Practical Advice

Visa

There are quite a few documents you’ll need when you apply for your visa - make sure you start early so you can get everything together! The insurance requirement is particularly specific, so call your insurance provider to confirm you’ll be covered. The visa requires that you are covered for repatriation, but the Frontier MedEX plan that Cornell offers for students abroad will cover you so you don’t need to buy additional insurance for that.

You must appear in person with the required documentation at the Austrian consulate to be approved for your visa. My application was accepted when I went to the consulate, and it then only took about two weeks for the consulate to send my passport back with the visa.

Since I did not have any items to declare I did not have to go through customs or interact with immigration upon arrival - I was able to pick up my luggage at the baggage claim and leave the airport.

Packing

I did not bring an outlet adapter - I brought a 220V converter for my electronics, but I didn’t bring a plug converter for a three-hole socket. When I arrived I realized that my computer charger needed an adapter with a three-hole socket, so I was desperately searching online for a place to buy one before my battery died! Luckily I found a Saturn store, which is Austria’s equivalent of Best Buy, and was able to purchase a universal plug adapter. It would have been much easier though if I had realized this before and bought an outlet converter in the US.

Bringing a pair of rain boots is not necessary (I didn’t bring any) but if you are planning on taking courses with excursions (field trips) it is a good idea to bring a sturdy and waterproof pair of shoes or boots. I bought a nice pair of hiking shoes at the Jack Wolfskin store in Vienna and it was definitely a wise investment! I also didn’t bring a good rain/wind proof jacket and I ended up buying one there, which was nice for the spring and when I went on excursions. Therefore, I’d recommend packing one as well.

Don’t bother packing a bunch of toiletries (shampoo/conditioner, toothpaste, soap, laundry detergent, etc.) - they just take up space and add weight to your luggage! You’ll easily find a grocery or drug store that sells all of these items.

Also, be wary of bringing too many clothes - this is difficult since you have to pack for winter, spring and summer but being willing to do laundry more often will save you tons of space and weight in your luggage. Everything adds up fast so when in doubt just don’t pack it.

Arrival

There was no real “reception” upon arriving at my host university - it was nothing like coming to Cornell for the first time. For the start of our official orientation meeting we just all met in a room in the main building - there are no “orientation leaders” or “move-in helpers” - it’s very independent. The reception was friendly but very hands-off.

I was offered a buddy and I am SO GLAD I decided to take one! My buddy was extremely helpful - she offered to pick me up from the airport, told me how to get to BOKU from my dorm, told me where to buy the adapter I needed, showed me how to register for classes and exams - everything I needed to know! It was great having my own personal guide to BOKU and Vienna.

The BOKU orientation is very different from freshman year at Cornell. We had a morning meeting where they gave us a handbook, then we split up into groups and did a scavenger hunt around campus. It wasn’t the most enthralling event but at least we got to see the buildings. The second day we had a library information session and a session on using BOKUonline. On the third morning we got a tour of Muthgasse, the new BOKU campus located at Heiligenstadt. Ultimately it was about 10 hours of orientation spread over 3 days, so basically pretty laid back but nice because you could spend the rest of the day exploring campus on your own.

Also, there was a really nice dinner at a Wine Tavern on the last day of orientation - that was definitely the best part.

The international office staff is extremely nice and helpful - I only corresponded with my coordinator via e-mail but she
quickly returned my e-mails with sufficient answers so it worked out well.

**Academics**

**The University**

BOKU’s centralized campus is located on Peter Jordan Strasse in the north-western part of Vienna. It’s basically seven buildings located on the same street, so it definitely has the feel of a city campus. BOKU has an additional campus near Heiligenstadt, which houses their biotechnology, food science and water engineering programs. There is also a campus in Tulln, a town about 30 minutes by train outside of Vienna. I had a research-based soil science class at that campus.

The library (located in William-Exner House) has computers on the ground floor and in the basement, and there is a computer lab in the Baracke above the Mensa. You can access wifi in certain buildings on campus, but you first need to register at the Dean’s Office (Gregor-Mendel House) and receive a pin number to create your BOKU account.

TUWI is a bar/restaurant type place located on BOKU’s main campus. The place has a really unique vibe- they have concerts at night and the food is homemade from ingredients grown by the students. Basically if Dilmun Hill owned a restaurant, it’d be TUWI. It’s a great hangout spot, especially when the weather is nice and you can sit outside.

**Courses**

The course enrollment process takes place through BOKUonline and is quite different from Cornell. Unfortunately there is no “schedulizer” or “chequred” to help you create your schedule. Classes are also not offered at regular time intervals and some classes might occur at the same time on some days. This makes creating your schedule rather difficult. However, unlike Cornell you can sign up for classes even if they’re offered at the same time (and it’s okay to miss a lecture for one class to attend a lecture for another class) so that makes creating your schedule a bit easier. The courses are also worth less credit than Cornell courses (usually only one or two credits per class) and there’s no limit on the number of classes you sign up for. There’s also no set “add/drop date” for most classes at BOKU so you can add or drop courses any time throughout the semester.

The class structure really depends on the course. Some classes are lecture-only, but the main difference from Cornell is that BOKU lectures are typically two or three hours minimum and usually held once or twice a week for a few weeks during the semester. However, I had other lecture courses that were held during a single week and lasted from 8:00am until 5:00pm.

Other courses consist of lectures and “excursions”, which are basically all-day labs. The excursions are really fun and usually field trips in the Alps or the Austrian countryside so you should definitely sign up for at least one!

The scheduling was also very different- some weeks I had classes all day Monday through Friday and other weeks I had class on only one day. It was different every single week so it can be difficult to keep track of your schedule.

I only had “homework” for a few courses. The homework always consisted of papers, either essays or field reports from excursions. The courses that did have homework assigned one or two papers, anywhere from two to eight pages in length. Compared to classes that assign homework at Cornell there was definitely less homework at BOKU.

Most courses have exams, and for many courses this will be your only grade for the course. You must sign up for exams on BOKUonline, and for some classes the slots fill up quickly which means you have to sign up immediately when registration opens or choose another date to take the exam. The exams take only about one hour and are pretty straightforward.

The courses aren’t curved because they are typically much smaller (usually around 20 students per class). The grading was very fair though, so this wasn’t a problem. For many courses your grade is based entirely on a single exam. Other courses base the grade off a paper and an exam. Some of my courses only had a single paper.

I took 14 classes, but since BOKU courses are shorter and worth less credit I ended up receiving 19.25 Cornell credits. Taking 14 courses was definitely manageable and I enjoyed the ability to take courses in soil science, forestry, limnology, river morphology and German.

I didn’t have to take any exams early, but there were times when I had to take a makeup exam since I couldn’t take the regularly scheduled exam. Most courses will offer the exam on two or three different dates so you can plan ahead and schedule your exam when it is most convenient for you. However, for one class I could not attend either date so I e-mailed the professor and we set up a specific time for me to go to his office and take the exam.

Another professor’s exam was a group discussion on the last day of class, which I couldn’t attend, so I scheduled an oral exam with him at a different time. We basically just discussed how to make the course better and he gave me a 1, so that was nice.
Life Abroad

Language

Most of the professors’ English is good and we had no problem communicating. Many of my professors, knowing that I was from the United States, would look at me during lectures for help finding the right English word for a scientific phrase or obscure idea, which sometimes made for an interesting class experience.

I found that sometimes the wording of questions on exams could be a bit ambiguous or they’d ask a very broad question, which made it difficult to understand exactly what the professor wanted, but if you ask them to clarify they will try their best to do so.

There were a few cases where the language barrier was a bit of a problem. Two of my classes said they would be offered in English, but on the first day one professor said, “Sorry, my English isn’t very good, do you mind if I teach in German?” The other students were all Austrian and therefore happy the professor wanted to speak German, and I wasn’t going to be the only student who asked him to speak in English so I just let him lecture in German. The notes and exam were in English so it wasn’t too much of an issue, but overall I can’t say I got much out of that class by attending lectures. Looking back I realize it would have been no problem for me to have raised my hand and asked him to teach in English since the course was offered as being taught in English, but it is a tricky situation that may arise while you are at BOKU.

The second professor who had trouble with English actually just started her class off speaking in German (and again, the course was advertised as being taught in English). I was really confused because I knew I was in the right course and that it was supposed to be in English. She actually asked us in German, “Who here only speaks English?” Thankfully I knew enough German to understand and raise my hand, but it was pretty funny she asked that particular question in German. The professor then provided me with the notes she had in English, but it wasn’t the entire course material. She taught the class in German and when we got to the parts where there were only German notes available she basically told me, “Yeah, you can leave now if you want.” Since there was no exam at the end for this class (my grade was based solely on attendance) I just left since I wasn’t really getting that much out of the course. That was definitely the most bizarre class I took at BOKU.

Most students’ English is quite good at BOKU, but there are exceptions- both with the Austrian and the exchange students. The language barrier can sometimes be unfortunate- I met some people who were really nice, but it was difficult to become closer since we couldn’t really communicate beyond basic conversation. However, this situation with students was rare- even if students’ English isn’t perfect it’s very easy to make friends- you just have to be patient and willing to talk a bit slower and clearer so they understand everything you’re saying. People will really like having you in their project groups- as a native English speaker you will automatically become the group-designated speaker for presentations and the editor for group papers.

Many of the young people in Vienna speak English, but they really like it if you speak German. If I was in a restaurant or shopping I would try to speak German as much as I could, but sometimes I’d have to ask to switch to English. When this happened many of the locals could speak English but there were some times when this wasn’t the case (especially among older people), and then we’d communicate with simple phrases and lots of hand gestures. Honestly, at first it was kind of tough to even go do something like grocery shopping because I knew I wasn’t going to speak English, but after I got used to it I had a lot of fun speaking German.

It’s not absolutely necessary to know German while living in Vienna because so many people speak English. However, I’m extremely glad I had one semester of German before I got here, and I REALLY wish I had taken more. Knowing a little bit of the language helped when reading signs, riding on the U-Bahn, ordering food, and buying tickets. I didn’t know quite enough German to speak well with the locals since they spoke so quickly and with the Austrian dialect, but I could interact to a degree. I especially wished I knew more German when I got “off the beaten path” since the amount of people who know English really drops off when you get outside of the tourist section of Vienna. So yes, I’d recommend taking at least one semester of German at Cornell, more if possible!

BOKU offers two types of pre-semester courses- a “beginner” course for students who have never taken German and an “intermediate/advanced” course. I took the “intermediate/advanced” course and honestly found it very difficult with only one semester of German. I explained this to the instructor, and she was very understanding and would give me a little extra help/explanation during class. There is no test for the class, but I still felt overwhelmed and didn’t always understand what was going on. I think if you’ve had two semesters of German at Cornell you’ll be prepared for the class, but if you’ve only had one semester I’d recommend not taking a pre-semester class and instead register for a class during the regular academic semester since they offer courses that will fit your ability level better.

Banking

I would definitely recommend opening a local bank account. Bank Austria would probably be your best bet since they have free student checking and are a member of the UniCredit group, which means you can withdraw cash for free at any ATM in the EU. Also, if you decide to get housing with oeAD (the student housing for students studying at all Vienesse universities) you can easily pay your rent with a payment slip they send you every month. The only drawback of having a
Bank Austria account is that you must pay a fee in order to deposit money into the account, but if you just make a single large deposit at the beginning having a local account will still save you money.

Housing

BOKU doesn’t arrange housing for you- you’ll have to sign up through the OeaD office, which handles housing for all international students in Vienna. All you have to do is sign up on their website, indicate your preferred housing accommodation (single, double, shared bathroom, private bathroom, kitchen, etc.) and they’ll do their best to find you a match!

I stayed in what’s known as a “Wohngemeinschaft” (or WG)- it’s akin to a suite on West Campus- I had a single bedroom and shared a bathroom and kitchen with two other students. I personally think this is the way to go! It was nice having my own space, but I loved having suitemates to hang out with. Plus, I could cook for myself and save money. My rent was 415euro per month, which is about $550. The utilities were included in this, and my suite/room was cleaned once a week. An 18euro/month “activity fee” came out of my housing deposit, the remainder of which I received when I moved out. There was also a 45euro final cleaning fee.

BOKU doesn’t have a meal plan, but when you get your student ID card you should go to the OH and sign up for a discount on food places around campus. Food was cheap at Hofer/PennyMarkt and I had a kitchen so I cooked for myself a lot. I went out with friends for dinner sometimes- just stay away from District 1 (city center) where food is much more expensive! The street vendors usually have good food for cheap - at the street carts you can buy these really good sandwiches called Kebaps for 2,80euro - I ate a lot of these... there is also some really good local food on these carts such as Kasekrainer (cheese-filled sausage).

Transportation

Vienna’s public transportation is SEHR GUT! (that’s “very good”) The U-Bahn (subway), Strassen-Bahn (street tram) and busses are always on time and come every few minutes. A student pass is 150 euro per semester- definitely worth the price!

You can buy tickets from a machine at any U-Bahn stop. To purchase a student pass though you have to go to one of the “main stations” and sign up at a ticket counter. Buy the student semester pass- it will save you a ton of money.

Communication

I bought a global-ready phone at Verizon and activated the SIM card before I left. I had an international calling plan through Verizon- for $4.99/month I had rates of $0.99/minute calling, 0.05/received text and 0.50/sent text. This is pretty expensive, so I didn’t use it much, and actually only had it so I could call my mom when I first landed in Vienna. It was nice to have the global-ready phone though when my dad came to visit me since he had a global-ready phone and we were able to text and get ahold of each other while he was in Europe. Ultimately though Skype is your best friend for talking to people... even if the connection isn’t always great, it’s free.

I bought an Austrian phone for 20euro, which came with a SIM card for calling Austrian numbers. The calling and texting plan was 10euro/month and gave me plenty of minutes and texts to talk to everyone in Vienna. A1 is the best provider- you can go to the A1 store on Mariahilferstrasse to buy the phone and get the plan.

I sent my family and friends some postcards and it took about a week. Stamps to send letters to the US cost 1.40euro. I sent my family a package and it took a little over a week to arrive. It was also pretty expensive- it cost me about $25 to send 3 pounds of goods.

Social activities

You will definitely meet more international students than Austrian students, but there are opportunities to meet Austrians. There will be Austrian students in your courses, but many prefer to speak German so being fluent is definitely the best way to meet Austrians. You can also sign up for the Tandem Learning program, where you’ll be paired with a native German speaker to learn German. Many of the German speakers in the program are Austrian so that’s another way to meet locals.

I didn’t get involved in any social organizations or clubs, but this was mainly because I found it difficult to find the opportunities. Many of the “advertisements” for the clubs are in German (and the club’s business is conducted in German) so if your German isn’t very good then it’s unlikely you’ll end up joining anything.

BOKU organized a hike in the Viennese Woods early in the semester, but the ESN and EBN networks arranged the majority of the exchange events throughout the semester. There were pub meetings or club outings for international students every night of the week and also special trips to Budapest, Cracow, Prague, Brno and other European countries.

Vienna has been rated as one of the top student cities in the world, and after a semester there I can easily see why! There’s a ton of stuff to do in the “tourist section”- hundreds of museums, the Spanish Riding School, Schonbrunn (the summer palace), the Hofburg, and Cathedrals on nearly every
street. If you want to get into nature just take a bus from Heiligenstadt to the Wienerwald (Viennese Woods)- there’s a ton of hiking and some nice views of the city. There’s also a really nice public pool in the same area- it only costs a few euros for a day pass and also offers some really nice views of the city. The café culture in Vienna is world-renowned and I didn’t experience anything like it in the other cafes I visited throughout Europe. Make sure you go to Café Central- it’s the most popular with tourists for a good reason- the desserts! Bars are also very popular- Nachbar and Travelshack are popular for international students because ESN has special deals with them, and they’re a lot of fun.

Shopping

The main discount grocery stores in Vienna are Hofer (the Austrian version of ALDI) and PennyMarkt. They are basically the same store, but different from your typical American supermarket. The aisles are made from the stacked boxes of food, you have to buy the grocery bag, and you must bag your own groceries, so it’s the same thing as ALDI here in the US. The more expensive grocery stores are BiLLA and EuroSpar, which is the most expensive. These are more similar to an American grocery store but you still have to buy/bring your bags and bag your own food.

The best store for toiletries is BIPA, which sells toiletries and cosmetics. If you need something like aspirin or antibiotic ointment you’ll have to go to an Apotheke, which is the pharmacy. You can buy houseware items at Momax, a home goods store or at IKEA but that is outside of the main part of the city and more difficult to get to.

Since Austria uses the euro you’ll have to be careful with the exchange rate- everything is about 30% more expensive for you than according to the price tag and it adds up really quickly. Groceries are reasonably priced but I still ended up paying more than I do here in the US, and restaurants are also more expensive- when I went out I’d end up paying around $15-$20 for a meal and drink, where I’d probably only pay $10-$15 for the same meal here. The only thing that is noticeably cheaper in Austria is the beer and wine. Despite this Vienna is still reasonably priced, especially with student discounts. Austria is all about cash- I was very surprised by the number of places that didn’t take credit/debit cards and was withdrawing a lot of cash from the ATM throughout the semester. Always carry a decent amount of cash with you- it’s pretty common for a restaurant or non-tourist shop to not accept cards.

Vienna has many outdoor markets, and they’re definitely worth going to. The most famous market is the Nachsmarkt- it’s huge and pretty touristy but fun to walk around. There’s also a really good Japanese restaurant there that’s worth checking out.

There are smaller markets in every district of the city, each with their own “theme”. For instance, some sell primarily vegetables while others have a variety of ethnic food available and some are known more for their restaurants and prepared food. The prepared food at these markets is always interesting and good, and you can purchase fresh vegetables for slightly cheaper than the grocery store, so they’re worth checking out. The general store hours for grocery stores, bakeries and shops was Monday-Friday 8:00am-6:00pm, Saturday 8:00am-5:00pm and closed on Sunday. Almost everything except for museums and other tourist spots is closed on Sundays. There are some grocery stores in the subway stations open on Sunday but it’s pretty limited. The shortened store hours were definitely one of the biggest things that I had to get used to while in Vienna.

Peanut butter was very difficult to find- you had to go to specialty English/American shops and I only found it in one “regular” grocery store in Vienna. If you like peanut butter I’d recommend packing a few jars for the semester. Plus many of the international students have never tried it so you can give people samples. I also couldn’t find tampons so I’d suggest to the girls that they pack a semester’s worth. They also have a lot less “snack food”- I didn’t see things like Cheetos, Doritos, or crackers but they have lots of pretzels and chocolates.

Health and Safety

Vienna is an extremely safe city- I never felt unsafe walking around, even at night. However, I did have some issue with the location of my dorm- it was located in District 2, which is the “red light” district of Vienna. There were prostitutes on my street and my dorm was located in between a strip club and two brothels. Despite this situation I never felt like I was in danger- if you ignore the people they will ignore you. I wouldn’t walk around my neighborhood at night like I would walk around the rest of the city but there was never a problem.

Use common sense- if it doesn’t seem like a good idea then it’s not. Don’t walk around by yourself at night, no matter how safe you think the city is. Strive to “blend in” when in Vienna and travelling elsewhere- neutral-colored clothes, no flashy jewelry, non-athletic sneakers and a purse or bag that you can keep closed and close to your side. As far as staying healthy goes just make sure you’re eating well and getting enough sleep- it’s very easy to skip on sleep when you’re abroad and there are so many things to do.

When applying for an Austrian visa you must prove that you have medical insurance that covers you while abroad so if you get sick you can call a doctor and set up an appointment and it’ll be covered by insurance.
Travel

I went to Budapest, Prague, Brno, Cracow, Salzburg, Munich, Florence, Rome, Copenhagen, London, and Bratislava. Many of these were weekend trips. Vienna is in a great location for visiting many countries- you can easily get to Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland by train.

The ESN and EBN planned many weekend trips to places such as Cracow, Salzburg, Budapest, Prague, Brno and a skiing trip to the Alps. BOKU only organized a hiking trip just outside of Vienna, but the ESN and EBN fill that role by planning trips to the places I mentioned above.

I spent... a lot of money. I went on at least fifteen trips during the semester and bought train or plane tickets for all of them, not to mention the hostel costs, restaurants, and tourist attractions. I easily spent $3,500+ on travelling alone, but I definitely travelled more than most of the students I met in Vienna. TravelAdvisor is a good site for seeing popular attractions. Another great site is called SpottedByLocals- it suggests great restaurants and cool less-visited spots.

Overall exchange experience

I was fortunate enough to get out of Vienna and visit the Austrian countryside so I felt like I got a decent overall picture of the country, and definitely noticed a difference between Vienna and the rest of Austria. Austria is a very conservative country, especially in the countryside. They are also pretty homogeneous- I talked with a few Austrians about how surprised they are to see non-white people outside of Vienna- it just isn’t common. I found Vienna conservative for a city of 3.5 million people- the locals take religion very seriously and are friendly but in a very formal way. I can’t help feel like I could have had a more enriching and complete experience and picked up on more nuances if I understood more German, but again I feel I definitely came to understand their culture in part despite my language shortcomings.

I got a pretty good feel for BOKU- it reminded me a lot of CALS only with more dreadlocks. It was nice to see compost bins in the buildings and have the option to eat locally-produced food. Like CALS there is a healthy mix of agricultural and environmental science majors, but I found in general everyone seemed more environmentally aware- for instance, there were a lot more sustainable agriculture and environmental economics students than at Cornell and everyone seemed very keen on studying their majors through an environmental lens.

To put it simply, going abroad changed the way I view the world. Before this past semester I’d never been outside of the US or Canada so Europe (or any other continent for that matter) always seemed like this obscure abstract idea. Once I actually arrived in Vienna though it just hit me that there are people who live on the other side of the world that have their own families, friends, aspirations and problems... people who have completely separate lives from my own but aren’t so different from me. This thought has really stuck with me and it’s changed the way I view people in any part of the world, whether it be someone living in the Middle East or down the street in Ithaca. People’s attitudes and opinions are shaped by their own unique life experience, and I was fortunate enough to have the chance to talk to hundreds of students from around the world and learn about their culture and the values and opinions they held because of this. I feel much more compelled to consider ones background and past experiences when they give an opinion, which I think has made me a much more open and tolerant person. I’ve also met many international students at Cornell since being back and it has been great to discuss my abroad experience with them and be able to talk about their own travels. By living outside of the United States (even if only for a few months) I have been able to connect with non-Americans in a way that I couldn’t have before.

I think having an abroad experience is a valuable asset on a resume. Going abroad shows a potential employer or graduate school admissions counselor that you are willing to take risks, are culturally aware, and aren’t afraid of putting yourself in a potentially uncomfortable or stressful situation. I feel that I matured a lot when I was abroad and am much more confident living on my own, and would be willing to move away from home for a job or grad school. I think that these new traits, along with a newfound emotional maturity when dealing with stressful situations or communication barriers, would come across during an interview and thus make me more attractive to potential employers.

Going abroad was the best thing I’ve done at Cornell- I have never had more fun or learned so much as I did during the five months I was in Vienna. Despite my nerves at the beginning and the occasional stressor during my trip I don’t regret my decision to miss a semester in Ithaca for one second- all I can think about is going back!