I think I got a great picture of the Netherlands. I’m extremely grateful for my housing situation and for the fact that I knew a good amount of Dutch before arriving. The Dutch have many traditions and do a lot of things differently (sometimes/usually better) and I was really able to appreciate that. Wageningen being a very international town was also a huge asset. It widened my cultural worldview so much more than I could have imagined. I never would have thought that the two closest friends I would make at WUR would be Iranian and Russian PhD students studying computer-supported collaborative learning. I also benefited so much academically from this international community, especially in classes like Gender and Natural Resources where different perspectives are extremely eye-opening. (We had students from Mali, Germany, France, NL, Bolivia, Peru, Bhutan, Ethiopia... in one class) I really fell in love with NL and WUR and I am strongly considering returning there for my master’s degree next fall.

Practical Information

Visa

A visa wasn’t needed for my university, but a residence permit was. It was fairly easy to obtain. I tried to apply for a visa before arriving in NL to speed up the residence permit process but because of time constraints I ended up just applying for the residence permit once I arrived. It was fairly easy to get the components for the application. My advice would be to bring extra passport-size photos and a valid birth certificate in order to be able to register with the municipality and receive the residence permit more quickly/easily. I picked up my residence permit in Den Bosch, which was a fairly short trip and a nice city to visit regardless.

Resources

The Exchange Student Network (ESN) at WUR was a great resource. As a member I was invited to welcome drinks, international dinners, and excursions to the Keukenhof, Paris, Amsterdam and many other locations. Any questions that students had could be answered at the student desk in the Forum building at the university. In NL there are tourist information stations marked by VVV signs in most major cities and towns. They will provide maps and assistance to find different attractions or locations. Social events at the university and town tend to travel well by word of mouth.

International office at WUR

The reception upon arrival was good because of the ESN. They had welcome drinks and dinners and made it very easy to meet other international students. They offered a buddy program but I never ended up signing up. The international office staff was very helpful and made the residence permit application process easier as well as getting a WUR card and registering for classes etc.

Academics

Like many European universities, there isn’t really a true centralized campus at WUR. The Forum building, Atlas, and a few other major academic buildings are located closely (see photo above) together but Leeuwenborch and some other buildings where students have classes are located in different clusters throughout town. Students generally hang out at the Forum building when on campus. There are accessible labs, wifi, and libraries on campus at the Forum building and other buildings. There is also a public library in the city center that has free wifi. The wifi on the WUR campus is somewhat difficult to access with a Mac but the instructions can be found on the WUR computer support website.
Courses

The course enrollment process was simple for me as I just told my professors my registration number and they signed меня у себя. The classes that I took were equal parts discussion sections and lectures. Homework wasn’t given nearly as much as it was at Cornell. Most of my work was done in independent projects and readings. The only exam I had to take was for Adaptation to Climate Change and it was much more straightforward than any finals I have taken at Cornell. As it was a new class, they created a practice exam for us and it told us essentially what kinds of questions would be on the test. The courses were graded without a curve and based mostly on involvement in discussions, papers, and group or personal projects. I took four classes, I would recommend taking one or more additional classes to what I took. Sometimes I felt I had too much free time because the courses weren’t as rigorous as Cornell classes.

Life Abroad

Language

Most Dutch people speak English very well. I had a few guest speakers in lectures that had a little bit of trouble with the language but for the most part they were fluent. I only encountered a handful of people that spoke no English at all. I also had to do a project with a student whose problems with English really were detrimental to our work (but I feel like that is a very rare case). I would definitely take a language course before going because even though you don’t need to know Dutch to survive in the Netherlands, it makes one feel more at home to be able to communicate in the native language, especially if your housemates are Dutch.

Unfortunately I think that this is the last year Cornell will offer Dutch language courses but using a self-study guide like Rosetta Stone could also help. They had many opportunities at the university for international students to take Dutch courses though I did not attend any of these while I was there as I took Dutch 1220 here at Cornell the semester before.

Banking

I did not open a local account but I would definitely recommend it if you can. However, in order to make a Dutch bank account, you need a BSN number, which involves registering at the municipality, which also involves a lot of hoops to jump through. My recommendation would be to contact the university before arrival and ask them what documents you will need to open a bank account. This became a little problematic when I was already there and needed a notarized copy of my birth certificate mailed to Wageningen from the US. When you do open an account, the most popular banks are Rabobank and ABN Amro, they were all over every town I went to, ING is less common. I used my American VISA debit card at the Dutch bank ATMs which ended up being more costly but easier than opening my own account. If I was going to be there any longer I definitely would have opened an account though.

Housing

WUR arranged for my housing through the exchange student office. A connection was found in a student flat where a Dutch student was going abroad to Sweden and needed a sub-renter. It worked out perfectly for me as I really liked my housemates and living situation. There were 12 of us living in the flat (myself, one French exchange student, and 10 Dutch bachelor’s and master’s students). This really gave me exposure to the Dutch language and culture. I paid 214 euro a month for my room in the flat. Utilities were included. It was right in the center of town off of the main shopping street (Hoogstraat) and a quick 10-15 min bike ride to campus depending on the building. One of the best things about this housing situation was that we often voluntarily cooked communal meals. There was a website called eetlijst.nl where anyone who was planning on cooking would write that down on a message board and people could sign up before 5pm if they wanted to join. This was great for busy nights when one didn’t have much time to cook dinner. I would absolutely recommend this type of housing in every way.

Transportation

Buses, trains, and bikes. Everyone needs a bike in Wageningen (or maybe NL in general), there is no question about that. There are lots of ads on university poster boards or online (marktplaats.nl) for people selling fairly cheap bikes so it’s not hard to find a pretty good one, same goes for selling it when you leave. Train and bus tickets can all be put on the OV-chipkaart. It’s a card that you can refill which pays for buses, trains, and even the trams in Amsterdam. I would recommend getting one of these (it’s cheaper and easier) and also getting a discount card for the train (this can be done at Utrecht or Amsterdam stations I believe - I didn’t have one but other people seemed to get a lot of use out of these discount cards)

Communication

I bought a Dutch SIM card and prepaid phone because they are only about 30 euro and it is much easier and cheaper than trying to get your American phone and plan to work over there. The plan was under the company Lebara.. which was good for international calls and I have no complaints about. However, calling on this phone became very expensive and buying minutes was a little annoying (can be done at Albert Heijn or many other food or convenient stores) so I ended up calling someone back on Skype whenever they called me from the US on my cell. Skype is great, basically. Not only can you videochat if the person has a camera and microphone but you can also call phones from your computer for a very
very low price. I bought a ten dollar Skype credit while I was there and didn’t run out at all. Sending packages takes a few weeks depending on the size and it can be expensive if you don’t look into weight prices before figuring out exactly what you want to send. Mail is easy, took a few days. Also cheap, it never cost more than a few euros to send normal mail.

Social Activities

I met many students from the host country, this was mostly through my living situation and my classes. I became involved with the Wageningen Environmental Platform and the Exchange Student Network, which was constantly putting on events. Local students go out to bars for fun mostly, or go dancing, or many travel a lot. Many Dutch students live close to home and go home on the weekends at Wageningen, so on the weekends it is mostly international students in town.

Shopping

Groceries could be bought at the chain stores like Albert Heijn and C1000 or at local grocers where things were very fresh and the people were very friendly. There was also an outdoor market in the city center every Wednesday where food, toiletries, gifts etc. could all be purchased from local vendors. Kruidvat was the main pharmacy and HEMA is a Target equivalent where one can get housewares and clothes etc. They were both a one or two minute walk from my flat, and the market was right down the street. Food was SO much cheaper than in the US and everything was so fresh. Store hours are quite strange in Wageningen. Basically everything is closed on Sundays and opens late on Mondays, and closes before 5pm on all other days besides Albert Heijn. There was really nothing I couldn’t find if I looked hard enough.

Health and Safety

I felt extremely safe in Wageningen, probably even more so than Ithaca. I’d recommend getting temporary health insurance for the period that you’re there because NL requires you to when you apply for a visa or residence permit. I used AON for my insurance and I’d recommend them. One should definitely keep in mind that many normally over the counter drugs or items in the US you can’t get in NL without a prescription. These can be sent from home in the case of an emergency though.

Travel

While abroad I traveled to many cities within NL because the great train system made that easy, including the Keukenhof, Rotterdam, Nijmegen, Den Haag, Maastrict, Den Bosch, Arnhem, Utrecht and Amsterdam several times. I also traveled to Brugge in Belgium, Paris, and Bristol in the UK. The ESN arranged these sorts of trips within and outside of NL all the time. Traveling wasn’t terribly expensive. I took a budget airline to the UK and the trains and buses to Belgium and France were well-priced. I'd recommend asking people where to go rather than relying on a guidebook if you don't have to.