder Bay. I went with Scotiabank because there is a teller machine on campus and they had the cheapest option. All you need is
proof of identity (your passport) and proof of student status and place of residence (you can get a letter from Lakehead University with this information on it). The account was free to set up and only had a $1.25 monthly charge and unlimited withdraws in any month. $1.25 well spent to ensure your money is secure! That way you can also reduce the number of times you use your Australia keycard, plus your Australian keycard will not work at every store. You will also get a keycard as soon as you open your account and seeing as though it is a Canadian account you should be able to use your card wherever go as long as they accept debit.

Now you are probably thinking well what do I do about my account when I leave? Well that is just as simple. You can either close your bank account down before you leave Thunder Bay or you can close it down just before you leave Canada. If you are flying out of another city such as Vancouver you will just have to go to that bank and get your account transferred across. That is what I chose to do so I didn’t have to carry excess amounts of cash around while I was travelling, and I didn’t have to put everything onto the credit card… that would not be a very nice surprise when you get home…! And don’t worry, when you close your account down they will give you the remaining money (if there is any) in cash so you will get any back that you don’t spend.

For some reason when you have a lot of cash staring you in the face every day when you open your underwear draw you are inclined to spend it a lot faster than if it was sitting in the bank where you can’t see it. That is another good idea why you should open a bank account over in Canada. That way you can also take your budgeted amount out each week and put it in your wallet then when it is gone, it is gone, you will have to wait until the next week to be able to spend more money on partying.

Budgeting

On that note you might want to make your weekly budget higher than usual even though living is cheaper. You are on exchange and you may aswell enjoy it because you probably won’t get the opportunity to do something like this again! Just make sure you have enough money left over to travel around after university. That is where you can send an email to your exchange co-ordinator back at CSU (probably Lynn Furze) and ask them to put the loan money into your account if you require it.

So how much should you budget each week? Well after all of your university fees such as accommodation and text books are paid for, living is fairly cheap. Personally I was not a big party person and I was living off about $60 a week. I think a reasonable budget for food and entertainment would be $100 a week. I am a pretty big eater and I would only spend $40 to $50 max per week on food. So I was essentially saving money from Centrelink while I was living at uni.

Weather

These photos were taken on my dogsledding expedition. They are hoarfrost (ice) which grew on the ice hole over night… pretty impressive!

-26˚C pfft, na you’re full of it… Yes it does… there’s the proof! Taken on my mini expedition to the shops that day the wind-chill was -42. Notice the clear skies and sunshine…??!!

If you are studying any form of outdoor recreation you will understand that dressing to the weather conditions enables you to enjoy any extreme, in this case it is -30˚C. A fun little thing to try when it is that cold is get a cup of boiling water and go outside and throw it into the air…
you will see the water evaporate in mid air right before your eyes. As with the extreme temperatures, this is something you can only believe when you actually see or experience it.

Another thing to look out for are the Northern Lights. I was unlucky, and never got to see them, but from what I have heard they are spectacular. Apparently they are burning gases that are released from the Earth on cold nights after a warmish (0˚C) day. I can’t tell you much more about them because I only found out about them toward the end of my time at Thunder Bay. And yes, it is possible to take photos of them, so if by chance you get to see them and get a photo I would love to hear about it!

When you first get to Canada if it is during the winter months the climate and days will definitely take a bit of getting used to. During January the sun was rising at 8:30am and would set at 4:30pm so the days are very very short, especially with the effects of jetlag. Jetlag is a very weird thing. For those who have not experienced it, it is nothing to be afraid of. All it means is messed up sleeping patterns. I usually go to bed at around 10:30pm and wake up at 7am but I found when I first got here I was going to bed at 1 or 2am and waking up at 10am. It took me a good two weeks to get my sleeping patterns back to normal. This also made the daylight hours even shorter which really sucked! And yeh, one thing to be aware of is that during the Canadian winter season, if you look outside and it looks nice and warm because it is sunny (which also doesn’t happen often) let me assure that it is not warm at all! On a fine sunny day in the middle of winter dress for -20 to -25˚C temperatures if you plan to go outdoors because it will be cold! If you don’t understand weather, cloud cover acts like a blanket over the earth to keep the heat in. When it clears, the heat escapes which is why it gets so cold. During winter around Thunder Bay especially, there is a lot of cloud cover thanks to the moisture evaporating from the spectacular, Lake Superior. So on a cloudy, miserable looking day it will be a lot warmer outside than on a clear, sunny day thanks to the cloud cover. This also definitely takes a bit of getting used to and you will probably find it very hard to believe how cold it is outside on a clear sunny day.

Dressing for and surviving in an extremely cold climate is definitely a fine art, one that can only really be achieved through practice and experience but I will give you some advice anyway. Firstly, if you don’t feel the cold much like myself you will get by with track pants or jeans for the whole of winter. I also wore a t-shirt with my good winter jacket and I was warm even in the -42 wind-chill conditions.

But for those of you who are not like me I recommend the layering system. For everyday living in the middle of winter you don’t need to go out and purchase any expensive light weight clothing. If you have thermal underwear I would recommend wearing that and then on your legs, throw on a pair of track pants and you should be warm enough. If it is extremely windy outside you might also want to put a pair of wind/waterproof or snow pants over top of that. On your upper body I would recommend a long sleeve or t-shirt over top of your thermal layer followed by a jumper and a winter jacket. That will keep you nice and toasty warm. Then it is important to have a scarf or neck warmer to stop the heat from escaping out the top of your jacket, topped off with a beanie.

It is important to keep your extremities warm aswell because they are the most prone to frost bite if they get cold. A pair of liner gloves which are usually fleece or polypropylene topped off with a good pair of winter gloves or mitts. If you get really cold hands mitts are definitely the way to go but you are very restricted in what you can do with mitts on. Finally for your feet; if one pair of socks isn’t keeping your feet warm throw on a second but make sure that the second pair of socks doesn’t cut circulation to your feet. If the second pair of socks cuts circulation you will find that your feet will be a lot warmer with only one pair of socks. Circulation is the key to keeping your whole body, especially your extremities warm. I hope that helps you out a bit if you had no idea on how to dress and stay comfortable in the winter cold! But remember that was an overview for ever day living around campus, if you decide to go on a winter camping trip you will have ensure that you have clothing that is not cotton because once cotton gets wet, it stays wet… not good when you are stuck in a cold environment!
Cultural information

This is always fun and interesting! In Canada you are expected to tip anyone who does a service for you such as a taxi driver, a waitress or bar tender. The acceptable tip is one that equals the tax value of the total purchase. A bit confusing but put simply, if the tax comes to $2 the expected tip would be $2. And getting used to a foreign currency is always fun. I felt like a bit of a dope when I asked for two $1 coins and I got a blank stare from the lady at the cash register. In Canada $1 is a looney, $2 is a tooney, 25c is a quarter, 10c is a dime, 5c is a nickel, and 1c is a penny. But little things like that is what adds to the experience of being an Aussie in a foreign country. I am not going to talk any more about little things like that because it is something that I want you to experience for yourself. You don’t fully understand how Australian you are until someone gives you a weird look when you call a beanie a beanie… you will understand when you get there, trust me!

On the topic of money, just beware that all of the prices that you see displayed on just about everything are before tax. Tax over in Canada is 13% on top of the marked price. They have two forms of tax; GST which is 5% and a thing called PST which is 8%. Just another thing to be aware of and yes, it is a bit of a shock when you first get here but you eventually get used to it.

Luckily the primary language that is spoken in Canada is English apart from Quebec where the first language is French so communicating is simple. Although, believe it or not you will have an accent, and you will find that sometimes Canadians actually find it difficult to understand an Australian accent. Funny but true!

I did not experience any culture shock as such because as everyone says, Aussies and Canadians are very similar in all aspects of life. We have a similar sense of humour and you will probably find that when people find out that you are from Australia they will get excited. I went to do a promotion of CSU and Australia as part of my participation while I was over in Canada and had the Aussie flag set up on the table. The funny thing is that one guy came up to the table after seeing the flag and said are you some group promoting Australia or are you actually from Australia. I said, yes I am actually from Australia and you should have seen the look of surprise on his face, hilarious!

The only real conflict of cultures for me was living on residences. I was living with one Canadian and two individuals who were not from Canada. I will just say that the two other guys had a totally different up-bringing and a different way of life to myself and the Canadian guy who I was living with. This made living on residences unpleasant at times and is something that you should be aware of. For those who are interested in learning about cultures totally different to yours this would have been an awesome experience, but everyone is different and for me this was frustrating more than interesting. On that note, it is important to understand that just because you are from Australia doesn’t mean everyone is going to like you. Be aware there will always be those who you just don’t get along with, but that is part of life and is something you have to accept.

Wildlife on and around campus

So you think Canada and you think bears! Well yes, from what I have heard there is the occasional Black Bear on campus. I was unlucky, yes I did say unlucky… to not get to see one of them on campus during my time there. I was so excited to see one but oh well.

One thing that is not depressing, but you will notice it, in the middle of winter when you are walking around outside, take the time to stop and listen… you will probably notice that you don’t hear one bit of wildlife. I noticed this, but a soon as things started to warm up the birds came back out and it was as if everything had rose from the land of the dead (or frozen). I also got to see
some deer, a snowshoe hair which is like a rabbit, a skunk, a fox, and plenty of squirrels and/or chipmunks (I couldn’t tell the difference between them because they are very similar, I think the squirrel is a bit bigger). Oh, that calls for another funny story. When I was in Ottawa, I think it was the second day I was there, I saw what I later found out was a squirrel… I thought it was a possum at first glance so I said, oh cool, a possum. Yeh, as you can imagine I felt like a tool after I got a heap of blank stares and then someone laughed and said “we don’t have possums over here in Canada, it was probably a squirrel!”. Ah, funny stories, don’t worry you will have your fair share of funny stories to tell when you get back aswell.

There are plenty of Beaver dams around the waterways, but I never got to actually see a Beaver around uni. On my expedition in Minnesota I also got to see a wolf in the distance, and on the way back I got to see a Moose. I didn’t realise until I went to Canada just how peaceful it is to hear birds in the trees and see animals around the place all of the time.

Not all wildlife is dormant in winter. When I went on a camping trip over the Easter long weekend I was walking along a packed trail, well for 2 days anyway, the other 2 days were trying to hike through snow up to my waist in places… that is a whole other story! Ohhh, ok then, I will tell it. but first I will finish what I was saying about the packed trail… there were heaps of animal tracks including these massive wolf and rabbit prints which are in the photos below. They also have Woodpeckers around here which are pretty cool.

Giant rabbit…          …and massive wolf print…

Rightio, the story of my Easter weekend: I went out to Sleeping Giant Provincial Park which is about 1 hours drive away from Thunder Bay. By this time there was very little snow left around town so we thought, bugger it, we won’t need snowshoes… Big mistake! So we left on the Thursday before Good Friday, so March 20, 2008. I was with some mates from uni; Steph, Ali and Kristina. Steph had no experience winter camping, Kristina had a fair bit of experience camping but was a bit out of shape at the time, Ali also had some experience, but not a whole lot, and fortunately I had finished my Cert IV in Outdoor Recreation before I went over to Canada so I was a qualified bushwalking guide and had my Wilderness First Aid certificate.

We spent the first day hiking along a hard packed snow path but then on day 2 we took a less used track. This was where the snowshoes were needed. For the next 2 days we travelled 7.5 km through snow no shallower than knee deep, and in spots I sunk up to my waist. I was only wearing hiking boots and did not have gaiters so by the end of each day my boots were saturated. I was the Sherpa for the whole 4 days and broke trail through the snow.

By the end of day 2 we were all stuffed so I went ahead of the group to make camp. After a 45minute battle with the still knee deep snow I finally found a suitable place to camp… 50cm down in the snow I finally found solid ground! I had to clear an area on the track and that’s where we camped. I finally was able to light a fire and dry my boots out which at the time I was able to pour water out of.

The rest of the group got into camp one hour later and Kristina had been feeling sick all day and could not eat. She got into camp and changed into all of her dry clothes but she just got colder. She ended up dropping into hypothermia… a very scary situation especially since the air temperature was dropping rapidly and ended up dropping down to -17˚C that night. Thankfully we were able to warm her back up in the field and continue on the next day.

The next day we were walking through snow up to my waist once more and only made 3km in 7 hours that day. We finally made it to camp on the third night to discover that the path to the finish was well packed once again and we had a designated camping area by Lake Superior with a drop dunny and a fire pit. Ahhh, the relief!

We talked about the massive bunny tracks that you saw in the photo not long ago and we came to the conclusion that it had to be the Easter Bunny… What do you know, that night it
snowed and the Easter Bunny found us. What a spectacular way to spend Easter!

The sunrises over Lake Superior… amazing!

Easter day… Deep snow!

Other things to consider

A good idea is to take some little ‘Australian’ things. I got some key rings that had teddy bear kangaroos and koalas on them. I also got some key rings that had Australian signs on them so ones with pictures of kangaroos and koalas with the little ‘next 10km’ caption at the bottom of them. They are just little things to give out to people. I also took an Australian flag because you will be asked to promote Australia and CSU while you are on exchange so this was kind of an essential. Plus it only cost $5.

Finally, keeping in touch…

From all of the help that you probably received from friends, family, and exchange coordinators I think it is fair to say that the least you can do is keep in touch with them while you are overseas. Email is the most common way to keep in touch with people back at home. Take the time to write group emails once in a while telling everyone back at home what you have been up to and don’t forget to include Lynn and Louise on your email list!

Obviously emails just aren’t going to cut it all of the time. Most likely you will have family that wants you to call them once in a while. Worried about the expensive phone bills? Well don’t be because there is a way to call for free using the internet. There is a program called Skype which is free to download off the internet. Skype to Skype calls are free, and you can also buy Skype credit and call mobiles for 0.025 cents per minute!

Skype can be a bit confusing at times. The same thing can be done using msn messenger. Simply sign in as usual and go to a normal conversation page. Then up the top of the conversation page, just below your name you will see 7 icons, the fourth one from the right is a telephone symbol. Simply click that in the conversation of the person who you wish to call and you will be able to talk to them as you would using a phone. You will need a microphone but you can use the speakers of your computer. You can get a microphone and speaker headset for $10 from Big W… That’s what I did and the $10 headset paid for itself in the first phone call I made back home!

So you are probably now thinking what about my mobile? Will it work overseas? Only if you have a plan. Pre-paid phones don’t work over in Canada. If you decide to go onto a plan, or are already on one you will need to call your mobile phone provider (Telstra, Optus, etc.) and get them to activate what is called ‘international roaming’ on your phone. I did this with my phone, but beware of the charges associated with this… I called dad when I was stuck in Chicago and we were on the phone for about 10 minutes and it cost $25. Also don’t be disappointed if your phone does not work everywhere you go. My phone did not work in Thunder Bay, but it was working everywhere else. It was good to be able to live without a phone or a car while at uni so it is something to consider trying. If you can’t survive without your mobile there is a mobile phone dealer about 10 minutes down the road on the way to the Superstore called Rogers Wireless. I think a pre-paid sim card was $30 or something around there.

Ok, kind of still under the topic of ‘keeping in touch’. I have to share this story with everyone! Just a little reminder before I begin, the emergency services number in Canada is in
fact 911… Ok so now I have your attention again.

So, living on campus you have a phone in your room, obviously, and that mixed with the fact that I had to make a long distance phone call to a 1800 number using my room phone resulted in me accidentally dialling 911. I was required to ring an Outdoor Education company and ask them about their business as one of my first assignments for Outdoor Education Practices. So being a uni student and all, I chose a company who had a 1800 number that I could call so I wouldn't have to pay a ridiculous amount of money for a long distance phone call.

To make a long distance phone call using the university phones you first need to dial 9 + 1 to indicate that it is going to be a long distance call, then you dial the number that you wish to call… so I began to dial 1800… after dialling the #1 of the 1800 number the phone started to ring and I thought that is odd, I haven’t dialled the number yet so I hung up thinking nothing of it. I went to the residence front desk and told them what happened and get advice on how to make a long distance call to a 1800 number. By now I realised that I had in fact dialled 911. The lady at the counter said you don’t need to dial the 1 of the 1800 number, so you just dial 9 + 1 and then the 8 of 800. So I went back and tried again. This time it worked and I got through to the Outdoor Education Company as I had planned in the first place. After speaking to the guy from the company for only about 5 seconds I had 2 police cars pull up outside my window and 4 coppers all who were about 7 foot tall men, wearing their bullet proof vests stepped out of the cars. I explained what was happening to the guy on the phone and I asked if it was ok if I could call him back in a bit. He laughed and said yes, you might want to sort that out and give me a call back.

So I hung up and ran out of my room and met the cops in the hallway and told them what had happened. I said I was from Australia (seems to work as an excuse all of the time) and I had accidentally dialled 911 while trying to place a long distance phone call. The cop smiled and said yeh, that has happened before. He took my name and student number and then they left after looking around to make sure everything was ok.

So just a little word of advice, remember that the emergency services number in Canada is 911, but if you forget and accidentally dial the number maybe just wait for them to pick up the phone and tell them what happened. Tell them you are from Australia and all will be fine… But don’t do it on purpose just to check if 911 actually works because I have found that out the hard way. Ahh, the joys of being an exchange student in a foreign country… makes for an unforgettable experience I can assure you that!

**Summing up**

I hope I haven’t overwhelmed you with too much information, but then again I hope I have provided enough clear information that answers most, if not all of the questions that you might have had in the back of your mind. I hope I have also told you a few things that you might not have even thought of. I am going to say this one more time;

“Courage is the power to let go of the familiar.”

Raymond Lindguist

Although the initial stages of application are daunting and somewhat painstakingly slow, maintain your courage and find the power within yourself to let go of the familiar and embark on exchange! It will be one of the best things that you have ever done for yourself. And try not to think too much about the financial side of things, just go and have an awesome time because I will guarantee you, if you have made it this far with the application process you are almost at the top of the mountain. Don’t give up now!

Good luck with the rest of the application and when you are on exchange remember to keep an open mind, be willing to see things from someone else’s perspective and embrace every single moment of your unique and life changing experience because it is truly your experience. When you are feeling lost or scared, take the time to stop and think about why you are there, and why you got yourself into this truly amazing journey! Most of all have fun and enjoy it!!!

Regards,
Ryan Todd.
Charles Sturt University
International Exchange Student
January to June 2008
Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, CANADA
Appendices
Appendix 1 Thunder Bay Street Map.