Practical Advice

Visa

Getting a visa was easy enough – the CALS Exchange Office provides really good instructions of what you need to do and if you follow it closely, you should not have any issues. Normally, I think it takes about 2-3 weeks for the visa to be ready once you drop off your passport and documents at the visa office (I went to the one in New York), but I told them I needed it rushed because I was leaving for China. They had it ready in a week and a half at no charge (I don’t recommend doing this, as I do not know if they’ll always be this accommodating.) The visa was free.

Once you are in Italy, the university tells you that you are required to register with the local government to get a Permit of Stay, which is an almost two-month process and it costs about 150 euro. You need to bring your documents from the consulate in the United States in order to do this. After going to the post office and then the police station a few weeks later to submit all my documents, I still have never gotten a text message from the police station saying that mine is ready (although it must be by now). I don’t really understand why we need the Permit of Stay – I have gotten in and out of the country no problem with just my passport. I guess it is only for emergencies or police-related issues.

Packing

I have pretty much everything I could imagine needing. I didn’t bring a winter jacket, but it hasn’t been cold enough to warrant one yet. I did bring a heavier leather jacket which I wear occasionally in Milan and that I wore when I visited northern Europe. It has been sufficient. I would recommend bringing a Thunderbolt Ethernet adapter because internet in the dorm is through Ethernet (not wifi) and the adapter makes it MUCH faster (it’s otherwise pretty slow). There’s nothing that I would recommend not bringing – however, I would look up your dorm before you get here to see what they provide (mine provided sheets and towels but not blankets).

Arrival

Immigration was easy. I just handed my passport to a guy behind a desk and he stamped it. There was no buddy program, but I met a lot of Italian students in my dorm and we’re friends. After moving into the dorm (the University was very helpful with this), there was one Orientation day. Again, nothing special, just giving students the lowdown on how the University works.

Academics

The University

Bocconi University is in southern Milan, a 15-minute tram ride from the Duomo at the city’s center. There is no centralized campus – the whole university is just a few buildings on the same block (I’ve only ever been in three of them – two academic buildings and a library). There is a PC lab that feels like it’s stuck in the year 2002, but I do use it for printing. The University buildings have wifi, which is much faster than the dorms’ Ethernet. There is one library (as far as I know), and I use it often. It is usually pretty crowded but I have never been unable to find a spot to study.

The Fall Academic Calendar runs from the first week of September until the week before Christmas, so pretty similar to Cornell. There is no class the final two weeks of October for midterms and no class the final two weeks of the semester for finals. Other than that, there are no days off during the semester.

The International Office has been very helpful when I have needed them. They helped me out when I had trouble paying for my housing, and they helped me with an issue on my student meal plan. I also cut my ear at one point and they were very helpful and responsive at sending me information for nearby medical centers.

Classes

I enrolled in classes about a week before I flew to Italy through Bocconi’s website (warning, it’s much worse than CourseEnroll). There was a one-week add/drop period during the second week of classes during which I changed a lot of my classes. Grade calculation varies by class – Intro to Options and Futures’s grade is 100% based on the final, while other classes have problem sets/online quizzes/midterms/group projects that factor into your final grade as well. One thing that I found interesting about this school is that class times are not consistent same every week. There is a time slot that a class will usually have to fill, but sometimes it can be moved to the morning or afternoon or rescheduled to the following week altogether. This occasionally caused some classes to run into conflict with each other, but it hasn’t
resulted in me missing any substantial amount of material
(my professors who did this always posted lecture notes
online).

Life Abroad

Social Activities

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) hosts many, many social
activities here. They had some sort of party or event at a club
or bar every night during the first two weeks, and have had at
least one or two events per week since then (including some
travel events). I went to them a lot in the beginning, but I go
much less now because they are always so crowded. Once I
settled down into a friend group and learned which
clubs/bars in Milan I liked, I just went out with them instead.

Banking

Depends on your personal situation. My family’s banking plan
allowed me to withdraw money outside of the United States
at the exact exchange rate without being charged by my
banker. None of the ATMs here have charged me fees (unlike
the ATMs in Ithaca), so all of my banking has been free. If you
don’t have a plan like this, I would look into opening up an
account here – although I really don’t know anything about
doing so.

Housing

Bocconi offers housing, I would recommend taking it. There
are a few dorms to choose from. I live in Spadolini, although
most of my friends live in Arcobaleno. Arcobaleno is mostly
international students – seriously, entire floors consist of
students only from the US, Canada, and Australia. Whether or
not you want this is strictly a matter of preference. There are
a few other Americans and Canadians in Spadolini, but we’re
spread out throughout the building. As I said before, neither
of my roommates are from primarily English-speaking
countries. The other odd thing about Arcobaleno is that it is
much further from the University than the rest of the dorms –
as far as I know, it is the only dorm that is a tram-ride away. I
live a 15-minute walk away from my classes. All of my friends,
regardless of where they live, seem happy with their living
situation. I don’t know much about arranging your own
housing, but it is obviously more complicated to deal with
(you have to find a leaser yourself, and few landlords lease
for only one semester, so you then may need to find a
subletter or sublet yourself) and it is more expensive. The
tradeoff is, of course, more freedom.

If you want to live in an apartment you’ll have fewer
restrictions (picking your own roommates and being allowed
to have guests stay over). Housing was about 2,500 euro for
the whole semester in a dorm, or about $3,300. Living in an
apartment costs more.

Transportation

You can get a student public transport pass (metro & tram)
for about 20 euro a month. I did this, and I think it was worth
it (buying an individual trip is 1.50 euro – I haven’t calculated
if I actually use public transport enough to justify the student
pass, but it eliminates the hassle of having to worry about
buying tickets from convenience stores for individual trips).
My dorm is within walking distance of the University, but
there is at least one dorm that is a tram ride away.

Communication

I’m adding this category because I think it’s very important.
Before you get to Europe, call your cellular service
provider and get your phone unlocked, especially if it
Can be done for free (I know that Verizon does it for
free). If it can’t be done for free, decide between paying for it
and buying the cheapest phone available (chances are, paying
to unlock will probably be more worth it – the price
difference will be negligible and if you have a smartphone, it
is much more useful than the 12-key cell phone you used in
Middle School). Once you are in Italy, go to a cell phone store
first thing and get a SIM card. They are reasonably priced – so
long as you don’t roam, it is about 15 euro per month for all
texting, calling, and data usage that a reasonable person
would possibly need (just don’t watch Youtube videos on or
download apps to your phone without wifi). Also, don’t roam
– it gets expensive fast (although I heard the European
Union will be passing legislation soon that allows service
purchased in one country to be valid throughout the entire
EU – aka, you’re not roaming if you go to any other EU
country. If this is true, I envy you future abroaders).

Traveling

If you plan to travel around Europe (and you should), book
plane/train tickets well in advance. This, combined with a
willingness to travel at extremely inconvenient hours, can
make travel really cheap (I got round-trip flights to England
for 60 euro by doing this. That, combined with the fact that I
stayed at a friend’s place there, made my trip the UK one of
my cheapest so far – well, at least the travel and hospitality
aspects). Otherwise... I mentioned the 150 euro fee for the
Permit of Stay above.

Health & Safety

Milan is a very safe city – I have not heard any reports of
anyone getting pick-pocketed here (I heard that further south
in Italy is not nearly as safe). One time, I went to get a haircut
and the barber accidentally cut my ear pretty deeply. This
was on a weekday evening, and I called the International
Office and they sent me a list of doctors, most of whom had
closed for the day. After calling my doctor in the US and
sending him pictures of the cut (about which he said there
was nothing really that could be done), I decided against spending the night in the waiting room of an Italian hospital for stitches (and the cut healed fine on its own). However, the International Office was very attentive and followed up with me the next day, which I thought was very professional. For the record, there are several doctors’ offices near the university.

**Overall exchange experience**

*The best thing about my semester abroad was:* Hopping around the continent? Making so many new friends from across the country and the world? Learning about half a dozen new ways to cook pasta? There have been so many awesome things about this trip so far, and I can’t believe that it’s going to be over in only about a month. My word of advice may sound cliché, but it holds true – take advantage of EVERY opportunity you have to explore here. You’re in Europe for four months of your life. Chances are, this will NEVER happen again. Or if it does, it’ll probably be because you have a job here, which means you’ll have much less free time. Travel as often as you can. Go out and meet people. Leave your comfort zone. I don’t care, just don’t spend every day only with other Cornellians.

*The most challenging things about my semester abroad was:* Fitting every travel plan into my schedule. Of course my plans didn’t always ideally match up with everyone else’s, so I’ve had to miss some great trips like Budapest and Lisbon. Still, do as much as you can. And make an effort to learn some Italian too. It helps.

*How did your semester abroad change your perspective?* That’s like asking how attending Cornell changed my perspective from when I was a high school student. I have met so many new people and experienced so many new things that I couldn’t possibly write down or explain them all. If I had to encapsulate it, I would say that I now have a much greater awareness for how big the world is, yet how similar people are. Physically being here makes this awareness much more visceral than just reading about Europe.

*Tips for future students* See the best thing about my semester. Take advantage of every opportunity.