My name is Alex Reese; I am a Landscape Architecture and Plant Science major. Before my semester abroad, my international experiences had been limited to two weeks on vacation in Australia in 2006 and a day trip to Canada in 2010. In other words, I have spent little time abroad and only in English speaking countries.

Practical Advice

Visa

From what I can remember about the visa process, the easiest part of the visa was filling out the paper work, which I suggest to do as early as possible. That leaves the largest window possible for the transfer of funds into the appropriate accounts and the trip to the nearest consulate, which was the most stressful. The closest consulate to Ithaca is of course the Danish consulate in New York City, and getting there during the school year is even more expensive and time consuming. Once I had officially applied, it took about the full three months for my visa to arrive, and I had to enter the county as a tourist until I received the official documentation.

Immigration upon arrival in Denmark was fairly confusing, but I did have a non-traditional visa experience in which I had to provide authorities my biometrics upon my visa approval. Furthermore, there was one office for my local registration and one office for national immigration because I lived in the neighborhood of Frederiksberg, which is technically its own commune apart from Copenhagen. Thus, the order of operations and coordination was difficult to figure out. I also did not receive a buddy from the university which may have made things easier.

Packing

I forgot to pack long underwear, wool socks, and adequately warm gloves – a given for Copenhagen. I don’t recommend bringing very many shorts other than those for physical activity because it’s only warm enough to wear them for about one and a half months late in the spring semester, and even then only during peak sunlight hours before the air gets very chilly.

International office at Host University

I appreciated the university’s orientation program it introduced me to the university and a variety of resources at my disposal, most of which I didn’t end up using. Still, it was a nice and recommended introduction and transition into a foreign university, with a campus (in truth campuses) and a structure quite different from Cornell.

The international office was very helpful and available, but about the only thing I used the international office for was to obtain my student I.D., which they did very quickly and competently.

Academics

The University

The University is located across the city in four different campuses, though I count 5 with a few detached locations. Thus, there is no centralized campus. Computer labs are accessible in most major buildings and in all libraries and the same wifi can be accessed at all campuses – though figuring out how to login to the wifi was initially very confusing.

Like Cornell, the University of Copenhagen has several colleges or their equivalents, however unlike Cornell the colleges can be on different academic schedules – at least in the case of the science college – LIFE, which divided its semester into to mini-semesters while the other colleges had one full semester. Furthermore, the LIFE college followed its own weekly course schedule model with blocks of classes hours and this made taking any classes across colleges almost impossible as they would almost certainly conflict with LIFE courses. Overall, it seemed there was little communication between colleges lending to an impression that the university was quite disorganized.
Courses

Enrolling in classes for the pre-semester course and for the first block (mini-semester) courses for one college (LIFE) within the university was done by email in the fall semester before arrival. For second blocks and for all other colleges, enrollment was done online. My final grade for my language courses was divided between a written and an oral language test. For my Landscape theory and method course, it was based on models and presentations that were then integrated into 2 papers. For the science courses in my second block, for one I took an oral exam and for another a 4-hour, open note written exam.

Life Abroad

Language

Language problems occurred at a minimum with students as well as faculty in that absolutely everyone spoke English very well. However, in my most intensive courses especially plant genomics, the faculty sometimes had a hard time understanding my questions and explaining or simplifying complicated concepts to me in English. Taking a language course before departing would be very helpful and rewarding; however, there is none currently offered at Cornell. The most I can recommend is the Danish word of the day online at http://www.innovativelanguage.com/word-of-the-day/Danish and a dry Danish grammar book in PDF form that I can provide for free. A crash course of the language was offered at arrival though and I did take it and found it extremely useful, but mostly in terms of reading signs and products and in very basic interactions.

Banking

I did not open a local banking account because I saw it as a confusing task to complete upon arrival and another one to deal with upon departure. I performed transactions and accessed money through a VISA credit card with no international fees which was accepted by most businesses but which came with the drawback of a cash advance fee when I needed to withdraw money.

Housing

My host university did arrange for my housing, which was the Danish equivalent of a dorm. They facilities were very nice but there was no common space (i.e. kitchen, common room, etc) aside from laundry facilities which made meeting and interacting with the other residents almost impossible. Rent and utilities were included in a sum paid to the housing office prior to arrival or in the case of two installments prior to arrival and then again mid-semester. Living costs in Copenhagen are very high. It is difficult to find any housing under $850 USD a month, though you give the housing office a range of what you are willing to spend monthly, they inevitably give you housing at the high end of this range.

Transportation

Transportation is negligible within the city after initial investment in a bike, though repairs may come infrequently. Bikes can be rented or bought used through bike shops, though they come most cheaply from other students selling theirs online. Bus, metro, and regional trains are available as public transport. They cost upwards of 2.50 per ride based on how far you are going and the method used to pay – a ten punch clip card that I used infrequently throughout the semester but which is being phased out in favor of refillable travel cards that can be bought at any metro stop or train station. There is a monthly commuter pass, but I never purchased it.

Social activities

Social activities were mainly initiated by students themselves, especially by international students in person and over Facebook during the pre-semester course which was of course a great way to meet other international students as well as through shared housing arrangements. However, it was much harder to meet Danish students or at least break into their social circles. I met most through my classes and a few through other friends, but really wished I had signed up for a student mentor through the university.

Shopping

Food is quite expensive, but cheap alternatives can be found though one’s dignity may suffer from buying low-end brands. I mostly ate food that I prepared in my kitchen. I ate out infrequently at fast food places and sometimes cafes and only once did I pay out of my own pocked to eat at a sit-down restaurant in the course of the whole semester.

Health and Safety

I felt very safe in my host location and in the entire city as a whole. The most I can recommend is to get your visa application in early so that you can get your Danish health care card too and be able to see your own doctor if you get sick when you arrive – which happened to me. Medical care will not be refused to you if you are without it, but it makes it
so much easier. Pharmacies are located on almost every major corner, and while pricey, the staff is always available to help you find what you need. Also be careful when biking in the snow, after nights out, and after snowy nights out.

Overall exchange experience

The best thing about my semester abroad was being able to become so familiar with the city and the country. Over the course of the semester I learned how beautiful, intimate, and livable Copenhagen was as a city and Denmark was as a country. Though it was a little too cold with a winter that lasted much too long, the summer city, of which I caught only a glimpse, was amazing. And there is no feeling like knowing the layout and experiences a city has to offer. I can’t wait to go back and discover more.

The most challenging thing about my semester was balancing school work with the desire to have fun, explore the city and hang out with friends. Studying and writing papers sometimes seemed like a waste of time when I only had a few months to spend in such an interesting and different place so far from home.

My perspective on the United States as a political and cultural entity has been drastically altered by time spent in Copenhagen. I have come to intensely appreciate Denmark’s low income disparity, its lack of political and cultural divisiveness (though with comparatively low cultural differences), its supportive and inclusive health care and education policies (though with taxation to consider) and the overall happiness of its population in comparison to that of the United States. Though I acknowledge that they have very different yet intertwined political and cultural histories, I now see many characteristics of the United States that I believed were a given before, but which I now would like to see drastically changed.

For future students, I would just recommend getting to know the city and its locals as much as possible, from the tourist sites to the local hangouts and festivities. It’s an experience you will not likely have again soon.