Practical Information

Hej, jeg hedder Kenny! I am a CALS student majoring in bioengineering and minoring in food science. I spent the second semester of my junior year studying abroad at the University of Copenhagen (KU) in Denmark. Before going to Europe the only country I’d visited outside the US was Canada, and never further than Toronto. That said, I had an unusual experience in that my great aunt lives in Copenhagen, and I have some other relatives who live in other parts of Denmark who I got to visit. For me studying abroad was as much about getting to visit my family as it was about school and traveling. At the same time, it was in many ways a dream come true because I had wanted to visit Denmark for most of my life! I had an amazing time, and even without a Danish connection I highly recommend it as a place to study.

In many ways getting set up to go there was one of the most difficult parts. To study in Copenhagen you need to get a student visa, which all together costs about $550. You pay $250 something online when you first register, but to get your visa you then need to go to New York City in person to complete the paperwork. When there, you need to pay an additional $260 in cash, which is not especially clear online, so make sure you have this with you (or stop by the ATM downstairs from the office).

Otherwise, the biggest hurdle is making a semester abroad work in your schedule at Cornell. As an engineer, most of my classes just fulfill electives since the University of Copenhagen does not have an engineering curriculum. That said, with proper planning there are some courses, particularly for environmental engineers, which can fulfill some upper level courses. Terrestrial environmental chemistry comes to mind, but I made have just made that subject up. If you are thinking about studying abroad, chances are you will need to plan out your course load for the rest of your time at Cornell in order to make your degree work in four years, especially for majors with a relatively fixed curriculum.

Packing

As you are getting closer to your departure date, the main thing I would say is to relax! I got very stressed out only to have my arrival go very smoothly. Every trip is different, but no matter what it isn’t worth getting stressed over. Chances are, you are considering studying abroad to do just the opposite. For me, part of this stress came in the form of packing. I like to travel light for trips, but in this case I was moving to a new place four and a half months, so it’s difficult to leave stuff behind. The Spring I spent in Copenhagen was especially cold, so the only time I wore shorts was to work out. The most important things I brought were a warm winter coat (and hat and gloves) and waterproof boots. The first day I did not wear my winter coat was April 16th (I arrived January 3rd and left May 15th) and the boots were a lifesaver the whole trip when biking through the snow or rain. As for things I would not bring, I brought a suit because my aunt told me ahead of time that we were going to the opera, and it wasn’t necessary. You don’t need to dress up that much for most of the Danish concert halls, with the possible exception of the new opera house. Danes in general don’t even wear suits and ties to work unless they have very high profile jobs. I would say to bring clothing you tend to wear a lot, and make that work.

As for weekend trips, I typically traveled with a hiking bag a little larger than a school backpack. Everyone has their own method, but I would wear one pair of jeans and bring a second, and have a couple t-shirts with one
button down that I could wear over the t-shirts. Then a book, flight information, toiletries etc. and maybe a little homework if I knew I would have a lot of travel time. Definitely check the weather before you go somewhere.

Arriving/Getting Settled

KU has a mentorship program that includes mentors who meet you at the airport and can answer questions for you when you arrive. Unfortunately because I came for the pre-semester course on January 3rd one of my mentors was on vacation and the other couldn’t come because she had a meeting about a test she was going to take. I never heard from either of them again, although I didn’t reach out to them either. My aunt was able to meet me, so that made it easy, and she was my mentor throughout my stay. Surprisingly, I was assigned a 3rd mentor by a faculty I was not a part of, but I figured I might as well attend the dinner that was set up and meet him. We ended up hanging out a couple times and I learned a lot about aspects of younger Danish culture I didn’t get from my aunt. I would recommend signing up for the program, because I know a couple people who had pretty good relationships with their mentors, and they can help you get settled. If you sign up the worst that can happen is that they never see you and you have to find your way to your place when you first arrive.

Once you get set up, living in Copenhagen is wonderful. You absolutely have to get a bicycle, even if you don’t bike much in the states. It is the easiest, fastest and most fun way to get around and experience the city. Typically, you can get a good used bicycle for under 1000 kroner, which is a little less than $200 USD. Most of the people I know got very good used bikes between 500-800 kroner. If you are a biker, you know what you are looking for, if not, make sure the bike fits you, make sure you get lights, and consider adding a basket if the bike supports it (regardless of gender) you will make use of it. You don’t need a brand new, state of the art bike, but it is worth investing in one that has working gears with a straight set of tires and one you enjoy riding. A crappy bike makes getting around a pain instead of being fun. There are lots of used bike shops around, or check out thefacebook group “ESN CPH: Give-Buy-Sell-Rent” or dba.dk which is like Danish Craigslist. I would also recommend reaching out to Cornell students there from the preceding semester, sometimes you can make arrangements to get a bike through them.

Eating out in Copenhagen is really pricey, but grocery stores are very reasonable. If you need to grab food on the go, shawarma is usually your cheapest bet, don’t pay more than 20 or 25 kroner for a pitabread shawarma unless you have a really good reason to, and order it with hvidløg (garlic) and chili sauce! Besides one of my favorite parts about Copenhagen was eating and cooking with the other people in my apartment. Since the science school through KU organizes international student housing, depending on where you live you get to meet people from all over.

Housing

Chances are if you do the University housing and get a shared apartment or flat you won’t be living with Danes, but other international students. That is what I did and I met a ton of Portuguese people and had a German roommate as well. This was fine for me since I have Danish relatives and I met a ton of amazing students from all over Europe, but if it’s important to you to meet Danes a Kollegium might be a better option. Danes are known for being very reserved; my mentor described this by saying that typically Danes won’t make the first move to get to know you, but if you make the effort to meet them it’s very easy to make a friend for life. I also think that depending on what apartment you live in it is easy to feel isolated from many other students compared to a Cornell dorm or Collegetown apartment. This can be good or bad depending on your outlook, but it may require you to be more outgoing and put in more effort to make/maintain friendships than you would at Cornell.

Courses

As for classes, my impression overall is that on average courses are easier in Copenhagen than at Cornell, but not necessarily. All courses at KU are taught in English, which puts most Americans at a huge advantage compared to the people you study with. When I worked in a group the Danes and international students would
always turn to me or other Americans for the authority on anything related to the English language. The subject matter is similar to Cornell courses, but the course I took on food enzymes was not what I hoped for. It was a project based class that was more like a very involved lab report than a full on project. That isn’t to say I breezed through it, but I didn’t learn especially much, although I have heard more positive experiences from other courses. As for electives, the pre-semester course in Danish was great. You meet a ton of international students and have a lot of fun, and pick some basic phrases to get you on your feet. Plus the teachers are a great resource to answer questions about residence permits and things like that. I chose to continue Danish language and am glad I did. It was more important to me than most people because I have Danish family, but I felt I learned more about Danish culture and, while the language is very difficult, I didn’t find the workload that bad. If you enjoy the pre-semester language course I highly recommend continuing, but if you choose not to, you don’t need to learn more to enjoy your visit.

Things to note: there was a 6 day break between the end of the pre-semester course and block 3 for the science college, in addition to an Easter break and the week between blocks 3 and 4 (the science faculty, formerly called LIFE, is on a quarter system called blocks) so these give the opportunity for longer breaks if you want to travel. I personally only took courses in block 3, in addition to the culture courses and language courses which went longer, so that I could get back in time for my summer job in mid-May. Also, I recommend the culture course on architecture and urban planning because they point out what a lot of the buildings in the city are, old and new, to give some background to the buildings you see every day.

Compared to the US books for class are cheaper than dirt. Also, in terms of money you probably don’t need a Danish bank account, but if you decide to open one you can do so through danskebank for free, they have an account type set up for international students. This has the advantage of getting a debit card with a chip which is very common in Europe (as opposed to just a magnetic strip).

Overall Experience

On the whole I had an awesome time studying abroad. I worked out my schedule so that I only had class four days a week so that I could go on weekend trips if I wanted to, and I made use of this. I went to 9 different countries while also traveling around Denmark, and I feel that I struck a balance between living and experiencing Copenhagen in addition to taking the opportunity to see Europe while I was there. It really is a great city with a ton of culture, and you start to understand why Denmark is the happiest country in the world. I also feel that although it is very open to English speakers, Denmark feels very unique from the rest of Europe. While in Copenhagen I recommend Science and Cocktails, a lecture series on science topics given in English for free in Christiania, see scienceandcocktails.org, and you have to splurge on the city’s bakeries. I lived right by two huge parks to run in, and I was able to rock climb at Nørrebrohallen through Nørrebro Klatre Klub (I am a climbing instructor at COE, and NKK has a really cheap student membership). You can see new things, do things you enjoy now, and meet some amazing people along the way. The only thing I would change is that because I gave myself so much time to travel, when I was in Copenhagen and my roommates were all in class there were moments when I felt like I had too much time on my hands and didn’t know what to do with myself. If this happens to you, I recommend calling up someone, go for a climb, see a free museum or site (there are tons) or just relax in the park and enjoy Copenhagen.