

# CROSSING CONTINENTS:

*FROM A DUCK POND  
TO A CONCRETE JUNGLE*

BY ASAL MIRKHANI  
2023



# WELCOME

My name is Asal Mirkhani, and I am a final-year student, graduating in January 2024 with my Top-Up in Communication Design & Media at KEA.

I have had the privilege of going abroad during my studies. From January to May 2023, I studied for a semester in Toronto, Canada. In this report I will go through the experiences and what I have learned during a semester abroad — academically, culturally, and personally.

Hopefully, I will help and inspire other KEA students who share the same interest in studying abroad to take the leap, and maybe learn what to do and not to do based on my experiences.

Throughout this report, you will be seeing a good handful of pictures, not all of them necessarily put in chronological order.

***Enjoy!***



# CHOOSING MY DESTINATION

I have always looked up to people who have lived abroad; it takes nerve and courage to leave the familiar behind and move into the unknown; it represents a high level of ambition and confidence, which I personally gravitate towards. Studying abroad has therefore gradually become a big dream of mine.

I am particularly intrigued by the international connection and network you get from studying abroad. Each time I've traveled, I've been humbled by learning about other cultures - and eventually concluding that the differences between us across borders aren't that big after all. I love the connection I get with people that I meet along the way and stay connected with when I return home. **It keeps life interesting.**

I have never been to North America and the thought of it being on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean - so far away from home - where cityscapes, cultures, and classrooms are dramatically different from what you have always known, excites me a lot.

Initially, I was juggling with the idea of either going to Los Angeles, New York, or Toronto. New York got crossed off the list quickly due to the specific program that I study. After adding 2 separate universities in Los Angeles as my first and second priority and one in Toronto as my third, I wasn't all too sure about the decision to go to L.A.

My greatest concern was naturally the lack of gun control and the thought of going to a place where I might have to worry about being a victim of gun violence wasn't particularly appealing. *Okay, Toronto it is.* Canada also seemed like the tamed and controlled big sister to the US so I definitely became more excited about going to Toronto.

My first priority was initially Centennial College, and I ended up changing that to Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU). Although Centennial offered courses that aligned perfectly with what I wanted to study, something didn't feel right. I couldn't really put a finger on it, but I was just drawn to TMU.

***Okay, TMU it is.***

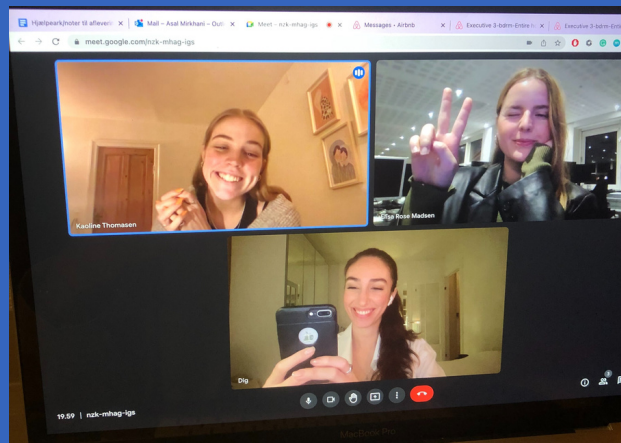


# THE MONTHS LEADING TO TAKE-OFF

The application process was probably my **biggest source of pre-exchange stress**. I had this notion that going on exchange would require a significant amount of work and be overwhelming. And it was, haha. My coordinator at KEA reassured me that there was nothing to worry about. I also had to remind myself that *'if everyone else can do it, then I should be able to do it as well.'* While it's certainly manageable, it does require effort.

***Ask for help when needed; there is all the help you can get.***

Fortunately, KEA has a well-structured approach to all matters related to the application, and all one needs to do is fill in the necessary information. While completing the paperwork, TMU organized three virtual meetings for all the exchange students before our departure. These meetings covered introductions to the coordinators, practical information about TMU and securing accommodations, and finally, getting to know the other students. After speaking with students from different countries, it became clear that KEA had provided me with a lot of support and guidance throughout the application process.



GROUP PIC TAKEN AFTER A MEETING WITH A HOST

The months leading up to our departure were spent looking for flight tickets, sorting out accommodation, completing paperwork, obtaining the ETA document, and applying for scholarships. The more you stay ahead of these things, the bigger headache you save yourself. Flight tickets around the new year are usually very expensive, so if possible, try to book your tickets as soon as possible. The same goes for applying for scholarships as the funds are very strict with deadlines.

As there might be a lot you need to take care of before departing, there is nothing to worry about. **Make sure to allocate time to do the things mentioned, and you'll be all set.**



6 | MONTHS PRIOR TO TAKE-OFF

# HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION

## *JESUS TAKE THE WHEEL*

Securing accommodation turned out to be a whole journey. TMU, unfortunately, does not provide on-campus housing, which meant that finding a place to stay was our own responsibility. TMU did, however, give us contact information for sublets from students connected to TMU. Unfortunately, after reaching out to everyone on the list, it seemed like a dead end.

Luckily, our coordinator from KEA provided us with contact information for all KEA students who were going abroad to the same destinations. This is how I connected with two other KEA students, Elisa, and Karoline. None of us knew each other, but we had all been accepted at different universities in Toronto. At the time, none of us had a place to live, so we figured that our chances would be better if we applied for accommodation together—and it worked!

## ***Staying proactive is key.***

Looking for a place to stay, regardless of whether it is long or short-term, in or outside of Denmark, I always make sure to seek out different sources at the same time to increase my chances of finding something in time. I asked my network for help and sought out relevant forums and groups on Facebook that are meant for housing in Canada. Spreading your eggs in different baskets gives you the opportunity to be selective instead of having to bid on the first offer. If interested, you can look up “Toronto Home Zone,” “Toronto Rental Home,” and “Toronto Homes” on Facebook. Most of the time, PMs end up in the spam filter, so if you reach out to anyone regarding accommodation on Facebook by sending them a private message, make sure to comment on their post that you’ve reached out to them.

We put in great effort and time to looking for a place on Airbnb and ended up finding a lovely house in a family-friendly area approximately a 30–40-minute commute from TMU. The house had three stories, three nearly identical bedrooms, a spacious kitchen, a cozy living room, and a lounge downstairs where we would unwind with movie nights and occasional hangovers. Our Airbnb hosts, Sean and Lisa made us feel safe and welcomed from day one. They were incredibly kind and quickly felt like an extended family.

Prior to renting the Airbnb, we had a series of video calls with them, which helped establish trust on both sides. This gut feeling of trust was invaluable.





# TRUST. YOUR. GUT.

Looking for accommodation in a foreign country can be tricky, and it is crucial to trust your instincts. Before finalizing the deal with Sean, we had been in touch with several other Airbnb hosts. However, one host, despite our 3-4 video calls, left us feeling uneasy as they kept changing the details about the lease of her apartment. We all had a nagging feeling of *"it is too good to be true"* and *"I don't know about this."* Trusting our gut paid off, as we continued our dialogue with Sean, who proved to be a reliable and trustworthy host.

Another good thing to keep as high-value criteria when scouting for a place to live on Airbnb is to look for hosts with good ratings (stars) and positive statements from former tenants. That increases the credibility of the host. This experience taught us the importance of staying proactive and listening to our instincts when searching for accommodation. It is easy to be drawn in by what seems like a fantastic deal, but as we discovered, **it's crucial to prioritize safety and trust when dealing with hosts in an unfamiliar country.** With most things, but especially looking for accommodation, all I can say is trust your gut. Oh, and did I mention that you need to trust your gut? Great.

***Put safety and trust above all.***



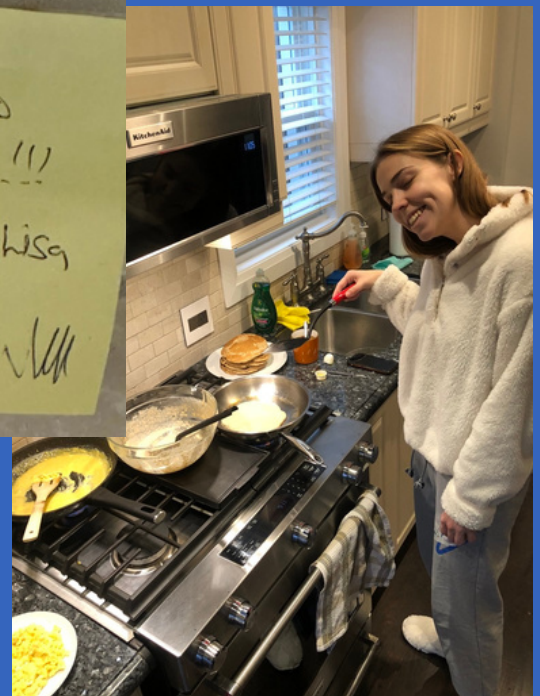
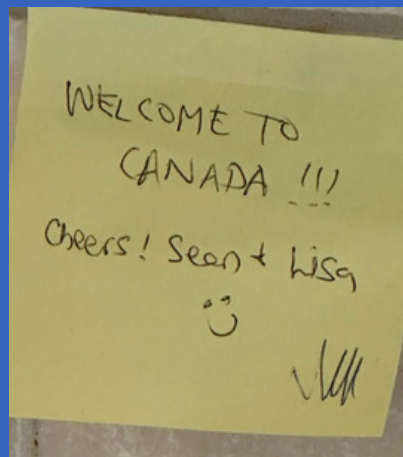
# TAKE-OFF

Elisa had already purchased her flight ticket to Toronto so Karoline and I opted to fly together. Our travel included a layover at Heathrow Airport in London, one of the world's largest and busiest airports. I'm so glad that Karoline and I decided to fly together as it made navigating travel details, gates, and changes much smoother. Moreover, the companionship made me feel more at ease than if I went by myself. The entire trip, from point A to B, probably took more than 12 hours due to an 8-hour flight from London to Toronto and a 4-hour layover in London. Luckily there were no significant changes or delays to our flights and we met up with Elisa at Pearson Airport as planned.



*PIC TAKEN AT HEATHROW AIRPORT AFTER ORDERING DINNER*

Upon arriving at our house in Toronto, Sean and Lisa had left a welcome note on the kitchen counter. To top it off, they also provided us with breakfast essentials such as pancake mix, oat milk, maple syrup, orange juice, and eggs for the morning after. Super sweet!

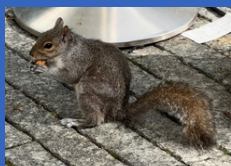
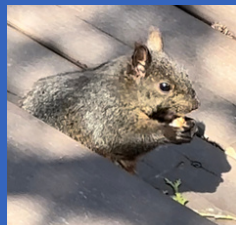
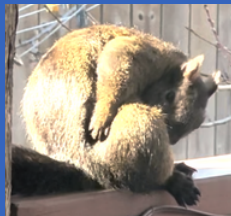


DISTANCE TO DESTINATION: 53 KM

WHERE WE FLY ✈️

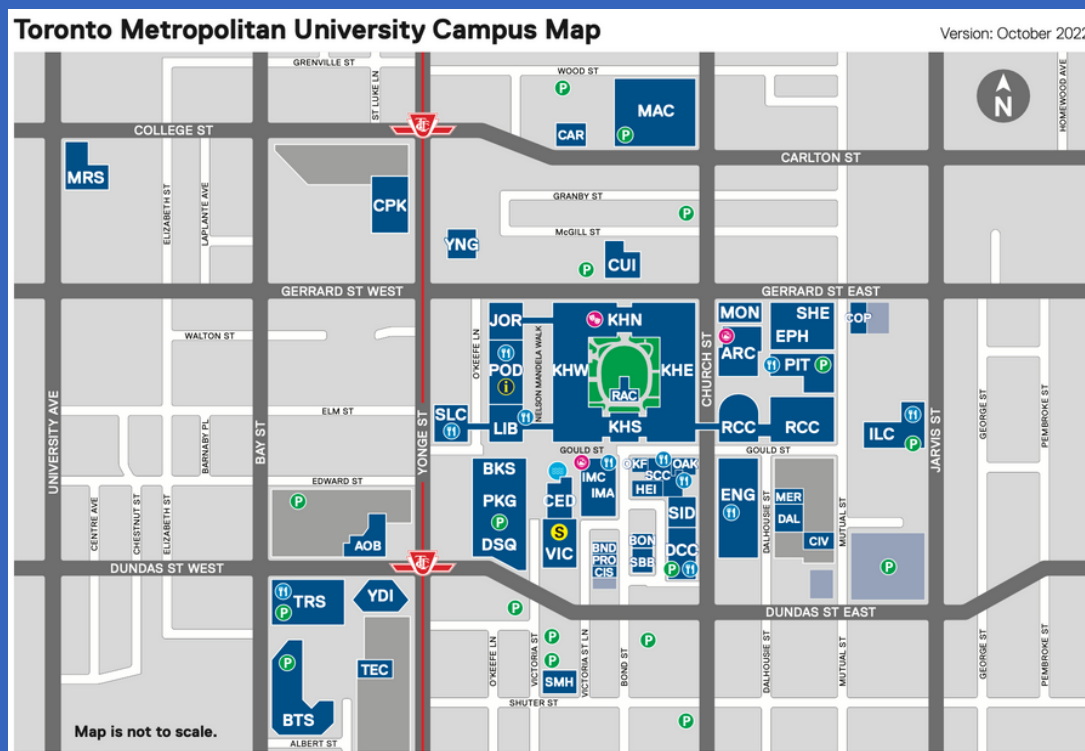


12 | TAKE-OFF  
PIC FROM THE FLIGHT ON OUR  
WAY TO TORONTO



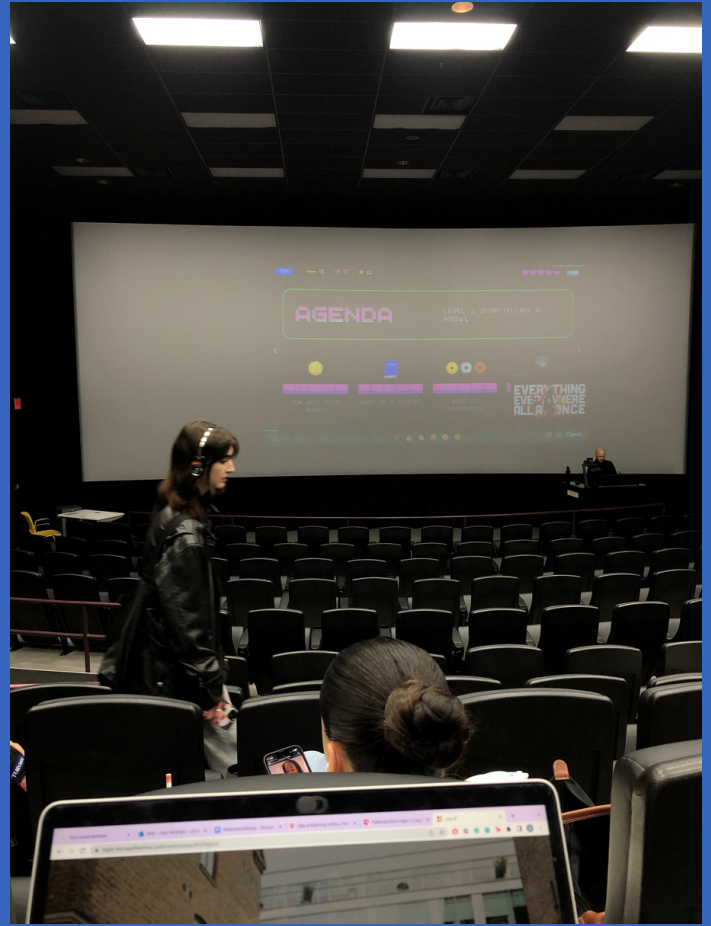
# MY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Attending classes at TMU was quite different from the lecture experience at KEA. TMU's various departments were spread across downtown Toronto, often requiring a 15-minute walk between different buildings for classes. One class even took place in a cinema due to TMU's location. To provide some perspective, attending different classes at TMU felt comparable to navigating classes across three of KEA's faculties in Copenhagen, which includes the main campus at Guldbergsgade, Lygten, and Prinsesse Charlotte's Gade. This meant having to walk approximately 20 minutes through Nørrebro to move from one classroom to another.



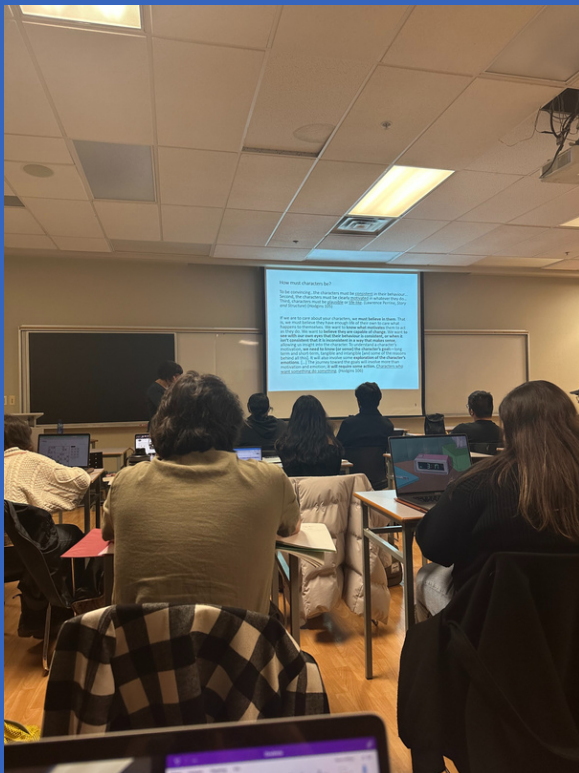
My personal experience during the first month was quite hectic, as I initially had four courses (along with tutorials) crammed into just two weekdays. This meant I had a single class on Wednesdays and a marathon of four classes every Thursday, stretching from 8:00 AM to 9:30 PM (help). Fortunately, the coordinators at TMU were supportive and accommodating, responding to email requests even during late evenings way beyond Danish working hours. They helped change some courses and rearrange my schedule so that my four courses were spread from Wednesday to Friday, which made my learning experience much more manageable.

# FIRST DAY: INTRODUCTION WITH TMU



CLASS IN A CINEMA

# INSIDE ANOTHER CLASSROOM



Wednesday 1 Feb	Thursday 2 Feb	Friday 3 Feb
		CMN 200 - 011 Laboratory 08:00 - 11:00 Victoria Building 210
ENG 505 - 041 Lecture 11:00 - 12:00 Sally Horsfall Eaton Centre 560		
CRI 400 - 122 Tutorial 14:00 - 15:00 Kerr Hall East 321B	CMN 314 - 021 Laboratory 12:00 - 15:00 Kerr Hall East 323A	ENG 505 - 041 Lecture 14:00 - 16:00 Sally Horsfall Eaton Centre 662
	CRI 400 - 121 Lecture 15:00 - 18:00 Ted Rogers School of Mgmt 2166	

NEW SCHEDULE

# MY COURSES

## **Creative Writing**

This course combines theory, analysis, and practical writing exercises to explore various genres and styles. Emphasizing the importance of extensive reading and engagement with diverse authors, students delve into the social and personal aspects of creative writing. Through lectures, discussions, group work, and peer editing, this course sharpens skills in effective writing, editing, and constructive critique.

## **Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries**

Focusing on entrepreneurship in a global context, this course delves into the theories and principles of entrepreneurship in creative fields. It examines the characteristics of individuals and companies, spanning cultural and commercial creative industries. Students explore diverse business models and gain insights into building sustainable enterprises. Additionally, the course focuses on teaching essential skills for planning, launching, and managing small creative businesses.

## **Professional Presentations**

This course centers on persuasive and engaging presentations. The course teaches the fundamentals of effective communication, with a focus on TED Talk-style delivery. The course involves frequent presentations, and various presentation techniques, storytelling, body language, structure, visual aids, and more are part of the contents.

## **The Craft of Professional Writing**

This course delves into professional writing in diverse organizational and creative contexts. It covers the planning, creation, and revision of communication texts for different purposes and audiences. Topics include various professional text genres, audience analysis, message selection, and collaborative writing. The course also teaches creative and conceptual tools for developing strategic approaches to professional writing, making it an ideal choice for those interested in copywriting and advanced writing skills.





# MY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE (2.0)

Academically, I found that the level at TMU was lower than my expectations. Much of the content covered at TMU was already familiar to me from my high school years in Denmark. While I initially didn't learn much academically, I did my best to remain open and curious about the ways I could grow during my time at TMU as much as possible.

In my pursuit of developing my written communication and storytelling skills during my Top-Up program, the course Creative Writing seemed to be a great fit. The course combined theory, reading, and analysis of various forms of literature with practical writing exercises. We had the opportunity to write our own stories, poems, and creative work. In my experience, this approach encouraged an intuitive process and was an exciting way to explore one's own voice and nurture personal creativity, rather than only reading about and analyzing others'.

However, I found the teaching format to be very passive and stagnant with each class following a similar pattern; reading homework, lectures, and exercises, with a significant emphasis on individual work, accounting for approximately 98% of the course. On top of that, being in an environment in which every student sat at their own desk in a dark classroom where the constant noise of a malfunctioning vent overshadowed the teacher's (already quite monotone and low) voice did not exactly create an engaging atmosphere for an interesting class.

In summary, my experience with the four courses at TMU was quite mixed, and the quality varied significantly from one course to another. The teaching approach seemed to depend on the specific course, with each instructor setting their own agenda. In the courses Creative Writing and The Craft of Professional Writing, the instruction primarily followed a static format, where the instructor delivered lectures, and individual practical assignments were infrequent. On the other hand, the instruction in Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries and Professional Presentations was more dynamic, involving a combination of lectures and group work - which I personally prefer as I learn a lot more by sharing ideas with other people.



# MAKING FRIENDS HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER

Our first day at TMU was purely an introduction to the school. Most of us had anticipated more engaging activities for all of us to get to know each other. The introduction arranged by TMU didn't consist of any social activity. It's worth noting that TMU did organize social events every week, with daily email updates about upcoming opportunities for students to connect and socialize. On our first day, everyone quickly created and added each other to a WhatsApp group in which people initiated social gatherings, dates, and more. A group of us decided to meet up at Imperial Bar later that day.



In general, I found it so much more easy to connect and make friends while being abroad. You might recognize this from traveling and staying at hostels for instance; when you travel and meet other people, they are just more open and curious. People easily engage in small talking and you always feel welcome. When it comes to social life at TMU, all exchange students eventually found their group of people shortly after school started. My group consisted of some Danes, Dutch, and Scottish people. We were a group of around 10-12 that would spend the most time together: going to bars, studying together, and visiting places like Niagara Falls, New York, and local areas of Toronto.





# ANOTHER LEVEL OF KINDNESS

The day after the girls and I landed in Toronto, we went downtown to get a first impression of the city. We went to a store, Aritzia, and we were greeted by the sweetest sales assistant. We ended up talking with her for 15 minutes or so, as she was showing great interest and excitement on our behalf as we'd just arrived in Toronto. I am also reminded of my first day at TMU when I struggled to find the right building where the introduction was arranged. I asked a guy for guidance, and without hesitation, he walked me all the way to the right building, about a 10-minute walk. Trusting my gut, I had nothing to worry about as he seemed very genuine. In the span of 10 minutes, we basically shared our life stories.

As mentioned, our Airbnb hosts were incredibly warm and accommodating right from the start. Despite living three hours away up north, Sean and his wife made sure we felt at home. Fortunately, Sean's mother, Diana, lived just two blocks away, and his grandmother was next door. One time our washing machine stopped working and Diana came to our rescue. She not only drove us and our 40+ kg of drenched clothes but also provided us with a jar of coins for the laundromat.

Throughout our exchange, Diana checked up on us on multiple occasions, making sure that we were happy, and things were going smoothly in the house.



These are just a few examples of how the people I encountered in Toronto exhibited their kindness and hospitality. People in Toronto are so kind and open, and eager to help you out whenever. **It truly made a big impression on me and made my exchange experience even more memorable.**





# DATING

The dating scene in Toronto differs significantly from what I am used to in Denmark. Back home, I often find men to be somewhat reserved and implicit, not openly displaying their interest, only for me to discover later that they were indeed interested. Very confusing. In Toronto, my experience has been quite the opposite. People tend to be more outgoing and show their interest right from the beginning. Men in Toronto do not hesitate to initiate conversation and are more direct in expressing whether they find you attractive or not, which ultimately makes it easier to navigate. People just seemed more confident.

It is funny looking back to the Intro night at KEA just about a month before departing. Two coordinators and a couple of former exchange students invited all outgoing exchange students for an informative meeting about do's & don't's and whatnot to keep in mind during an exchange. Halfway through the meeting, I fondly remember my coordinator, Hanne Vang, talking about why studying abroad is great. She mentioned something along the lines of *"some even meet their spouse while taking a semester abroad"*. Given a (let's call it) **questionable** year of dating in my personal life prior to that, my initial thought was *"I wish, lol"*. Who would have thought that on my very first day at TMU, I met a very handsome, Dutch guy among the other 70 exchange students coming from all over the world. Two days later we went on our first date. About a month later he asked me to be his girlfriend.



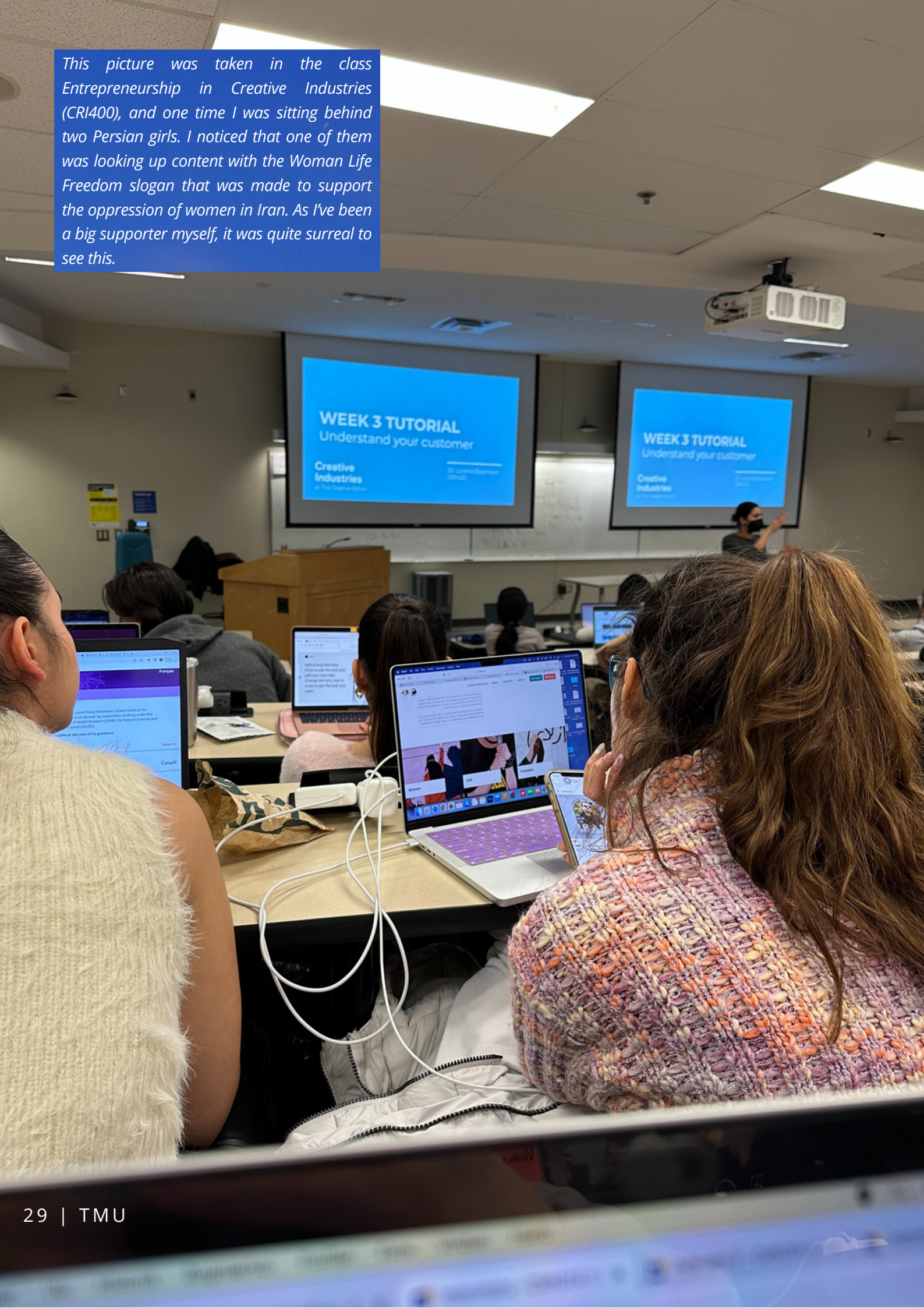
# FELT LIKE HOME

As a Persian, I have light, olive skin combined with strong features and dark hair. I stand out in Denmark, and despite being born and raised here, I have **always** felt different from my peers. Living in Toronto, I was suddenly part of such a multi-cultured and diverse society, which felt like a fresh breath of air. Everywhere, I would see people with backgrounds of Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Black, Middle Eastern, Portuguese, Caribbean, and Korean, to name just a few.



Unlike in Denmark, there is a big Iranian community in Toronto, and being Persian myself, it was both odd and exciting to walk past people on the streets and recognize the Persian language being spoken in the background. It felt like being home. Besides this, about everywhere I'd go I would see billboards with ads portraying people of color. I have never felt this insignificant yet so included in a society. I can best describe living in Toronto as feeling like an ant in a huge colony. If you want to start a new life, I can recommend going to Toronto.

*This picture was taken in the class Entrepreneurship in Creative Industries (CRI400), and one time I was sitting behind two Persian girls. I noticed that one of them was looking up content with the Woman Life Freedom slogan that was made to support the oppression of women in Iran. As I've been a big supporter myself, it was quite surreal to see this.*



# NO ONE GIVES A SH\*T ABOUT YOU

Excuse the clickbait-y title - but it is true. Something I often think back on is whenever I went to the gym, I would frequently see people record themselves. Living in Denmark, we generally don't bother doing something abnormal to attract attention, but recording your gym session was refreshingly common in Toronto. While seeing other people filming themselves might appear ordinary, I believe it carries a deeper message regarding the culture in North America. In Denmark, the weight of societal judgment often feels suffocating, as we're way too concerned about what others think I have never seen anyone film themselves in a gym in Denmark. Seeing people in Toronto carefully balancing their phones on the ground against the base of a machine to record their session spoke volumes about their carefree attitude, in my opinion.





# CULTURE DIFFERENCES – TO TIP OR NOT TO TIP?

In Canada, tipping is a common practice and an important part of the service industry. Tips are typically given to restaurant servers, bartenders, taxi drivers, and other service workers. The standard tip in Toronto and most of Canada is around 15-20% of the total bill before taxes. It's customary to leave a higher tip for exceptional service and slightly lower for average service. Many restaurants and bars will add an automatic gratuity to larger groups. While tipping is customary, it's not mandatory. You can adjust the tip based on your experience. Having a decade of experience in retail and customer service, I found that exceptional customer service experiences in Toronto were relatively rare in my opinion, which made tipping less intuitive for me at first. Also, the principle of tipping before even tasting your cup of coffee seemed like a weird concept to me. However, over time and towards the end of my exchange program, I began to feel compelled to tip more regularly. This became my gradual adjustment to this cultural difference.

A standout experience that demonstrates the nuances of the tipping culture occurred at the CN Tower. My boyfriend and I went for a romantic dinner at the CN Tower's restaurant, sitting 300 meters above the ground with a 360-degree view of the city. We ordered a 3-course meal, and I was paying the bill for both of us that evening.

The service we received was *meh*, considering the price tag of about \$260. While the staff did their job of serving, our designated waiter seemed to have a quite blunt attitude with us the entire evening. Unlike in Europe, where we like to take our time dining and enjoying a meal, we had the experience of a “get in, get out” type of evening. When we got the bill, I chose not to leave a tip. The waiter made sure to inform the entire staff, resulting in us leaving while getting death stares from everyone working that night.

***Okay, lesson learned.***

However, it *is* beneficial to tip, especially if you're a regular at a certain spot. Café 808 ended up being one of my favorite places to go for the daily cup of coffee and a study session. I discovered Café 808 with Karoline as it is located very close to TMU. It became a spot for the group to spend many study dates there. Over time, the staff grew familiar with us, greeting us by name, engaging in friendly conversations, and occasionally offering us food and cakes on the house. I didn't tip every time I purchased something there, but in hindsight, I wish I had. My mindset was somewhat inflexible and rooted in the standards from back home. I wish I had been more open and adaptable to tipping, which is a significant part of Toronto's culture. Ultimately, it is not about tipping but about being a guest in someone else's home.

**Remember to tip, even just a small portion.**





# MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

You might have heard about everything being very expensive in Toronto. My toxic trait was me thinking that nothing could top living in Copenhagen. Girlie was wrong. Everything here comes with a higher price tag than what we're accustomed to in Denmark. Moreover, tax is added at the cash register, further making things seem way overpriced.

Our day-to-day expenses were primarily groceries and public transportation (which we got a student discount on, luckily). Besides that, tipping is always something you must consider, whether it be ordering food, going somewhere with an Uber, paying for a coffee, etc. Everything is just more expensive than what I am used to back home in Copenhagen, especially food.

I received both SU and Erasmus during my exchange. I received a portion of Erasmus at the beginning of the exchange and not regularly throughout the exchange in comparison to other exchange students (this highly depends on your destination for exchange, whether it is inside or outside of Europe). I applied for 10-12 grants and received 4 in total, which helped finance my expenses while being abroad. Besides that, I also spent some money from my own savings account.

To you who might be holding back from seeking exchange opportunities because you're afraid it's going to cost you a lot of money, I just want to remind you that,

***Money comes and goes, experiences do not.***



# SAFETY

There is a high rate of homeless people and drug addicts in Toronto, and it is a part of the everyday encounter at the metro stations or just in the city center in general. As a female, you feel very vulnerable and exposed, and I became much more aware of my surroundings compared to living in Denmark. Whenever I'd encounter a person who would be acting odd/hysterical, I'd move close to a crowd or a person I'd feel safe with.

Homeless people and drug addicts were often present at the busier metro stations, such as Bloor-Yonge St. Whenever I would be at a metro station, I made it a habit to wear my AirPods (never soundproof headphones) and kept my music at a low volume so I would still be able to **hear my surroundings.**

Also, being accompanied by my boyfriend often, going from A to B most definitely helped me feel protected and at ease.



As an extroverted introvert, I love going for walks to ease my mind and recharge my energy while listening to a podcast after a long day. I would do that as late as 11 p.m. in Copenhagen. Upon dusk, the streets in East York would look like a ghost town, and being the only person walking in the streets, of course, I felt unsafe and on edge. After a short while of living in Toronto, I would go for walks on a rare occasion, and otherwise go with Elisa and Karoline to buy groceries or walk to the nearest drugstore.



**B L O O R** - YONGE

# THIS IS IT

I hope you've enjoyed going through the report, gaining some insights into how my semester went down in Toronto, and hopefully, I've helped you gain some clarity on what you'd like for yourself going abroad. I'm wishing you the best of luck!

*Cheers!*



