

Imagine a colorful children's book or the advertisement picture of a language learning book. People of all backgrounds and colors are holding each other's hands and smiling into the camera. Voilà, ca, c'est Montréal! Montreal, this incredibly diverse bilingual city in the heart of Quebec, home to artists and hipsters, musicians and hippies, travelling and lost souls, migrants and locals, game designers and intellectuals, and, for four months, my home for my exchange semester at Concordia University.

Montréal, pourquoi ca?

When two years ago, I was thinking about where to go for my stay abroad, I was not yet aware of this special vibe that makes Montreal both fascinating and overwhelming. I was mostly looking for an academic opportunity in a francophone country (but with a better education system than in France!) that allows me to pursue my academic goals while offering an interesting culture and landscape. Soon, my interest focused on Quebec, the only francophone Province in Canada, that seemed to fulfill both my cultural and academic interests and offers a number of great universities, a politically fascinating culture and stunning nature. In particular, I was interested in the (liberal) education system that seemed to allow me to continue my educational path abroad and meanwhile learn more about how interdisciplinary and international education could work. Speaking English fluently and French almost fluently, there was no fear but strong interest in the linguistic opportunities. In addition, after having spent a High School year in the USA, I was interested in experiencing Northern America from a different side which may help me to understand both the American mentality (is there one?) and my own European/German identity.

La préparation

The International Office greatly supported me in the entire application and preparation process which made the tedious administrative tasks more endurable and organized. At this point, it is also important to mention that my experience was special and different from others, since I got sick in the spring before my departure and hence had to shorten and postpone my stay to one semester (Jan – Apr. 2019). This was unfortunate since I had already selected classes and prepared my visa application but I was very well supported by the IO in Freiburg and at Concordia, as well as my scholarship organization DAAD, who helped me organize this specific arrangement. Hence, it wasn't until November 2018 that I could finally decide to take the opportunity that was given to me and go abroad.

Probably the biggest help in preparation of my exchange were a friend in Montreal who answered all questions about Quebecois culture and life, and a Kommilitonin in Freiburg who was in Montreal before and provided me with detailed information about the places to go to, the banks, transportation, neighborhoods etc. Thus, I felt very well informed and was able to organize some things in advance. Three weeks before my departure, I found a shared flat on Kijiji.ca (another good website is craigslist.ca, in general, finding accommodation is a lot easier than in Germany!) who would welcome me by the end of December. Quite spontaneously, I found a sublet for my room in Freiburg and transported all things I might potentially need abroad to my family, so I could decide to either take them with me or have them sent to me once I was in Canada.

But, quite unfortunately, I broke my foot a few weeks before finally taking off which put an extra challenge to my emotional and organizational preparedness. Consequently, several calls with my air plane companies followed until I could apply for special treatment and help with my journey.

On y va!

So finally, the big day came and I was heading off from Frankfurt via Reykjavik to Montreal! After a long (and emotionally and physically very draining) flight, I landed in Montreal, passed the security check-points and was warmly welcomed by my wonderful Montreallaise friend. The following days, she took me to phone companies (I can recommend going in person to Chatr directly after arrival), banks (very easy to open a bank account although they offer different plans depending on your citizen status) and a very Quebecoise New Year's Party. If possible, ask for this help of a local or join a buddy program at your university to have someone support you in these first organizational tasks in your new home!

Les premières semaines

The first weeks in Montreal were probably the biggest challenge I have had in a long time. I was extremely overwhelmed by the culture, the many many people you see every day in the city, the lack of familiarity and peace, the amount of organizational tasks, the transportation – and my broken foot! Although Montreal is culture-wise not much different from any German metropole, compared to Freiburg it is just MORE and INTENSE. An average trip with metro and buses takes about 30 min. depending on where you live and where you are going, you hear street music and different languages everywhere you go, Canadians are a lot more outgoing than Germans are and I was confronted with masses of people and stimulations every day. Hence, I soon felt very overwhelmed and could only little enjoy the nights out with my new flatmate or good friend in Montreal. So, I tried to take my time and arrive slowly. And I was very happy when I got the opportunity to go with my Montreallaise friend to their family house on the countryside where I could rest my soul and body, watch the snow and get slowly in touch with a Canadian family and their experiences of life in Quebec.

Although much support was offered by my university, this familiar surrounding helped me most to deal with the sensual overload of the first weeks.

Nevertheless, some things had to be organized by myself. In the first week of university, I was confronted with the decision of choosing my classes. Known as the “shop-and-drop” period, during this time students can try out the classes they had registered for and either stick with them or drop them and choose others. Although I was in general very lucky with my choices, I noticed that one class was far too easy for my level and hence I decided to drop it. In the end, I was happy about this decision that reduced my workload from 5 to 4 classes because I definitely needed the extra time for my health and some travels. Although I was automatically enrolled in the university's mandatory health insurance, I got an exemption due to my DAAD scholarship insurance and was hence eligible to go to private doctors instead of the university health center. Consequently, my experience with the Canadian health care system is different from regular students but I would in general say that the quality and availability of doctors is comparable to Germany.

Moving in to my new flat proved to be very easy. Quite coincidentally, my two flatmates (both true Quebecois) had lived with another German exchange student before who left me her furniture and stationary so there was not much left to organize. In the end, the experience of living with them turned out a lot more difficult than I expected at the beginning but I know that it was just bad luck that I could have faced in any WG around the world.

Identité et vie à Montréal

Regarding my personal experience, my four months in Montreal were probably most characterized by a struggle of (or with?) my identity. The greatest challenge of my stay was my foot injury that put into question who I was. Due to my limited mobility, I had to cancel all dreams of exploring country and people through indoor or outdoor sports, spontaneous bar tours and night walks, visiting cities and countryside or climbing the

Mont Royal (check it out, there is indeed a mountain of this name in the middle of the city!). With this experience, not only the city and people were strange and new to me but also my self-perception, and I desperately longed for some stability and familiarity. During these first weeks in Montreal, I often played with the idea to cancel my stay and go back to Germany. I felt very frustrated, reacted oversensitive to many influences and often questioned the value of my experience. I was overwhelmed with the vibe in Montreal that many perceive as incredible, diverse and artsy but was just too much for me (including the far more liberal consumption of drugs all around the city). I greatly missed the calmness and closeness with nature that I was used to from Freiburg. And I was so much annoyed by the long travels in the metro and the severe snow storms and icy sidewalks that made my mobility even more difficult. Yet, I fought. I tried to build up friendships and looked for places that could give me comfort. I discovered some spots of nature and peace (there is a Greenhouse, an open space to study on the roof of the Concordia building!), some spots of culture and distraction (I spent at least one night every week in a Jazz bar!) and planned trips to escape the intensity of Montreal. Finally, I managed to leave the city for one week during spring break (one week off at the end of February) and found peace and tranquility in a yoga retreat on the countryside. I know, this does not sound like a Canadian experience and it really wasn't. But my piece of advice to anyone going abroad would be to truly listen to your emotional needs, to accept the feeling of overwhelming you might perceive and take the time to work through it. Yes, I missed out on some more "authentic" experiences but this week of retreat eventually gave me the strength I needed to go back to the city and enjoy my remaining two months. It proved to be a turning point in my experience. While I would still be struggling with the foot injury for several more months (and hence had to abandon the plans of more travelling in Canada), I built up the emotional stability that allowed me to engage in social activities and truly enjoy the academic experience at Concordia.

Although I was first quite skeptical about Montreal, I finally realized how absolutely great Canadians are! They are kind, funny, open and very welcoming. Overall, it is a lot more easy to make friends (than in Germany!), if you just go to them, smalltalk a little and in a short time you find yourself going out with them to concerts, bars, restaurants or wherever you find a common interest. Montreal (and Concordia university) is also very international, so you can soon engage in fascinating cultural exchanges (although cultural differences are so common that they are usually not the first topic to talk about). One thing I soon noticed is that my colleagues in school usually had very little time because they were all working part-time next to their studies to finance their living. Plus, Concordians are known to be very engaged, with numerous events and demonstrations taking place every week. But, despite this busy-ness and lack of time, they are always happy to go out with you for lunch (free food is served everyday at 12.30 on the 7th floor of the Concordia building, called "People's Potato"!) or for a coffee.

Both academically and personally, I was very interested in learning more about what constitutes this international, or bilingual, or Quebecois or Canadian culture. How does the multiculturalism work? Is Quebec really that different from the rest of Canada? I think the question of identity is a really interesting one to ask in Montreal. I noticed that I received different answers from everyone. Some considered themselves as Montréalaises, some Quebecois, some Canadians and some just didn't identify with anything. In general, Canadians (and/or Quebecois) are really proud about their culture and love to share their favorite folk music or foods with you! Although I was very limited to experience different cultural events to do my limited mobility, three must-dos in Quebec are the Cabane à Sucre (maple syrup harvesting events in March/April), going out to a bar with Quebecois music and trying out Poutine (the "national" dish: fries with cheese sauce in all variations).

Et puis... L'école!

Limited as I was physically, I soon started to put most of my energy into school and my classes and it proved to be an amazing experience! I took three classes (although one of them counted for two):

Issues in Canadian Public Policy (Mon 10:15-13:00)

Educational Psychology (Mon/Wed 14:45-17:30)

Workshops in Social Science Research (6x Fri 09:00-16:30)

With this schedule, I could fulfill my academic goals and learn about subjects that were not offered (or not available to me) at University Freiburg. In general, I perceived the classes to be easier to what I was used to from my prior studies although the workload tends to be a bit higher. So, in the end, I would have felt comfortable to take more or more advanced classes but it was absolutely right for the first weeks to keep the schedule minimal. What I loved about studying at Concordia was the individualistic education that allowed me to pursue my personal interests, i.e. by deciding on my own the topics for term papers. Also, the teachers put a lot more emphasis in supporting diversity in the classroom: Special arrangements were offered for students in need, gender equality was emphasized and after every class, the teachers would take time to answer individual questions. Thus, I felt supported both personally and academically. This support allowed me to incredibly grow academically during my time abroad. Although I honestly didn't take school very serious in the first weeks, I so much enjoyed my classes in the end that they helped me find the specific focus I now want to pursue in my academic career. And I even found ideas for my Bachelor's thesis! To anyone going to Concordia I can especially recommend the class "Workshops on Social Science Research" in which prominent researchers and politicians were invited to teach us and work with us for one day on the topic of their expertise. It was in particular in this class that I connected with interested and engaged students and we spent many hours and coffee breaks discussing Canadian politics! In the other classes it was a bit more difficult to make contacts. Although they were organized rather like seminars, it is not unusual to have 50-80 students in one classroom. Consequently, the atmosphere tends to be very anonymous and I had to put some courage and energy into talking to my neighbors and finally finding great people in all my classes. In a nutshell, Concordia was a great academic experience and a school I would definitely recommend!

If you are planning on going to Montreal, be aware of the cultural differences between the schools. Université de Montréal (UdM) and Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM) are the francophone schools, with the latter being a very left institution in which it is not uncommon to discuss with your teachers the amount of workload you agree to do or just go on a strike as an entire faculty. McGill and Concordia are the anglophone universities. While McGill is known to be very elitist, with many high-achieving students mainly from the US, Concordia is a lot more relaxed and diverse with a very engaged student body.

Conclusion

My semester abroad was a challenge. It was a very tough time both for my physical and emotional health and I often doubted whether it was the right decision to go. But in the end, I learned to personally grow out of my frustration and struggles and made incredible academic developments. I learned to love the Canadian mentality, the political correctness and the balance of pride for the culture and openness to newcomers. Today, I still feel like I was "zur falschen Zeit am falschen Ort" but I am grateful for the positive developments I made and I am already planning to go back to experience Canada on a hiking trip, a visiting trip or perhaps even for going there for my Master's studies...