



## My Exchange Evaluation

### Basic Information

<b>Host University</b>	McGill University
<b>Semester &amp; Year of Exchange</b>	Semester 2 (Fall), 2024
<b>Otago degree(s)</b>	Bachelor of Science
<b>Major(s)</b>	Ecology

### Academics/ course load

*Which papers did you take whilst on exchange?*

<b>Course title</b>	<b>Language of instruction</b>	<b>Otago equivalent</b>
ANTH 202 – Socio-cultural Anthropology	English	100-level ANTH
BIOL 510 – Advances in Community Ecology	English	400-level ECOL
BIOL 594 – Advanced Evolutionary Ecology	English	400-level ECOL
GEOG 333 – Introduction to Programming for Spatial Sciences	English	200-level GEOG/COMP?

Total Otago credits gained:    54 points    72 points    108 points    \_\_\_\_\_

*Any comments about these papers?*

My plan went through so many iterations before I confirmed my four papers! I took two 500-level papers which cater to both undergraduate and graduate students. I found that although there were not too many assessments, my courses all required more reading and preparation than Otago papers.

The material covered in BIOL 510 was a lot more challenging than ecology papers I had done before! At McGill, it seems that ecology courses are more theory-heavy and classmates seemed to know more about classical ecology. Each week in BIOL 510, we had one content-heavy lecture and a

seminar where we had to present and discuss one of two assigned papers. These papers were very complex, and we had to write graded summaries every week.

BIOL 594 was a very unstructured class where we discussed a new book chapter every week. It was definitely a new style of learning for me, and I found many of the ideas very challenging to follow along with! 500-level papers were a lot of work, but I managed to achieve well in them.

GEOG 333 was a fantastic introduction to coding in Python and its geospatial modules – I highly recommend it. McGill seems to be great for geographic information I am glad I could experience it.

ANTH 202 was a large foundational anthropology class taken by the amazing Eduardo Kohn. His style was focused on discussions and engaging with interesting articles and films. He talked a lot about his own work in the Amazon and concluded the course by showing how culture and nature are continuous, while humans and other beings relate in complex ways. As an ecology student this was fascinating!

*How did the academic experience/ workload/ style of teaching differ from Otago?*

From my experience it was hard to know how much McGill differs from Otago! More time was required to prepare for each class – in particular, BIOL 510 required an understanding of multiple papers for each lesson. I thought that the academic environment at McGill seemed a little more intense than at Otago; people seemed to participate more in class and there was more of a ‘grind mentality’. I thought the Otago environment also seemed somehow friendlier and more supportive than that of McGill.

## Accommodation

*What accommodation did you stay in? What were the pros and cons of your accommodation?*

I found an apartment near Metro-Jean Talon which I shared with two Canadian graduate students. My roommates were wonderful – they connected me with new friends and helped me to get settled fast. I was very happy with my choice! My apartment was a 30-minute commute away from campus (most exchange students lived a lot closer), but I loved living there and couldn’t recommend the neighbourhood more. There were plenty of grocery stores nearby (including Marche Jean-Talon) as well as peaceful parks and major cycleways. Cycling around the city was a revelation for me – I loved it! I mainly used the bike-share service BIXI to get around, but also occasionally (and exclusively in December) took the metro. I signed a one-year lease from the beginning of August as I thought I might stay in Montreal for longer; instead, I left in December. I transferred my lease quite late and recommend getting this sorted in October or November, rather than in the last week!

Many of my friends lived in university residences and they seemed to have an amazing time there too. Residences seemed like a great way to meet other exchange students, and some felt like tight communities. However, residences were considerably more expensive than my accommodation (even by as much as \$400 CAD/month), while living with Canadians meant that I spent more time with locals and people outside of the university. I enjoyed the independence of an apartment but think I would have had a good experience in a residence too. I don’t think you can go wrong!

## Money matters

*Please detail your basic costs, e.g. accommodation, flights, visa, food, insurance*

I flew directly from New Zealand to Vancouver in mid-July; after a week in Vancouver and Victoria, I then flew to Montreal. All up, flights to Montreal were approximately \$1400 NZD. I recommend spending some time in BC which was stunning in summer (although I imagine the skiing in winter would be incredible). Exams at McGill finished just before Christmas; I then flew to London and am living in the UK for a bit. This flight was at a busy time, so it was horrendously expensive – also \$1400.

I travelled to Canada on an eTA, which cost only \$7 CAD. I also acquired an ESTA to the United States which was \$21 USD.

My rent was \$700 CAD/month which was pretty good in Montreal for a three-bed apartment. Power (hydro) and internet was under \$30 CAD every month. I would typically spend \$40-50 CAD on groceries each week. I also ate out more often than I would have back home but would be surprised if this exceeded \$20 CAD per week on average.

Because I lived further away from campus, I had a 30-minute commute either by bus or metro. I found that with the amount of exploring I wanted to do from July to September, it was most cost-effective to get both a BIXI membership (\$22 CAD per month, allowing you to have as many 45-min long journeys as you want) and a metro monthly pass (\$60 CAD with the student discount). In October and November, I was a lot less adventurous and could have dispensed with the metro pass (you can also buy individual trips!), while in December I ditched the BIXI membership as they took away most of the bikes – which was just as well as conditions looked treacherous!

I went with the StudentSafe Outbound insurance discounted at Otago, which was \$750 NZD all up. McGill's mandatory International Health Insurance was \$349 CAD.

*What means did you use to access your finances? What would you recommend? (Credit card, Cash passport, foreign bank account, etc.)*

I transferred money from my New Zealand bank account to Wise, which I converted to CAD when the exchange rate was good. I also opened a Canadian bank account with Bank of Montreal which seemed to make things easier. For the convenience of e-transfer (rent, reimbursements) I think it was worth it! There were no additional fees, and it was super easy to set up and close.

## Visas & Insurance

*Did you have to apply for a visa? What was the process?*

I applied for an eTA which cost only \$7 CAD and took less than 30 minutes to be approved online. It was really easy! The eTA didn't allow me to work but enabled me to reside in Canada for less than six months. I also applied for an ESTA to travel to the USA in the October reading break, which required a few more details (such as an address where I would stay) but was similarly straightforward. It helps to have your McGill enrolment letter with you at the border to avoid extra challenges.

*Did your host university have a mandatory insurance?*

McGill had mandatory International Health Insurance; this cost \$349 CAD for one semester.

## Extra-curricular/Social Activities

*What organised activities were available to students? What extra-curricular activities would you recommend to future exchange students?*

International Student Services at McGill ran a few events throughout the semester, most of which I sadly didn't take advantage of. However, I did go to an introductory international meet-and-greet which was a great way to meet some people! There was a massive WhatsApp exchange group chat that must have been 300-strong and was a fantastic way to meet others in the exchange community.

I joined the McGill climbing club which introduced me to bouldering. I also signed up with the classical music club (which was a good way to score cheap concert tickets) and took part in some of the Wine Society's events. I also joined McGill Outdoors Club meetings and hikes which were a great way to meet others and explore some amazing places around the city; I was too late to sign up for Frosh but would have done an outdoors programme. (From what I heard, most Frosh events were geared toward first years and not as fun for exchange students.) I also joined the McGill Birding club on a couple of occasions.

*What was the university/ city like?*

I LOVED Montreal and would really like to return one day! It has such a distinct feel to it with its bilingualism, diversity, and iconic triplex buildings, and I have never had such an amazing summer. There are so many cool cafes and places to eat, live music, festivals, and clubs, and it is close to other fantastic places in Canada and the States. I spent so much time exploring new neighbourhoods and streets. Montreal felt a little ephemeral with so many young people around, who tend to only stay for a few years, but it is also steeped in history and tradition. On the shores of the Saint-Laurent/Saint Lawrence River, Old Montreal feels like a much older European city (albeit very touristy), whereas the Plateau Mont-Royal/Mile End areas are trendier and feel a little more alternative. My favourite neighbourhood was my own (I'm biased) at the edge of Villeray, where there is a nice mix of families and younger professionals, all sorts of food destinations, and proximity to the metro and bike routes.

I lived in the Francophone side of the city (but found myself in a Latin American neighbourhood. I found it a little isolating with my poor French skills, but it was a fantastic way to push my language ability and confidence – and of course, most people spoke English too. Overall, I found people in Montreal to be super inclusive, friendly, and supportive of my French attempts.

McGill is great for so many reasons – it is in a convenient location, my lecturers were fantastic, and there is a range of extra-curriculars and interesting research happening there. However, I struggled to feel at home on campus – potentially there was a different academic culture, it is a more 'prestigious' and perhaps privileged university, and it felt less friendly than Otago (which is also probably because I know Otago a lot better!). Maybe I had just extended my undergraduate degree

to its natural limit and wasn't as wild about uni as a result! Or maybe there was too much to do) outside of that environment...

*Any recommendations for things to do, places to visit, places to eat etc.?*

Montreal turned me into a certified foodie! There are so many amazing places and culinary influences in the city and there were still so many I hadn't tried by the time I left. A Montreal bagel at either Saint-Viateur or Fairmount in the Mile End is essential. (I couldn't go past a fresh sesame bagel at St-Viateur while my roommate claimed that Fairmount had the best blueberry bagel.) Drogheria Fine next door to Fairmount also has \$5 gnocchi that you eat with chopsticks(!), and Kem Coba down the road has exceptional ice cream. Poutine originated in Quebec, and it seems that every place does one – my favourite was at Chez Claudette on Laurier, but I tried MANY. Perhaps the most well-known spot for poutine is La Banquise, which is a great place to revel in all sorts of unusual toppings.

Other highlights included La Ligne Rouge, a gyro restaurant close to my place; I also loved walking around Marche Jean-Talon and Atwater. Nouilles Zhonghua had fantastic noodles close to campus. I had a great French meal at the iconic L'Express on Saint-Denis. I had the greatest donut of my life at Bernie Beigne on Saint-Bernard, and the greatest pastry at Patisserie Kouign Amann on Mont-Royal. I lived on the edge of Little Italy and visited a few of the cafes and bakeries there (cannoli are so good!). I also had a few pizza slices from Pizza Bouquet on Beaubien. Le Depanneur café was a great music venue/café space, while 180g doubled as a record store and was a great space in which to discover groovy new tunes. Cafés Ferlucci and Vito were close to my place, and I also recommend a visit. Finally, Segal's Market was a chaotic but glorious place to grab discounted food where prices included tax.

I loved exploring all the different neighbourhoods of Montreal; it is such a fun and safe-feeling city to just wander around at leisure. Vieux-Montreal, the Plateau Mont-Royal, and Mile End should not be missed, as well as Marche Jean-Talon. I joined the Mount Royal Run Club to run up the forested hill in the middle of the city every Saturday morning. Mont Royal is an essential place to escape the city or catch the sunrise and unsurpassable views.

I enjoyed a lot of the clubs in the city and had a wonderful time at SAT, Unity, Datcha (which also has jazz nights) and Stereo. I recommend going to Picnik Electronik which is a cheap electronic music festival that runs from May to October every Sunday at Parc Jean-Drapeau. I also enjoyed catching free jam sessions every Wednesday at Turbo Haus and gigs at Quai des Brumes. There is also plenty of classical music in the city and there are heavily discounted tickets for students or Classical Music Club members – I got to a few symphony orchestra and baroque orchestra concerts.

I enjoyed visiting cathedrals (St Joseph's Oratory, Notre-Dame) and museums (Pointe-Calliere for archaeology and history of the city, Beaux-Arts for a fantastic collection of art), as well as public libraries for study (National Archives and Westmount were my favourites). Librarie Drawn and Quarterly is a wonderfully curated bookshop on Bernard in Mile End. My favourite vintage clothing stores were Eva B and D.

I would say a Habs ice hockey game is ESSENTIAL viewing despite its price – it is fast-paced and a lot of fun (especially if we win... which wasn't often this season). And I enjoyed many more concerts than I would have back home – I managed to catch Charli XCX/Troye Sivan, The National/The War on Drugs, Vampire Weekend, and KAYTRANADA live. It was great to have picnics in the park in summer while there seemed to be musicians on every street corner as well.

The Botanical Gardens are really good here too, even if they cost money to enter and are a little further out of the city centre. I was lucky to accompany a staff member on several surveys of rare plants around properties and reserves in Quebec which was a great way to learn the local flora and more French.

Montreal is very convenient to many other destinations in Canada, and I made good use of this! On the way there, I visited Vancouver and Victoria (I wish I had gone skiing in BC too...). Once I was based in Montreal, I went on a day trip to Ottawa, spent a weekend in Toronto, and travelled up to Quebec City before driving further to Parc-National des Grands-Jardins, which was stunning at the end of November. I went hiking at Mont-Tremblant a few times, as well as to Montagne Noire with the MOC (go in October for spectacular fall colours). Over the week-long reading break in October, I crossed the southern border to travel to Portland, Maine (Maine is STUNNING), Boston, and New York City which were all incredible. I would recommend travelling to the US when everything is so close.

*Any tips for future students?*

MustBus has cheap trips to all sorts of places (including many of the major cities, national parks, and quaint villages) which are fantastic to take advantage of, while Poparide is a great car-sharing app that I used a few times to travel to other Canadian cities. Sadly, I couldn't drive in Canada because of my restricted licence, but Enterprise also has good deals for McGill students. Also a must – get a Bixi membership! It was truly life changing.

Although it is easy to worry about how fast the time is going and to push yourself to do as much as possible, I would advise that it's important to give yourself time and space to adjust! Many of my favourite memories involved aimlessly exploring neighbourhoods and chilled times in the apartment. As long as you're doing some adventurous things as well, you will be sure to have a fantastic time!

Before going on exchange, I also took a semester off uni to gain additional work experience and save up. I am so glad I did this because it made the entire exchange more financially comfortable; it also gave me more space to plan and optimise my experience.

And of course, I recommend arriving earlier to experience the famous Montreal summer!

## Overall Experience

*Please write one paragraph (or more) about your exchange experience. Please include some photos!*

It's what most people seem to say – but please, go on exchange if you are considering it! I felt I learned so much about the world and my study area, while it was amazing for personal growth. I met so many people from around the world, had all sorts of different experiences I wouldn't have had before, and fell in love with Montreal and its surroundings. Montreal is a fantastic city and I'm glad I chose to study there – it had the perfect blend of familiarity and friendliness, but also many factors make it strange and exciting. On reflection, my favourite moments occurred outside of the confines of university; I would recommend exploring the wider city and all it has to offer. And of course it was a great chance to improve my French! There were challenging moments and homesickness for sure, but it's all part of the experience...



Gault Nature Reserve at Mont Saint-Hilaire, not too far from Montreal



Cycling through Parc Jarry



Day trip to see the Ottawa spider



Summit of Mont-Tremblant



One of many picnics at Parc Jeanne-Mance



A stunning day on McGill campus



Pre-Sweat tour



Among the orchids at the Jardin Botanique de Montreal



MOC trip to Montagne Noire



NEW YORK NEW YORK



Mont-Royal views



Niagara Falls!



Old Montreal



Parc National des Grands-Jardins



First heavy snow in December from my apartment!



Nothing like fresh St-Viateur bagels on a chilly December day (or a sunny August one)