

Coming to America

I am not going to lie: my first few days at McGill University I felt a bit like someone who has found a magic portal and now finds themselves in a strange new dimension that is remotely similar to one's own, but different in weird places. First of all, there was sheer size. In Freiburg, not only is the University smaller, I attend the University College, where I am used to knowing every face. Here, at the welcome events not only do you know nobody, there are also literally thousands of new students there with you. And McGill makes a point of setting up many large scale welcome events and activities to get new students to

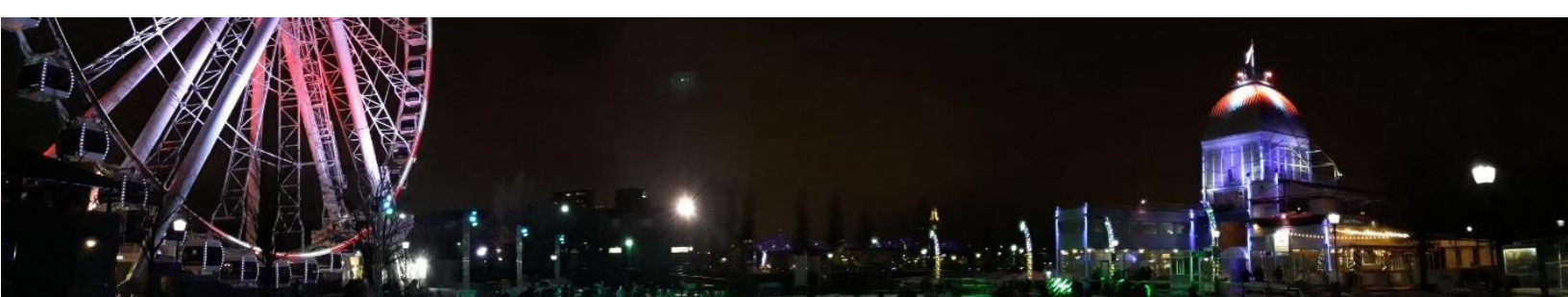


connect, and these are very valuable. The good thing is, everybody there also knows no one and tries to make first contact with the new humans around them, so you are not alone. However, especially at the early, big University welcome events I soon realized that few people around me were actually my age. Because most of the early welcome events are set up for mostly 18-year-old freshmen, I felt a little alienated as the odd 21-year-old, third year university student. Entering university for the first time is just not the same experience as having spent a few years in one already.

Therefore, one of the best decisions I made in those early days was to attend alternative welcome events. Let me explain: at McGill, faculties organize welcome days much like they do in Germany, there is a lot of partying and drinking for the First Years. I didn't have much interest in that. Alternatively, you can sign-up for a few alternative welcome day clubs, like an outdoor one where you go canoeing and camping, faith-based ones, or, in my case a "radical" one. Because it was much smaller, and more political, there were quite a few older other exchange students and it was much easier to keep track of people. This is the way I found my first real pocket of friends in the massive ocean that McGill seemed to be at first.

To find these little pockets of people in the early days was really important for me to arrive at the university and start to feel at home. It helped me get over all of the tiny things that you notice on your first days in a new place, that make you feel like a little, green alien. Is it me or does everything here feel really *American*? Why do they have T-Shirts for everything and hold their welcome day in a Football stadium? What is a land acknowledgement and who are the *Kanien'kehá:ka*? And, as the liberal-arts-studying snowflake that I am: they serve meat at lefty student events?

If all of this is confusing to you, try living it. If it is not confusing to you, leave it and do something that challenges you, because being confused is the fun part, discovering, experiment, making a fool of yourself trying to speak French on the street and not get lost in the city without phone data and realizing that, oops, the metro does not run past midnight. I had time to figure those things out, because I made the good choice to find a flat before arriving in Montréal. Some of my friends here who did not do that, ended up moving from Airbnb to Airbnb for a few weeks before finding something permanent, which certainly did not help with the arrival. There are of course advantages to looking for a place when you are already in



the city and know people, but it does not make your first few weeks less stressful. Generally, it was a good idea to have as much of the chores done before arrival as I could: course registration and insurance of course (although I ended up changing courses), knowing where to go to register for a student card, which bank I wanted to open an account with, housing, being roughly aware of the exchange rate between EUR and CAD, bringing some cash.

I arrived around a week before the start of the semester, which is a good amount of time to find your way around but not enough time if you want to do any travelling. Then the semester started. Slowly. Here they have this transition “add-drop-period” where in most courses there is very little that’s going on because people are still changing in and out of courses. In the beginning this was quite confusing for me, and I was a little underwhelmed by the lack in complexity of course content but soon after add-drop the full course load began to kick in. That meant that courses got really interesting, but also very work intensive. Even coming from the Liberal Arts programme, where I was already used to having a lot of little assignments throughout the semester, I was still surprised by the sheer amount of work that students have to do here. So far, I haven’t found studying here more challenging than in Freiburg, but there are just a million little assignments to keep you busy. On a University exchange this is something that you really can’t shake, given that your study permit requires you to take at least 4 courses.

On a normal day I would have some classes in the morning and the evening until about 5:30. In the afternoon I would usually stay at the University, in the library or sitting in a common area or Café with friends, trying to do readings or write assignments. Still I usually still have time to explore, meet friends or go to events in the evenings, afternoons or weekends. And so, you spend your days and suddenly you realize – I have a routine.

Bienvenue au Québec

If there was one thing that made my arrival in Canada easier it was the fact that I had already spent a year in the country after school. It also meant that I was a little less sensitive to cultural and environmental peculiarities that I might otherwise have been. Certainly, some things will maybe never stop to amaze me, both positive and negative things. For example, without having statistical data for this, Canada seems like an incredibly wasteful country: everything is wrapped in layers of plastic, no one bothers to turn the lights of, buildings are poorly insulated (which in a country where temperatures go down to below -30°C in winter means that people may put plastic sheets over their windows to keep the draft out – or just overheat). On the positive side, the society is beautifully diverse, there is an ice rink on every corner, and people are generally extremely friendly and open.



However, Montréal is not only in Canada, it is also in Québec. And on every level, from the broad features to the small everyday things, Québec is quite different in their culture from the rest of Canada. Being largely francophone and closely tied to France, they are more European in a lot of things than the rest of North America. This means they have more public services like public transport and free public pools and are generally more social democratic (even their capitalist institutions are, for example Québec has the



largest co-operative bank in north America). They also cultivate their own styles of food, music and political culture. On the flip side, they are also more protectionist of their cultural homogeneity than the rest of Canada, which is generally very multicultural.

A massive part of this cultural protectionism concerns language. A key question that many people may share, who, like me, come to Québec knowing barely any French is: So, can you get by in English. The short answer is: YES, but DON'T. On the one hand, Montréal's downtown area, where the English-speaking Universities like McGill and Concordia are located are quite anglophone, and it is a running joke that McGill students never learn French even if they are here for years. There are also a lot of anglophone events that you can attend. However, you will have a better experience with each level of French you have. My French is rather shabby and apart from taking a course at the University I haven't put much effort in getting better. However, it is absolutely crucial if you want to participate in Québécois cultural life or live just slightly outside the city center, where people's readiness or ability to speak English diminishes rapidly. In the best-case scenario, Montréal is one of those curious places where people just talk at each other in different languages or mix and match languages and still everyone kind of understands each other - #Franglais.

This is Colonized Land

One of the most interesting things I have encountered in my time here so far has been Canada's colonial and Indigenous history and present. In Europe what we learn about North American Indigenous peoples comes from Wild-West movies, Karl May books and questionable children's TV-shows. Without questioning it much, we place Indigenous peoples in the past. But, surprise, Indigenous peoples live! Canada is not a post-colonial country nor have Indigenous peoples disappeared. The Indigenous people of the Montréal area are the Kanien'kehá:ka, also known as Mohawks or even Iroquois (the Iroquois are not a single group, rather the Kanien'kehá:ka are members of a governance unit known as the Iroquois / Six Nations confederacy). I would really like to turn this report into an essay on settler-Indigenous relations in Québec now, but instead I will just say this: if you come to Canada you should get informed about Indigenous presence in the space. Not only is it super interesting, it is also necessary for understanding how Canada functions as a state and a society, and to learn how to exercise responsible Indigenous allyship. I would even say it is a responsibility for newcomers, especially in a space like Montréal, which is unceded territory, meaning Indigenous Nations never consented for settlers to exercise sole sovereignty over the space. For previously fairly uneducated Europeans like me, it's also a good opportunity to learn how maybe, sometimes, not to put your foot in your mouth on Indigenous issues.

Remembering Home

Apart from all the new and exciting things I have discovered and people I have met in the five months I have been here it should be no surprise that being away from your friends and family for such a long time can also be really hard at times. When you're sad, when you're sick, and also when you're happy, when they are sad or sick or happy, and you can't share that with the people you love in the same way as you would if you were together. For me, this wasn't my first time being abroad for a longer period of time and it's still difficult, yet I wouldn't want to trade it for not making all these wonderful new friends as well.

And that's that for now, I wish everyone a wonderful Freiburg summer!

