

Informal Report for UBC in Vancouver

Most important tip: Facebook Groups

My biggest tip is the importance of using various Facebook groups to buy and sell your stuff and plan adventures and meet people. The two most important groups for these are UBC Buy and Sell textbooks and the UBC Incoming Exchange Group, although there are many more. Don't be afraid to ask any questions on the latter if you need advice on anything, like the application process for example or if you want to plan a trip with like-minded people.

Visa

If you just have a South African passport, you will need some form of Canadian visa. I did not apply for a study permit, as a student visitor's visa will suffice for one semester. However if you want to work there you will need a study permit. It takes about three weeks to get your Canadian Visa and the application process is all online. I was not required to get police clearance or have my finger prints taken, but on the official site I remember reading that in the future South Africans may be required to get at least one of those. Police clearance could potentially take months so make sure to find out if you need it.

Flights

Once you have booked your flight and sent UCT the three cheapest flight quotes, they will reimburse you for 50% of the cost of the cheapest flight. I was reimbursed about two months after I booked my flight. The cheapest flight for me at the time was with British Airways via London.

Arriving and Public Transport

I highly recommend taking public transport to get from the airport to the university. The public transport is very reliable and safe and taxis are very expensive. It's a good idea to buy a compass card for about \$5 at the airport train terminal. You will be able to load money onto it and from October onwards you will be able to link it to your UPass. This will give you unlimited access to all public transport in Vancouver including the sea bus. For the first 3 days before UBC opened the residences, I stayed in an AirBnB which was about R300 per night.

Accommodation

Because of the relationship UCT has with UBC you are guaranteed a place in residence. The two residences for international students are Walter Gage and Fairview. You will need to pay a deposit of about \$900 beforehand. I stayed in Walter Gage residence in a unit with 6 other guys. We each had our own room but shared kitchen and bathroom. It was very conveniently located on campus and safe. There are two gyms across the road and an aquatic centre which is free for all UBC students. However, I would recommend staying in Fairview residence. In Fairview you have a dishwasher and two toilets as opposed to one for about 6 people. They also have a nicer living room with a big table, whereas Walter Gage did not have a proper table. For this reason almost all dinners or parties that I went to happened at Fairview. If you plan to do your own cooking you may prefer Fairview for this reason over Walter Gage. I found the students there to be a lot nicer as well. In Walter Gage most people seem to stick to themselves. It is important to mention however, that Fairview is a lot more open than Walter Gage and therefore security has been an issue there. A lot of the international students do not lock their doors and I heard of incidents where people walked in and stole stuff. This is almost impossible in Walter Gage. In general crime is not that common there though so as long as you keep your door locked there is nothing to worry about. Fairview is also not as close as Walter

Gage and it will take you a few minutes extra to walk to your lectures, but overall I would have preferred to stay there.

Both residences are self-catering and you will need to get or bring your own bedding and cooking utensils. I mention some tips for getting these cheaply on the financial report.

It is possible to get cheaper accommodation off campus, but it is not that easy to find and there are lots of scams. However, I have heard of people finding rooms 10 min from campus for about \$500 per month.

Finances and Medical Aid

In order for UBC to give you your living cost scholarship, you will need to open a Canadian bank account. I used Scotiabank, as they offer a student account with zero fees and there is a branch on campus. Once this has been paid into your account, you must pay for the remaining sum of the residence fees and your iMed and UPass. iMed is essential and will cover you for all basic medical costs. You will be covered even before you have paid for it. All of this will be explained to you at Orientation once you arrive.

Communication

It's not worth it to get a sim card for data or Airtime, as the cheapest contract I found was about \$40 a month excluding a phone. It's possible to pick up Wi-Fi almost everywhere, as there is free Wi-Fi offered at each Starbucks, McDonalds or any other chain store. On most streets you will find a place to access Wi-Fi, you may just need to hunt a bit. I managed just fine without, but make sure to register your sim for international roaming beforehand if that is necessary. There is also Wi-Fi in all residences.

Academics and UBC Admin

I found all of my courses to be easier than their counterparts at UCT. In science at least, our second year is equivalent to their third year. The quality of education is not bad though, they just don't make the exams that hard.

Their admin is not very good, however, and in fact the university registered me for the wrong courses initially. One really needs to badger them to get a response, so if there is something wrong, make sure to sort it out as soon as possible.

Climate and the City

Vancouver has probably the mildest climate in Canada. It was around low twenties when I arrived in late August and around zero when I left in December. It is still possible to swim in the sea in December, but the aquatic centre steam room is essential right after! I would also advise bringing along a rain coat as it rains a lot. You can get free use of umbrellas for the day in a building called The Nest. I also used my raincoat as ski jacket.

Vancouver and the UBC campus is a really beautiful and there is plenty to do, especially outdoorsy adventures. I did a lot of hiking. The highlight of my trip was hiking up and camping at Magnesia Meadows. You can pitch your tent anywhere and have fantastic views. It will be very easy to find people to go with if you post on the UBC Incoming Exchange group. A lot of these places are reachable by bus and I found it easy to borrow all necessary equipment like tents and sleeping bags on this group or from the UBC exchange club. Other favourites were visiting Victoria on Vancouver Island and going night skiing on Grouse. If you have the money for it I have been told that skiing at

Whistler is amazing, but Grouse and Cyprus are a lot cheaper and reachable by public transport. If you want to do anything outdoors, it's best to go almost right away before it gets too cold.

Other must do's:

Wreck beach (10 min walk from campus)

The Museum of Anthropology (it's free if you bring your student card and it's on campus)

Explore the Regional Pacific National Park (good running trails and right next to UBC)

Going Ice skating at UBC (it's \$2,50 to rent skates and free if you have your own), obviously if you have the time, to go more inland ice skating on a lake is a lot more fun. Robson square downtown is also a lot of fun.

The Japanese Gardens on campus (also free for students)

Go to Kingsway Sushi (unlimited sushi and tea for \$15)

Hike in Deep Cove and try their famous doughnuts. You can also go kayaking there.

Explore Bowen Island (there are lots of fun hikes and festivals there)

If you want to eat somewhere special "East is East" is close by and has amazing food. You have a choice of 12 dishes and you can eat as much as you want for \$30

Cycle around Stanley Park (give yourself time to borrow bikes from other exchange students instead of renting)

Watch any Ice Hockey game (the one's at UBC are very cheap to get tickets for)

Participate in day of the longboat

Try poutine (but don't ask for ketchup with it!)

Joffre Lakes

Garibaldi Round trip (probably the best day hike I did there)

If you have time I have heard that Banff is amazing. I wish I had come a little earlier and had gone there right away. Friends of mine planned a road trip with other random exchange students on the Facebook group. And that worked out quite well for them.

There are so many other things to recommend, but I wanted to finish by saying that I am very grateful that I was given this opportunity to go on exchange. Academics aside, I have learnt and grown so much. Vancouver is an amazing place. Make the most out of this opportunity and don't waste a single weekend. Feel free to contact me about anything.

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