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Practical Advice

Visa

The visa process was tedious. The Italian consulate in New York requests lots of paperwork and only offers a limited amount of weekly appointments (the visa office is only open Monday-Thursday for a few hours in the morning). I initially had trouble finding an available appointment, but the best thing you can do is refresh the consulate’s appointments page every evening at 6pm - this is when the consulate updates its schedule with cancellations and changes. After two weeks or more spent trying to get an appointment, I actually had to miss a day of my summer internship to attend whatever available time slot I eventually got.

However, after the appointment, I received my visa in a timely fashion and have had absolutely no issues with it while abroad. Overall, the process was inconvenient, but the Schengen visa has allowed me to freely travel to so many different places in Europe.

Housing

Housing at Bocconi is something that I got incredibly lucky with and will actually miss a ton when I get back to Cornell. There is a housing lottery where students choose three of their desired residence options and submit them to the school. The majority of exchange students get placed in Residenza Arcobaleno, a dorm located 30 minutes from the university by tram that is outdated and not centrally-located. It isn’t a “bad” place to live; it’s just in an inconvenient place, a little bit old, and forces residents to commute to campus.

I was so, so lucky to get my first choice of housing -- Residenza Bligny -- the newest Bocconi residence that is actually located right on campus and near major attractions in Milan. The building feels way more like a nice apartment building than a college dorm – there is a small lobby area with a security guard/reception area and marble floors, large kitchens on several floors, a basement study area, coin laundry, snack and coffee vending machines, etc.

I was randomly assigned an Italian roommate who has been so kind and helpful this entire semester. Everyone in the building has their own room, but the suite itself is shared with at least one other person. My suite has a nice bathroom and storage area, and my individual room is fully furnished with a huge closet, nice table area with a view of campus below, a safe, a desk lamp, and a comfy bed. Pillowcases and linens are provided by the university, which saved a ton of room in my suitcases. Once a week, residence staff members come into your suite to take your garbage, replace your linens, and mop your floor. It’s an incredibly nice facility and I don’t know how I got so lucky!

The one aspect of life in Residenza Bligny that was an initial challenge to adjust to is that I was the only American exchange student in the building. I don’t speak Italian and lots of students lived in suites with their friends, so socializing was hard. Not to worry, though – if you study at Bocconi and are in a similar situation, you’ll meet other exchange students in classes and at university events. Once I started cooking somewhat frequently on my floor’s kitchen, I made some Italian friends as well who are super friendly and will chat with you about anything.

Arrival

Immigration was no issue. To get to campus, the best route to take is the Malpensa Express train from Malpensa Terminal 1 to the Milano Nord Cadorna station. It takes about 39-45 minutes and is the fastest option, costing 13 euro/a little over 15 USD. Once you arrive at Cadorna, you can either take a taxi or Uber to Bocconi – this is the most direct route, as taking the tram/bus/metro will involve walking, and that’s no fun with jet lag and multiple suitcases.

During the first two weeks, there is an Italian crash course offered by Bocconi that many exchange students take. This is a great way to meet other exchange students and learn language basics. The classes were a bit long, but the material was useful and enough to help students understand simple Italian phrases and greetings. There is also a brief orientation
where campus officials go over the basics of the university, resources, exams, and the like.

The first few weeks will undoubtedly be filled with excitement and curiosity, but there will also be times where you feel overwhelmed. It is so normal to initially feel sad and homesick – every exchange student I know has felt this! My best advice is not to let it consume you and find ways to overcome any challenges – i.e. if you’re initially uncomfortable, make a bucket list of things you want to do and see in your host city, and start checking things off every day. This will not only introduce you to your new home, but will allow you to become way more comfortable with your surroundings, public transportation, and the overall way of life! Before you know it, the new city will feel a lot more like home. Your time abroad is limited, so take advantage of every day.

Academics

The University

The campus is much smaller than Cornell’s campus, which was actually a pretty big adjustment for me. I love having the ability to study and have classes in a multitude of locations at Cornell, but this isn’t really the case at Bocconi since it’s an urban campus. There are two main buildings where undergraduates have classes, referred to by students as “the Lions building” (Sarfatti) and “Velodromo” (Sraffa). The facilities are nice, with marble floors and even a piano in the main entryway of Sarfatti, where students will often play beautiful songs on them between classes. There are two statues of Lions in Sarfatti, and campus legend says that those who walk between the two lions will not graduate.

There is a really small gym on campus as well as a small library that fills up really quickly. At Cornell, we are blessed with a large amount of libraries to do work in – I’ve never experienced not getting a seat in a library until coming to Bocconi. However, there are lots of cafes nearby that can be utilized for work. Many students study in Panini Durini, Dahlia Lab, or Giodocet, all located on Via Bocconi. If you want to get off campus, it’s also nice to take a tram to a different neighborhood and do some work in a café there.

The location of campus is great because it is within walking distance of the Duomo di Milano and other main attractions in the city. It isn’t far from major train stations that will connect you with other cities/the airport. There are lots of restaurants and grocery stores surrounding campus as well. Everything you need is close by.

Courses

There was a pre-enroll period for exchange students in the morning. It’s similar to the Cornell pre-enroll and Bocconi sends you info on how to go about selecting courses beforehand.

I took 5 courses – Management of Fashion Companies, Principles of E-Marketing and E-Commerce, Marketing Communication, Sociology, and Economic History. Most exchange students here are only required to take 3-4 courses pass/fail by their home university, so taking 5 graded was a lot of work. It was sometimes challenging to stay grounded in an environment where other students did not have the same academic requirements as me, so making a schedule to balance travel and school helped.

Unlike Cornell’s classes that are mostly limited to 55 mins or slightly longer, I actually had a class at Bocconi that was nearly four hours long. I think my shortest class was an hour and a half. Because of the longer class times, I had class from 8:45am-5:45pm with only one small break on Thursdays. It was exhausting! This allowed me to have Friday available for travel, but was tough. My class schedule was pretty packed. If there is a way for students to take 4 classes graded in the future instead, that would be a lot more comparable to a Cornell semester in terms of coursework and time spent in class. The rigor of the classes here is the same as Cornell.

The grading here is a bit different than at home, as most tests are graded out of 30/31. Some courses I took had papers, others had presentations, and they all had finals. Some classes offer optional midterms; I’d recommend taking them so that your grade doesn’t entirely rest on the final exam. The professors seem to care a lot about what they are teaching and are available if you need them. A lot of them are well-connected within Milan and bring in really interesting guest speakers (i.e. Accenture Fashion, Swarovski, etc.) – this was really valuable to me. In my Principles of E-Marketing and E-Commerce class, we actually had a group case project where we tackled a real-life business challenge and presented to the CEO of HRS. Despite the workload, I felt like I got really relevant academic and professional experience throughout the semester.

Difference between studying at Cornell and at your host university

People dress really nicely to class – guys in nice sweaters/pants and girls in dresses, tights, etc. It was a funny environment to be a part of, because you could always tell who the Americans were (we were all dressed more comfortably). It was interesting to
observe, since Milan truly is a fashion capital and it was visible even through the students.

I mentioned this above but the different class timing (i.e. longer classes) was a major difference between Cornell and Bocconi, as well as only having one small library. Also, in some lectures, a few things were lost in translation – there were a few slides where I wasn’t sure what the lecturer was trying to say because some part of the translation was off. Besides that, the rigor was very similar to that at Cornell and the students here are smart and hardworking.

Life Abroad

Language

The Italian crash course was offered at the beginning of the semester for exchange students. There is also an option to take Italian throughout the semester, but most students just take the crash course. People in Milan primarily speak Italian, whereas in some other Italian cities, you can find a ton of people who speak English. This is still the case in the major tourist areas of Milan, but it’s good to know basic terms and greetings in case someone you encounter does not know English.

Learn how to say your address, how to order food on a menu, basic pleasantries, and the like. Worse comes to worst, if someone does not understand any English, you can easily pull out Google Translate on your phone. The security guards/receptionists in my residence did not speak English, but always appreciated that I translated my questions for them.

Health and Safety

Staying healthy is really important when studying abroad – you’re moving at a fast pace, traveling frequently, and studying in a new environment, which can be tiring. You are exposed to a lot of new challenges that you have likely never encountered in your life before, which can cause stress. Try to continue the healthy habits you would normally have in Ithaca to make the transition easier. A lot of people quickly get burned out from lots of travel and simply living in a new country if they don’t pay attention to their health. If you ever do get sick, you can use ISOS services to connect you with a local doctor or go to a farmacia to pick up OTC medicine.

In terms of safety, I never felt unsafe abroad. Pickpocketing, however, is huge in Europe, so just be vigilant of your surroundings and buy travel locks if you’re really worried. Use the same caution that you’d use if you were back in the US – i.e. avoid train stations and the metro late at night, read accommodation reviews online before booking, always be in touch with friends and family, and don’t separate from your friends if you’re with a group.

Overall exchange experience

I loved it. There is so much of the world to see and experience, and I was able to effectively manage schoolwork and travel every weekend of the semester except for times around exams. This experience changed my mindset about the world and myself and pushed me out of my comfort zone in the best way possible. It was a challenging yet transformative and amazing semester and I wish I could spend more time abroad! I’ll never forget my special time at Bocconi.

Additional Tips for future students

Packing

Italian women in Milan are extremely fashion-forward but also dress very conservatively; even when it’s hot at the beginning of the semester, you rarely see tank tops/short dresses. Layers are key. Bring jeans, sweaters, a few nice shirts, and generally what you’d bring to a semester at Cornell. Since Milan is known for its fashion, there are beautiful stores here where you can buy additional clothes – save some room in your suitcase because there are a lot of surprisingly affordable and gorgeous options.

Also, don’t bother bringing big rain boots, pillows, or items like that that will take up lots of space in your suitcases – I’d highly recommend bringing comfortable sneakers for all of your traveling instead. If you’re still concerned with packing lists, contact the International Student Desk and see if they have any advice.

If you need something while abroad that you didn’t bring from home (for example, it was extremely hot for the first two to three weeks abroad, so I needed a fan in my room) you can easily order it from amazon.it or find it in stores here.

Anything else that students should be aware when studying at your host location

Make the most of your semester and try to do and see everything that you want! Don’t be afraid to do solo travel if you want to go somewhere that your friends are less interested in. I did a solo trip to Stockholm and it was one of my favorite trips. If you have free time, go to Milano Centrale and take the train to do a day trip nearby! There are so many beautiful, accessible locations near Milan that make for wonderful day trips that can expose
you to amazing things in your own host country – I’d recommend Stresa/Lake Maggiore, Bologna, Parma, and more.

Utilize budget airlines for flights (Ryanair, Easyjet, etc.) and services like Google Flights, eDreams, Skyscanner, FlixBus, hostelworld.com and more to get good deals. I also loved using the Trainline EU and GoEuro apps throughout the semester.

Lastly, keep a travel journal or something similar to document your experiences. Take lots of pictures, too! The semester flies by, and it’s so nice to look back and read through everything that you have seen and accomplished.