

Shannon Slattery – Exchange to Regina University – Semester 1, 2010

The old Clichés about taking an exchange:

- That when you when you go on exchange it is a once in a lifetime experience,
- It will change your life,
- You will meet people who will become your companions, your best friends, your travelling entourage; they become your family in a sense.

And the one that hits you most?

- They tell you it will be 100 times worse leaving the new friends you've come to know and love than it was to leave your family and friends to get there in the first place.

Well, they are all true and many more besides.

Exchange will change your life.

After years of consideration and months of preparation, I decided to take my international student exchange during the first semester of 2010 (this being the equivalent of second semester in the Northern Hemisphere).

As a shock to most people I know and to myself, I decided I would leave the 35°+ temperatures of the Australian summer, and travel to the famous -40° of the Canadian winter.

I chose to exchange to the University of Regina. (The worst part of this decision was in telling people where I was going, since "Regina" is actually pronounced "Ridge-eye-na" so no matter who I told, it was always followed by a snigger). Regina is the capital of the central province of Saskatchewan. Regina is a city of 180, 000 people and, like Canberra, literally comes out of no-where. It is situated in the middle of totally flat prairie plains which stretch as far as you can see. In winter, it's probably like being on the moon, white as far as you can see, no trees, no fences (which was weird). It took me 2 days on a bus getting to Regina from Vancouver and every 100kms seemed to drop the temperature another 2 degrees. Everywhere you look is a minimum 1 metre deep with snow and mostly this only gets thicker. At the University, there are huge windows looking outside onto the commons/green and these windows can have 3-4metres of snow resting up against them. Seeing this, it reminds you, you're in a different world.

It was very interesting to see everyone walking around in a t-shirt and jeans yet see it snowing outside. However, you learn quickly that when you are going outside, unless you want frost bite, you glove up, put on a beanie (they call them toques?!) and layer with singlet, t-shirt, fleece lined jumper/sweater and a decent waterproof/windproof ski jacket (I topped it off with rubber soled/water proofed ugg boots – which pretty much saved my life).

The University of Regina is a state of the art university with about 12, 000 students and offers 100s of different courses, from pottery and astronomy to environmental economics and kinesiology. Many of the buildings, including the new Residence towers are brand new, almost all the buildings are more than 5 storeys and the Gym (the main gym, there are around 3 as well as a pool and sauna) has a 200m indoor running track (access to the gym will be free with your UR Student card). The University is built in a circle so luckily for me there was no reason to go into the -43° wind and snow to get to your next class. And trust me; it's not a stroll in the park going into that type of weather even for a 100metres. The University is like its own self- sustaining world during winter, and it was always an adventure going outside. However, I absolutely recommend going outside during a blizzard it's truly amazing.

All in all, if you are willing to go with all the opportunities offered to you, you'll make amazing lifelong friends from all over the world (I have a couch to sleep on, in almost every continent and a half dozen countries). And although it's a scary thing to go on exchange during a Canadian winter, which you really can't imagine before going there, its 100% worth it. You can do things that simply aren't possible during warmer months. You can get caught up in the famous Canadian Ice hockey culture, learn how to curl, experience breathing arctic temperatures, go ice skating on actual frozen lakes, ski the Rockies, experience your hair freezing solid after a dip in the hot springs and my personal favourite – jumping into 2-5 metres of powdered snow.

So, as one of my Canadian friends would say: "Seriously, what are you doing with your life?!"

Go for it. Go and meet some Canucks.