Visa

My visa application process was extensive. Because I live in the California Bay Area, I had to apply at the San Francisco Italian Consulate. This meant that the Italian Visa Application meeting that CALS provides (with information based off the New York City Italian Consulate) was helpful but not comprehensive for me. Every consulate has their own rules, and for the San Francisco location, they requested an extra document from me, but I didn’t know this until I was standing at their door. I had to make a subsequent trip to the Consulate because of this. I recommend that doing extensive research on your own consulate, maybe even going so far to call them to double check everything. Make sure to stay cooperative and polite on the phone and in person with them. I went back to the Consulate a third time to pick up my visa. It only took two weeks for them to process my application, but it can take longer, so make sure you do everything early. Also, the student visa is free at the SF consulate.

Packing

Because I spent Spring semester in Italy, I felt the need to bring a peacoat, which turned out to be a smart idea. The spring in Milan can bring snow and will definitely be very rainy. However, I never needed more than a peacoat – it’s not like Ithaca. Because it did snow once or twice, and it rained a lot, I wish I brought a pair of sturdier boots. It’s definitely a necessity.

If you’re looking to pack things that will help you blend, there are three things to know. 1) On the street, most people wear jeans no matter the weather – hot or cold. When it did get warm, almost no one wore shorts. It doesn’t seem to normal to wear shorts in Italy; people do it, just rarely. 2) If you walk around wearing jeans, t-shirt, and a sweatshirt, you’re pretty much branded as an American. Italians favor jackets over sweatshirts, and blouses over t-shirts for women (not so much for men). 3) The students at Bocconi tend to dress more fashionably than the regular Italian. If you’re looking to blend in there, I would recommend more stylish blouses, pants, purses, jackets, etc.

Overall, I just recommend packing for a long rainy season (layers will help on the days when it snows) and a hot summer season. Also, know that you will not be allowed in any Italian church wearing the following: low-cut shirts, shorts, skirts above the knee, tank tops.

Arrival

I flew into Linate, which is one of three airports that service the city of Milan. Immigration only required to see my passport and visa and asked me how long I was staying, then I was sent on my way. The taxis in Milan are very efficient and the drivers are very nice. They knew exactly here my dorm was, as Bocconi is a well-known university. The fare for the Taxi to my dorm was only around €40, which is significantly less than from the other airports since Linate is the closest to city center. The entire arrival process into Italy was very simple.

I took the 2 week Italian Crash Course, and attended a couple of orientation sessions, which were one hour each. One session just introduced you to Bocconi’s exchange program, the other helped you with your Permit of Stay application.

Academics

The University

The University is a centralized campus, which is located twenty minutes from the international dorm and another 15 minutes away from the city center (The Duomo). It’s in the bottom left quadrant of the city. It is extremely close to stops on both the 15 and 9 trams. On campus, there is a library, two buildings for classrooms, and a faculty building. The library is situated so that books are all located on one floor, and the other floors are used for study rooms only. There is a separate computer lab inside the main building for classrooms. Wifi is located everywhere on campus, but you must sign up for it by registering your devices on your agenda page. Internet in the dorms is accessible by Ethernet cord, which Bocconi provides to you.

The academic calendar is different from Cornell’s, in that they set aside two weeks after spring break (Easter week) for midterms. This means that for two weeks – regardless if your class offers a midterm or not – no classes meet. If you don’t
Courses

Bocconi has their own online enrollment system that occurs about a month before school starts. It was a little confusing, but the only thing you need to know to understand is that you can schedule conflicting classes – this is because you can take classes “nonattending” at Bocconi, meaning that you don’t go to class, but show up for the final.

Your final grade make-up varies for each class, but the common thing is for classes to be based on a group project and your final or a midterm and your final, not much more than that. Classes at Bocconi don’t have assignments like Cornell classes might. I did have one class that was based on my final exam grade alone.

Life Abroad

Language

Speaking wasn’t much of an issue. There was very few times when I ran into someone who couldn’t understand my poor Italian or who couldn’t speak English. I didn’t know any Italian prior to arriving, but I did take a 2 week crash course offered by Bocconi. As long as you pay attention and go every day, everything that you learn in the course is sufficient to function in Italy. I knew how to speak Spanish prior to arriving as well, so that may have helped, since it is similar to Italian. Everything that I learned to say in Italian that I didn’t learn in the course was acquired by eavesdropping and using context to make assumptions about a conversation. Many other exchange students confessed that they too would just listen to people talk on the train and teach themselves that way.

Banking

There is no reason to get an Italian bank account, especially if you have a Bank of America account like I did. BofA has a sister bank in Italy called BNL. You are allowed to take out money from your BoFA account with no fees from any BNL ATM. This is what I did all semester.

Housing

I stayed in the International dorm (Arcobaleno) that was offered by Bocconi. It was just outside the city, and was very nice. Everyone gets a single, and there are communal kitchens. [IMPORTANT: In the kitchens in Arcobaleno, you must only use convection pans and pots. They are specific and are distinguished by a curly symbol. You will see signs in the kitchen detailing how to identify a convection pot or pan. Make sure you don’t buy the wrong kind!] The dorm provides sheets and towels, but I brought my own towels and some people did use their own sheets. There is also a maid service that comes around every week to clean your room and change your sheets.

There wasn’t a meal plan like at Cornell. I would go to the grocery store about once a week and spend an average of €25 each time, so I generally spent an average of €100 on food a month. My roommate and I would coordinate who would go and share the food. I didn’t go out to eat a lot because I was trying to teach myself how to cook, but if I did go out it was mostly for lunch. A panino is generally €3-4. Anything more, and you’re paying too much.

Transportation

I bought a metro card for ATM (Milan’s public transportation) for five months which was about €90 total I believe. It gets you on all transportation – buses, subway, tram. You should definitely get it. You have to renew it every month, or you can buy three months in advance. Outside of Milan, if I was just staying in Italy I took Trentitalia, Italy’s train system. You can buy the tickets at self-service machines in every Italian Train station. I only bought online once, and that was when my parents came. They just wanted to have it in advance. There is no real reason to buy online though – when it’s sold out online, it’s never sold out in the station, so I would just recommend always buying at the station and it will be cheaper there as well. When I would go out of the country, I liked to fly out of Malpensa because EasyJet, a budget airline flies from there; there is also a train that goes directly to the airport, which is much cheaper than a taxi. I found EasyJet to be my favorite airline because of their customer service and because they were just as affordable as RyanAir, which is a little less cooperative at times and has hidden fees.

Shopping

The dorm is in front of a large park perfect for running and only a few stops away from a mall with an Apple Store, a food court, and shops. Around the corner from the dorm is a WalMart like grocery store, where everyone did their shopping. There are also a couple of pizzerias and a gelato shop across the street from the dorm.

Health and Safety

I never felt in danger in Milan. The part of the city we lived in is mostly families living in apartments, so that was very safe. Within the city, or really anywhere in Italy, the biggest concern is pickpocketing, which you can avoid as long as you pay attention to your belongings. I did know someone who got her bag with all her credit cards and passport stolen. It is very important to keep an eye on your things.

I never needed medical attention, which was great, but I did know people who did. This was only if they sprained their
ankle or something. If you ever need cough drops, you can get Halls at the grocery store, but if you need something like cough syrup, you need to go to a farmacia (pharmacy) which are everywhere in Milan. However, they do close for siesta, so be aware of the time you go to get something.

As long as you are responsible and pay attention to your surroundings at a higher level than you would at home or in college or even if you were in NYC, you will be fine. This goes for not only when you are in Milan, but anywhere in Europe.

**Overall exchange experience**

The best thing about my semester abroad was being able to call myself a local Italian. You live there, so you are a local. It’s great to think to myself, “Oh hey, I lived in Italy for half a year.” Don’t be afraid to live like a local. Being a tourist gets old very fast. Be confident in yourself, and you will have no trouble adapting.

The most challenging things about my semester abroad was my visa application. It was just awful. Do your homework about what’s needed so you don’t have to go through what I did!

I feel like I knew nothing about how anyone else in the world lived outside of America. A lot of stereotypes and assumptions were debunked. I can now see myself living outside America and traveling for the rest of my life. I feel like I grew into a more adventurous and outgoing person.

**Tips for future students**

Don’t be afraid to get out there! Being abroad helps you to grow and mature. It’s an experience you’ll never forget. If you want to go to Spain for the weekend, go to Spain! Don’t let anything scare you. Try the cuisine of different regions, force yourself to speak a new language even if you don’t know more than ten words, just wander for a while and you’ll find that you’ve turned into this great new person with tons of experiences you’ll remember for a life time.