Visas

Prior to my arrival in Germany, I did not have to do anything to get a visa. Germany has a very easy program for students where you register with the local authorities at a Bürger Service Center (Citizen Center) within 3 months of your arrival. Jacobs University specifically makes this process much easier by taking all exchange students to the Bürger Service Center to make sure all students are legally allowed to stay in Germany for the semester. Beforehand, they give you a packet of information that you must fill out and a sheet that lists important documents you need.

Unfortunately, I missed this group trip to the Bürger Service Center because of previously planned travel. I ended up finding the building easily on the University of Bremen campus and registered with ease with the authorities. The process can be stressful, but if you reach out to Jacobs they will help you every step of the way. Just make sure you remember your passport!

Packing/Preparation

The weather in Bremen during most of the spring semester was chilly and rainy. Definitely pack sweaters, pants, a rain jacket, and a winter coat just in case. I believe it snowed 5 or 6 times out of the whole semester. Towards the end of April it started to warm up a bit. There was actually a whole week of 75+ degree weather with sunny skies in May. You'll get used to the weather pretty quickly and adapt your lifestyle accordingly to survive the rainy weather.

I successfully packed all of my clothes in one checked bag. Obviously, I had to sacrifice a lot of my clothing I would normally bring to Cornell, but in the end it was worth it. I could not imagine pulling another checked bag around multiple airports. Therefore, I would highly recommend packing as light as possible, but be sure to pack all the essentials. If you don’t mind paying the money for an extra checked bag, then by all means go right ahead and do it! The amount you want to pack is really personal preference. For me, I want to get through the airport as fast as possible with little hassle. If you do decide to pack light, definitely pack more outfits that you are comfortable walking in the rain and cold in. But be sure to pack nice summer outfits for the nice vacations in Spain and Italy 😊.

Arrival

Boy, was my arrival crazy. This is probably one of the most exhausting, exciting, stressful, and most interesting parts of the trip. I took an overnight flight from JFK in NYC to Amsterdam, Netherlands. After a meager 2 hours of sleep (I just couldn’t contain my excitement), I arrived in Amsterdam and managed to get on a train to the bus station where I picked up a 5-hour bus to Bremen, Germany. This is a lot to handle after first arriving in Europe. I did this because I wanted to save as much as possible, and flying into Amsterdam, rather than Bremen, was $200
cheaper. I definitely would not recommend this to everyone. But if you are confident, ambitious, and ready to take hold of Europe immediately, then yes, save money on the flight going into Europe so you have plenty more to experience once you’re there.

After arriving in Bremen, I was immediately greeted by my student advisor at the bus stop who took my luggage and me to the Jacobs University campus, about a 25-minute train ride from the city center. Honestly, thank you Jacobs University for this. My student advisor was my best resource and I probably would have passed out from exhaustion trying to find my way to the campus if my advisor was not there. NOTE: Make sure you have euros (especially the coins) before arriving so you can pay for this train ride. I believe it was about 3 euros. Once you get to Jacobs, they’ll give you a semester train pass, which I will talk about later.

University

Jacobs University is an international university that is modeled after English-speaking American universities. Because of this, I did not have any problem adapting to the campus atmosphere or way of life. The campus is obviously much more diverse, but because everyone speaks English, I felt very comfortable upon arrival. It’s pretty amazing that I now have friends from Senegal, Lesotho, Pakistan, Guatemala, and other amazing nations. The dorms are absolutely amazing (everyone gets a single and shares a bathroom with one other person), the dining halls were small but nice, and the classrooms are high-tech. It’s basically a small, modern-looking Cornell.

There is plenty of support on campus. If you run into a problem, consult your Jacobs friends, student advisor or campus staff. The person that handles the exchange students at Jacobs is VERY friendly and will help you with anything. I developed a really good relationship with my student advisor. We got lunch once a week and took a class together. If I ever ran into a problem, I would send her a text and she would answer immediately. Just seriously don’t be afraid to reach out and ask.

Classes

Classes are set up very similar to those at Cornell, although I found the workload to be much lighter. Tests are especially easier to study for and for the most part less intense than Cornell exams. The math class I took at Jacobs (Differential Equations and Modeling) was a breath of fresh air after taking MATH 1920 (Calc 3) here at Cornell. The expectations are lower than at Cornell, but the professors are really cool. All the professors I had were very passionate in their field of teaching and I had a wonderful learning experience in most of my classes.
Health/Safety

The only problem I ran into with Cornell or Jacobs during my time abroad was dealing with health insurance. My health insurance (Blue Cross Blue Shield) was approved for Germany and would have worked there, but unfortunately Jacobs requires everyone to get German insurance during orientation week. This means that no matter what, your American insurance will not work and not be good enough for German standards. The insurance costs about $600 for the semester. What was unfortunate about this is that Cornell did not know of this compulsory insurance and therefore I didn’t either. Thankfully, Natalie (CALS Exchange leader) revised my budget accordingly so that financial aid could adjust what they had given to me. I was a bit stressed in the beginning, but relieved to find out that everything would work out. (Note from CALS the exchange office: We will keep this in mind for next year!)

There is a Doctor’s office right off campus called Dr. Schmidtmann’s. It’s very easy to get to and they will help you with anything health-wise. They will even give you sick notes for your classes so that you can sleep and rest until you are better.

During April, I had a really bad infection in my throat and went to Schmidtmann’s. They recommended me to a throat specialist the same day and I received a prescription for antibiotics there.

Life Abroad

Before leaving for Germany, I opened a Bank of America account which partners with Deutsch Bank. They have ATM’s all over Bremen and one in Vegesack (a local village near the University). The bank is also represented in many countries of Europe, making it much cheaper to travel and take out money. Beware of those ATM fees, they do add up fast!

Shopping for snacks, food, or extra clothing was easy. There are buses right outside that can take you to a shopping mall in Vegesack which has a Marktauf (similar to a Wegmans or Price Chopper), H & M, and other various shopping places. I would recommend learning some German just so it’s easier to get around (I took 2 semesters of German through Arts and Sciences before leaving for Germany). Yes, some people know English, but it’s much more exciting to interact with locals than being an “ignorant American”.

During my time in Germany, I left my phone on airplane mode. I decided to just keep my American plan instead of paying for a new phone plan abroad. NOTE: You can access Wi-Fi on airplane mode! So many places in Europe have Wi-Fi now that you won’t really have a problem getting around. Some tips: download Google Maps and Skype or Facebook Messenger on your phone. Google Maps has an option to download maps of areas that you can use offline so that you won’t have to use Wi-Fi or data if you get lost in a city. Skype or Facebook Messenger makes it much easier for you to call home, since you can do it over Wi-Fi for no cost.
Overall Experience

To put it bluntly: studying abroad was easily the best semester of my life. I made so many new friends from around the world, and got to see a ton of exciting places rich in history and culture in Europe. If you budget well, you won't have a problem traveling to your dream destinations. I saved up a lot of my money before going to Europe, and managed to travel to 25 cities in 12 countries (15 if you include airplane connections)! While this number seems like a lot, it’s totally doable. Travel in Europe is so cheap. After awhile, you’ll become a pro at finding the cheapest way to get to cities (FlixBus, Ryanair, Easyjet, etc.) and the cheapest way to stay in them (cheap hostels, Airbnb for large groups). Flights out of Bremen are expensive. In fact, I never flew out of the city. I always took a train to Hamburg (free with your train semester pass from Jacobs) and flew from/to there. Take advantage of long weekends and go to a nearby destination; even 2 nights in a city is worth it (of course, you’ll be a bit exhausted by the end of it). I personally made my schedule so that I had no classes on Friday.

Another note: things will go wrong. Sometimes you’ll be in a rush to your train or bus, sometimes you’ll get scammed (watch out for those “nice” shoe-shiners in Istanbul, Turkey), sometimes you’ll get really homesick and want nothing else than to stay in your bed. These are normal. Follow the rules, stay positive, and immerse yourself. It’s important to remember where you are (Deutschland in Europe!), and push yourself to explore as much as possible, whether it be downtown Bremen or southern Europe.

Thanks for reading!