

Go Global: 42 days in Victoria, British Columbia

During the last summer semester break, I joined the Cultural and Language Immersion Scheme Program organized by the College of Business, City University of Hong Kong. The College of Business offers its students different summer programs, ranging from study tours to service trips. I joined one of the study tours in which we had to attend a 100-hour English course at the University of Victoria in Canada. The one-month course also included two workshops or voluntary sessions each week. For students from City University of Hong Kong, we had no choice but to do the voluntary work in different organizations, including Upland Park, Haliburton Farm and Women in Need.

Victoria is located on Vancouver Island, a region in British Columbia. There are only a few universities in Victoria, and the most famous are the University of Victoria and Royal Road University. The University of Victoria values not only the high quality of its undergraduate degree programs, but also the quality of its advanced language courses. It has put a lot of resources and effort into language education; for instance, many graduates have been hired as cultural assistants, and the English Learning Center has been renovated to provide a better learning environment for students. For these reasons, I applied to the University of Victoria as my first preference in the summer program.

As I mentioned, we needed to attend 100 hours of English lessons and two voluntary work sessions per week. We basically had class every Monday to Friday from 8:30 am to 12:30 pm, and then we had voluntary work on Tuesday and Wednesday from 2:15 to 4:00 pm. During the English lesson, we learned advanced grammar such as past participles, relative clauses and conditional sentences. The style of education was different from that in HK. Teachers in Victoria valued the practice of knowledge, whereas teachers in HK valued the understanding of knowledge. In Victoria, teachers asked us to do different activities to practice what we had learnt in class, and we had discussions on certain topics almost every day. Being in the same group as people from different countries was super fun because we were trying to improve our English through discussion while at the same time learning, appreciating and understanding the other students' cultures. Sometimes, though, it was hard to express our own opinions in English rather than in our native language.

For the voluntary work, I contributed my hard work to Haliburton Farm, a non-profit organization promoting organic farming. There were eight sessions of voluntary work included in our program, and I helped with sheet mulching, blackberry picking, square foot gardening and potato planting during my time there. Working on a farm has always been one of the items on my bucket list because we seldom have opportunities to work in a farm in HK, where there is not enough land for farm development and the existing farms seldom recruit volunteers to help in farming. Farms in HK usually recruit volunteers to attend programs related to biodiversity or organic food processing procedures instead of really working on a farm like a farmer. Elmarie (the person in charge of Haliburton Farm) taught us many new facts about organic farming, such as things related to soil and water, and most importantly she provided many chances for us to have hands-on experience with planting, sheet mulching, removing weeds and everything else she taught us. Therefore, I really enjoyed my time at Haliburton Farm, although working under the bright sun was really tough.

Apart from the required English lessons and voluntary work, my friends and I joined the Vancouver tour held by the University of Victoria. The trip lasted three days and two nights, and the cultural assistants from the University of Victoria took us downtown and to the Vancouver Aquarium. They also introduced some good places and restaurants for us to visit. During the trip, there was one free day, and we went shopping at CF Pacific Mall, McArthur Glen Designer Outlet and MetroTown Mall. They were really great, although we all spent a lot of money there!

I experienced many memorable moments during the CALIS program, meeting new friends, working on a farm, learning in a completely different mode and situation and using zip lines, which I never thought I could do. It is hard to pick only a few memories to share. The most memorable moment was the farewell lunch at the end of the course offered by the University of Victoria. On that day, we all dressed in semi-formal outfits, the girls did their make-up and the boys wore their ties—everyone was very pretty. That day was meaningful because it represented the completion of our course and it was time to say goodbye to our fellow international classmates, who were going back to their home countries a few days later. Students from City University stayed in Victoria one week longer to participate in business workshops. It was a very memorable day because it was really touching to say goodbye after we had experienced so much together—we met and had lessons every day, we laughed together, we did everything together. The English Learning Center became so silent after the course ended, as the other international students had gone and no one was going to class anymore, which made it feel unreal.



This is the photo taken at the farewell lunch with some of my beloved classmates and my two teachers.

Other valuable memories are also related to the international students I met at the University of Victoria. On the third day after we had arrived in Victoria, we met some Mexicans during the class. They were really friendly and were willing and happy to teach us simple Spanish. Of course, we taught them Cantonese and Chinese in return. Meeting new friends from different countries is definitely the best way to understand other cultures, although it is hard for foreigners to learn Cantonese, and it is the same for us to learn Spanish. By understanding and accepting new cultures, I realized that the world is larger than I had imagined. We often send each other messages even though values we are now back in our own countries. Meeting them was the best and most memorable moment in Victoria because they brought us joy and happiness; they widened my horizons by giving their opinions from a Mexican perspective, and let me understand that friendship can be built based on love and the heart. It doesn't matter where you come from or which language you speak.



This photo was taken on top of Mt. Tomie on the first day we met our Mexican friends, soon after we arrived in Victoria.

The times I spent with friends from my university, with all of us speaking the same language, also provided me with unforgettable memories. Going to places you have never been to and where people speak a completely different language is hard to adapt to within a short period. With my local friends, I knew I could rely on them and talk to them whenever I faced any difficulty or problem. They were my shelter, my support and my angels. They really helped me so much, both in adapting to the new lifestyle and in completing the academic work. Therefore, I was really grateful to have them in my life in Victoria. Without them, I would have been just a nerd repeating the daily routine every day—eat, sleep and work at my computer. They were definitely my most treasured group of people in Victoria because they brought me so much fun and happiness every day and night. I hope our friendship will last even when we go back to our hometowns.



This photo was taken at the yard in front of Hatley Castle, the third week after we met.

Although my most memorable memories are all about the people around me, I would not have met so many people if I had not gone to Victoria. Victoria is a small place, yet the lifestyle is more relaxing than HK. The culture and people caught my attention. In Victoria, people used to shout out “thank you” to the bus driver when they got off the bus—no matter whether they got off at the front door or the back door. Although it is just a small action, it fully represents how polite Victorians are. I went to Vancouver, Whistler and Seattle during the program and I observed that, like in Hong Kong, people seldom said thank you when they got off the bus. I think this kind of action should be introduced in Hong Kong; today’s teenagers take everything for granted, and some of them think bus drivers should drive them to stations because they are paid to do so. This is actually very rude to all bus drivers. Saying thank you not only brightens the driver’s day, but also emphasizes the civility and etiquette of a society. This is my greatest insight into the culture and people of Victoria.

I learned to appreciate Victorian culture and communicate with people of different ages and different backgrounds, and this outreach activity equipped me with knowledge about Canadian business and economics. During the last week of the program, we had to attend some business workshops offered by the University of Victoria, and Professor John discussed the past and current Canadian business situation with us. Other than in-class discussion, Professor John asked us to do a PechaKucha-style presentation, introducing a Canada-based company. My partner and I presented Shoppers Drugs Mart to the class, and we got a better understanding of what this company was trying to do to maintain its place in the market. By reading the company’s financial statements, we also found that it paid several kinds of taxes to support the country’s finances. Therefore, the CALIS program actually taught me the skill of analyzing a company’s marketing strategies and financial situation, the historic economic situation in Canada and how to improve a country’s economics.

I found out, as the saying goes, that “meeting people is sometimes better than learning new things!” We met so many people through the program—Mexicans, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Canadians, Panamanians, etc.—and built great relationships although we only met for a month. I say this because I visited South Korea right after this program ended and GaHyun, one of my Korean friends that I met in Canada, showed me around Seoul. I would never have thought that this friendship would last after the program ended! Learning about different Western and Asian cultures from my friends is not the only benefit I gained—the long-lasting friendships count too! I enjoy meeting new people around the world, and the CALIS program gave me such a great opportunity to do so. I am so glad I joined this program.

The experiences I gained from the program and the 42 days I spent in Victoria were unbelievably great and unforgettable. Thank you, College of Business, for giving me the chance. Go global, go humble. ☺