Personal information

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You hear countless times about people going abroad and having the time of their life, and when you get there you wonder if your experience will ever live up to the hype. I certainly wondered that upon arriving in Copenhagen, but in just a few short weeks I realized it would. I experienced new cultures, traveled a majority of Europe, and made lifelong friends from around the world, all while having to fend for myself in a strange and foreign country. Living abroad is a necessary endeavor in my opinion, and what better time is there to do it than during college?

Practical information

Get the visa paper work in as soon as possible. From my experience, the visa was completed sooner than expected, but that may not always be the case. I also called once or twice to check on its status, and it was only after one of my calls explaining that I was traveling to Canada and needed my passport back that they informed me that it was already completed and would be sent back right away.

Registering in Denmark is pretty easy. Upon arriving in Copenhagen, I travelled to the local immigration office which is located right downtown, and I was registered with a CPR number and medical insurance within an hour.

Packing

Bring spring/summer clothes. Since I first arrived in Copenhagen in the winter, a majority of my suitcase was devoted to winter clothes. Once spring arrived, though, I was not very prepared for the warmer weather. However, this problem could have been avoided if my parents came out to visit me and brought spring clothes with them; of course they said they would, but it never happened.

Bring a bike lock. If you are living in Copenhagen, you will definitely have a bike at some point or another. If you have a bike lock from home and it won’t add much weight to your bag, you might as well bring it.

Getting information/resources

About KU: The University of Copenhagen’s website
Social events: Facebook groups and events; Posters and flyers in the student center on campus; and Emails from student groups
Movies/shows/concerts: Facebook and Word of mouth
Maps/tourist information: Maps could be found anywhere. Everyone in the city is extremely nice and helpful, just stop in a store or at the metro and ask for directions (they should speak English).

Arrival and support by the international office at KU

I was greeted at the airport by a student mentor, who was very friendly and helpful. She helped to get me situated in a hostel before I could move into my dorm, and eventually helped me move into my dorm, as well. Having a student mentor was great. She invited me to dinners, social events, and was helpful with any questions I had about the University.

Note: I did not ask for a buddy, but was assigned one anyway. I would recommend asking for one just in case you aren’t as lucky.

The University offered several events for new students to participate in, but the highlight was definitely a weekend trip to a campground outside of the Copenhagen. The two-night event was so much fun and helped me to meet most of the friends that I stayed close with for the remainder of the semester. Definitely do this trip!

The international office staff was always helpful and could be easily contacted in person or via email.

Academics

The University

There are a couple of “campuses” to the University of Copenhagen. The main campus is located right downtown in the heart of Copenhagen, while the LIFE Campus (which is where CALS students would be studying) was located a little outside the city in a nice area called Fredriksberg. The LIFE
Campus certainly has a more campus-feel than the downtown campus; it features several gardens, a library, and even a student bar.

Students hang out all over the place. On campus, we would usually spend our time hanging out at the student bar, in the lawn, or at the library. Off campus, we spent a majority of our time at each other’s dorms and apartments. Once the weather got nice, however, our favorite places to hang out were the several parks and beaches located throughout Copenhagen.

Computer labs and wifi are available in most student buildings, with the easiest access being in the student libraries. I never had an issue accessing the internet while on campus.

Courses

The course enrollment process is certainly different from Cornell (that’s a good thing). It was relatively simple: you find the classes you want and email the department they are in to say you want to take them. I was never in a situation where there was too many people enrolled for me to get in.

Lectures were certainly longer. For instance, for one class you may meet two or three times a week and for 4 to 6 hours each time. Of course, they do give you 15 minute breaks for every hour of class time, but it was still hard to get used to sitting in the same classroom for a majority of the school day.

The classes themselves were definitely more discussion-oriented. With much more time devoted to spending time in the classroom, it was necessary for teachers to encourage student involvement so that the entire class wouldn’t fall asleep.

Homework depends on the class. For one class I took, homework was the only way in which we were graded. We were given three relatively big assignments throughout the semester, which combined to determine our final grade. For my other two classes, though, I received no homework. Just a final examination for one and a final paper for the other.

The exams are certainly different than what we are used to at Cornell. I only had to take one exam during my time at the University of Copenhagen, and it was an oral exam. The way the oral exams typically work is that the professor assigns several questions (probably around 10) for the students to prepare in the week leading up to the test. Then, on the day of the exam, the student is asked to select a question from a hat at random and give a 10-15 minute presentation on that topic (usually you are allowed to bring one page of notes into the examination with you, so prepare beforehand). Although it may seem stressful, the whole process is relatively easy and you are given your final grade for the class immediately after completion.

The way grades are given vary depending on the class. Denmark uses a 12-point system, which works like this: -3 (fail), 0 (fail), 2 (pass), 5 (pass), 7 (pass), 10 (pass), 12 (pass). In my not very expert opinion, the mean score for most classes lies between a 5 and a 7.

For one of my classes grades were based on homework. With another it was an oral examination. The third, a final paper. You are told how you will be graded before the course begins, at least.

I took three classes. Two classes were 7.5 ECTS (divide that by 2 for an approximate conversion to Cornell’s credit system). The third class was 15 ECTS (again, divide by 2). That gave me the 30 total ECTS that I was required to take.

I never had to request to take exams early because I only took classes that ended before June (I had to leave early for a summer internship). If that problem arises, though, I’m sure that a conversation with the professor could help solve the issue.

Life Abroad

Language

The Danes speak very good English, and, since the LIFE program is an English speaking program, all of my European friends were very well-spoken, as well.

However, take the pre-semester language class. I never did it, and it may be my only regret from the entire semester. For one thing, you get to spend another few weeks in Copenhagen, and you also get to meet and make friends long before the other students arrive.

Banking

I opened an account at Danske Bank, which has several branches throughout Copenhagen, and they provide you with a card that allows you to avoid any expensive foreign credit fees.

As long as you tell your home bank in advance, your credit or debit card should work just fine at most store and ATMs in Denmark. Definitely travel with some cash initially, though, so that you can take the metro from the airport upon landing.

Housing

LIFE arranged housing for me, and I stayed in a relatively new apartment-style dorm. I had a roommate, although most of the rooms have just one resident. The room came with its own bathroom and kitchenette and was pretty well furnished, but there not many other students from my own program staying in the area. I would recommend requesting a
dorm that contains many rooms reserved for LIFE students. The dorms near Tasingade were good and very social.

There was no meal plan, although the campus did offer many on-campus dining options. I mostly cooked in my apartment to save money. The first couple of trips to the grocery store were interesting considering most products were labeled in Danish and I had no idea what I was buying.

Transportation

Public transportation in Copenhagen is awesome. Because my dorm was located pretty far outside the campus, I always took the train into the city (about a 10 minute ride). On bike, it was around 20 minutes, and I did that very often once the weather got nice. There are several trains, metros, and buses running throughout the city and you can buy a monthly card with unlimited access to all of them for around $60 a month. For me, this was well worth it, since public transportation is what I relied on for a majority of my stay. There are other payment options as well, though, including a discounted 10-pass ticket and a single ticket (both of which are good for all 3 modes of transportation). Regardless of what you choose to do about public transportation, definitely get a bike in addition (and lock it! I went through 10 bikes in my time in Copenhagen...but that’s a long story).

You can get tickets at the electronic kiosks at each station or at the main station in the center of the city and at Norreport. Also, little hint: you can buy monthly passes at most Seven Eleven’s around the stations (they are everywhere).

Communication

I always used Skype and email to contact people back home, and honestly didn’t even do it that often. I did call my mom on Mother’s Day with a phone card while sitting on a beach in Italy...she was surprised.

I bought a cell phone. It was relatively cheap, and I used the Lebara service. This is the service used by most exchange students in CPH, which is useful considering calling amongst Lebara users is free. I really didn’t spend much on cellular coverage while I was abroad, and I texted quite a bit. The plan is pay as you go, and you can sign up for automatic refills on minutes and texts to get cheaper rates.

I only sent mail once, and remember it being pretty expensive (like most things in CPH). I had a few things lost in the mail, but that was probably because I forgot to change the name on my mailbox from the previous owner’s to my own...

Social Activities

I never got involved in any clubs, although I did consider playing for the club basketball team. A lot of my friends did get involved, though, and it definitely seemed to be worthwhile if you could find something you’re interested in. Treat it like your first semester at Cornell.

There are excursions, events, and parties organized for exchange students throughout the semester. Just listen around and participate in the things that sound fun.

Copenhagen has a great nightlife and you will see large crowds of students whenever you go out. Of course, that’s not all they do. It’s a city like any other, so there is always something to do.

Shopping

There are several different grocery stores throughout the city and they all have their own specific niche. I tended to shop at Netto, just because it was the grocery store located closest to my dorm. Fotex is a good one to shop at if I recall, but my memory is escaping me. Trust me, though, once you arrive in Copenhagen you will have several conversations with students about where to find the cheapest food and toiletries (everyone is in the same boat as poor college students living in a very expensive city).

It’s definitely pricey, but manageable. Living in Copenhagen is just a matter of planning your spending accordingly. For instance, I rarely ate out while abroad; simply because I preferred to spend my money on travel, social events, etc., rather than food. I got by on pasta and cheap meats for the most part, and I survived.

A lot of grocery stores closed by 8, but there are some that stayed open as late as 10. Then, of course, there are Seven Elevens. They are everywhere, and seem to always be open.

Tiger is a pretty cheap department store (I bought headphones here for around $5 and I am still using them as I write this now two months later).

Where’s the peanut butter? Well, it’s not entirely true, because it is available. But if you are looking for the classic Jif or Skippy, you’ll be out of luck.

Health and Safety

I felt extremely safe in Copenhagen. I heard the occasional story here or there and did have one guy friend who was almost mugged, but for the most part I felt very safe. I got lost in the city during my first week, in the dead of winter, and wandered the streets from 2 am to nearly 5 am without a cell phone or any idea of where I was. Needless to say, it...
would have been a much scarier situation if it happened in any other city, American or abroad.

In regard to health and safety: just be smart. It’s the same as anywhere else in terms of staying healthy and keeping yourself out of dangerous situations. If you are ever in need of medical assistance, Denmark offers free healthcare, which is nice.

You will get assigned to a doctor when you register for your CPR number upon arriving. Healthcare is free.

Travel

- I visited:
  - The Netherlands (Amsterdam is essential to any Eurotrip)
  - Belgium (brief stay here, but enjoyed it nonetheless)
  - France (went to Paris and Versailles, both were great)
  - United Kingdom (London is an awesome city, and they speak English...kind of)
  - Sweden (went here on a field trip with my class on Viking culture)
  - Germany (went to Berlin, would love to go back and see more cities)
  - Czech Republic (definitely go here for the beer)
  - Hungary (Budapest was one of my favorite cities)
  - Croatia (very underrated and beautiful)
  - Italy (hiked the Cinque Terre along the western coast. Do it!)
  - Switzerland (hiking in the Alps is a must-do)

I planned all of my trips with friends through external means, but I’m sure someone at the university could help in the planning.

A few of my friends did a week-long trip to Germany with their wines class and the school offered an excursion to Moscow during one of our spring breaks.

I definitely learned to budget my travel expenses more as the semester wore on. My first trip (to Amsterdam, Brussels, and Paris) was quite pricey, simply because I went out to eat for all my meals and spent some money on the hard-to-avoid tourist traps. My second trip though, a 17-day excursion throughout Eastern and Southern Europe was much more manageable. For this trip, me and two other friends purchased a 17-day unlimited Eurail pass to cover our travel, and stayed at hostels and cooked for ourselves to save even more money. Overnight trains are a great mode of travel, since you are able to save on a night’s stay on a hostel by sleeping in the car.

Overall exchange experience

I got a very good picture of Denmark’s local and school culture. Denmark is a happy country and Copenhagen is a great place to live. The people are relaxed/laid back, and certainly like to enjoy themselves. There might not be as much to see in Denmark as in Italy or Germany, but it is a great home base if you are interested in immersing yourself in a carefree lifestyle.

Studying in Copenhagen certainly had a big impact on my views of other countries and people around the world. For one thing, I now have a lot of friends from all over the world. There were only 9 Americans total in the program at LIFE, so a majority of my friends were from various European and South American countries (and honestly, I wouldn’t have liked it any other way). I learned to be more tolerant of people very quickly, and found out that I have much more in common with people from other countries than I ever would have thought. Travelling abroad only made me want to travel more, and I plan on doing so very soon.

Travelling is always a great topic of conversation, whether casually or during an interview. I feel like my new perspective on other people and cultures will be very important in an increasingly global work environment, and I am even considering look for employment in Europe after graduation.