Practical Advice

Visa
The visa takes a long time to obtain and it includes a trip to the consulate in New York City.

As soon as you know you will study abroad you should schedule an appointment at the consulate office. The application for the visa is very long and you must make sure you have all documents (and copies) ready before you go to the consulate.

When we arrived we were required to apply for a residency permit although the official documentation would not arrive until after we left. There was a lot of paperwork to fill out, fees to pay and waiting at the immigration office.

Packing
Pack as light as possible. We had access to free laundry so you really do not need to bring a lot of clothes. Trust me on this that you will accumulate a lot of souvenirs, etc. while you are abroad and so the less you take, the more you can bring back. Also I would recommend bringing black or dark colors because that is all Italians wear.

Resources
We had the most assistance with the host university from our mentor, Federico Righi. He was our number one resource during the time abroad and helped us to become acclimated to our surroundings as well as coordinated all of our classes. We learned about social events from him and the Parma Erasmus office. The Erasmus program holds many social events for exchange students. We found maps and tourist information at the local tourist center in town as well as from the Erasmus office.

International office at Host University
We were picked up by Federico Righi, our mentor for the program. He was absolutely wonderful and drove us directly to our apartment and then from there he brought us grocery shopping. Federico also organized some orientation activities during the first week which just aimed to introduce us to the campus and make sure all documents were in place. The international office staff were not as kind as I would have expected after dealing with Federico. Each student also received an international buddy. One of the buddies organized a large pizza party with all of their friends for our first night in Italy which was nice welcome. Unfortunately the buddies were not in the same classes as we were, and were not around us so we did not have a great relationship with them.

Academics

The University
There is not a centralized campus but all your classes will be in the Vet School, which is centralized. If you opt to take the Italian language course (I recommend it) then you will have to go to another part of campus which can be reached by bus. Students usually hang out in the cafes and libraries found around campus at the vet school. At the vet school there was a library where we used wifi. Parma has a free wifi internet program but it did not work consistently in our apartment. Two of the other exchange students purchased internet keys which allowed them to have wifi anywhere.

Courses
Course enrollment is easy because all the classes are preselected for you and the Cornell students are the only ones in the classes. There were four classes for six weeks which were normally a three hour lecture once a week. We had many field trips, including farm, cheese house, and other agricultural related visits. There was also an optional introductory Italian language course twice a week in the afternoon which I found helpful. There was not homework in any of the classes but it was important to take notes in every class because of the abundance of information given during the lectures. The class grades were given by teacher personal evaluations because the classes were so small that they knew each of us individually and the effort we had put forth. There were also four, weeklong internships after taking the classes. Through the internships we worked on a dairy farm, a cheese house, a ham factory and a co-op. After completing the internships, papers were completed on each to explain what we learned.
Life Abroad

Language
The language barrier is probably one of the hardest parts of studying abroad in Italy. Most people do not speak English and if they do it is limited. Luckily, Federico spoke English extremely well and helped us with communication. I would recommend taking an Italian class prior because it will make everything much simpler. We did have a course during our orientation week to help us learn some common words and phrases which was helpful but I think it would be better to come with experience.

Banking
I do not thinking you need to open up a local bank account while studying abroad. I got an international credit card through my local bank that did not charge any fees for use in Italy. I also had a debit card that I used to take Euros out of the ATM in Italy.

Housing
The host university completely set up our housing which was a three bedroom apartment near the vet school. The housing was very nice and came with everything you could need including bedding, dishes and towels. The housing was 350 Euros per month and paid through the Erasmus office. The apartment was nice but I would have preferred to live with other Italians in a home stay so that I could have learned more about the culture and language. We prepared all our own meals in the apartment. There were grocery stores close enough that we purchased everything.

Transportation
The bus is the easiest form of daily transportation. It costs about thirty Euros per month for an unlimited bus pass. We were also given bikes by Federico which I preferred but you must make sure you lock the bikes. For traveling around Italy the train system is fantastic. Trains run every day, at numerous times, to most locations in Italy. Most every weekend we traveled to a different location in Italy, as well as to Switzerland using the trains. The train station was very close to our apartment.

Communication
I purchased a pay-as-you-go cell phone while in Italy. It was about 40 Euros and then I would put money on it as I went. I contacted home through Skype, not the telephone. I did not use my cell phone to call home because of the cost. It takes about a week to receive mail like letters but about two weeks for packages. To send packages it would take only a few days if you went through the company Mailboxes Etc which was right down the street from our house. You could send packages through the postal service for cheaper, but it took longer to get there.

Social activities
We did meet some of the students who attend the host university through our exchange buddies as well as through our mentor Federico Righi. The Erasmus office set up many events to get to know other exchange students. Local students go to the bar, go out to eat, or go to the cinema/theater. Italians consider eating as a large social event and use it as a way to be together and get to know others. Meals can last for a few hours and have numerous courses.

Shopping
We bought groceries and toiletries at a local grocery store that was very close to our house. The houseware, towels, and bedding were all supplied for us in the apartment. The prices were more expensive in Italy than the US. There are many outdoor markets that sell pretty much everything at very cheap prices with produce, cheese, meats, as well as clothes.

Health and Safety
If you are a girl in Italy you should not travel without a partner at night. Italian men are very open with their feelings towards women, so just be prepared. Otherwise you are very safe in Italy.

Travel
We traveled most every weekend to numerous places in Italy. We used the train system to travel to the main cities like Milan, Venice, Florence, Cinque Terre, Bologna, Rome. We also had two weeks off for spring break where I traveled to Ireland and Scotland. We got very cheap flights from RyanAir. It was very expensive to travel abroad but is completely worth it. I knew I would never have the opportunity to do the traveling any other time in my life so it made the expenses more bearable. We used the Rick Steve’s guidebooks for traveling which were extremely helpful. Rick Steve’s has traveled to Italy numerous times and knows the country very well. His book includes many walking guides that can replace going on tours.

Overall exchange experience
Italy is an absolutely beautiful, culturally rich country. I absolutely loved it and would go back in an instant. I learned a lot about other people as well growing as a person. It was the best experience of my life and recommend this experience to anyone.