Practical Advice

Visa

Obtaining a visa wasn’t as difficult as I had expected it to be. All you have to do was fill out an online form. It doesn’t take too long to complete and mine was processed in one day. Don’t put this off, however, as having a visa is a must and the sooner you get it done the less stressful your pre-departure preparation will be. Also, be prepared to pay a fairly large sum. The visa cost somewhere in the $500 range.

Packing

Sydney is an expensive place to live. So bring what you can from home and avoid buying things you’re going to need when you arrive. However, beware, do not over pack. Airlines have strict luggage weight limits and if your bags exceed the given weight restrictions there will most likely be a hefty fee. So try to fit in things like towels and bedding if you can, but be careful. Also, it’s worth it in the end to pack light. You will generally be allowed two carry-ons and two checked bags on your flight over and back. Keep in mind when packing that you may want to leave extra space in your bags so that you will have ample room for souvenirs and etc. when you pack to come home.

Arrival/Orientation

Immigration was very simple in Australia. You are guided through the process which is relatively easy. You have to fill out a short form for customs and officials will ask you a few questions about your stay, but it’s really nothing to worry about too much. As far as getting started at the university goes the school did not match us with a buddy, but does have a Buddy Club. Basically it was a Facebook page for international students to join, talk to each other on, and have some access to a few university students. They also held a somewhat helpful orientation that gave information about the school and the city as well as several opportunities to meet other international students.

Academics

The University

The main campus is split between the suburbs of Camperdown and Darlington. The school holds certain courses in separate locations, but you can avoid having classes at multiple campuses by checking into where they are held when you are doing your initial research on them. I only ever attended class at the main campus so I can’t say anything about the others, but there were several accessible libraries and available wifi at this one. The libraries are not open as late as they are on the Cornell campus and close early on the weekends. It is often almost impossible to find an open computer during the day. So if you like working at the library you will probably need to carry your laptop around. As far as social activities go there are a large number of clubs you can join, like surf club, and the university holds many events throughout the semester.

Courses

I took four classes, six units each, during the semester. This is considered to be equivalent to 15 credits. Enrollment was pretty easy, and unless a class was not approved or you want to change something, is taken care when you apply. I suggest taking a good long look at the list of available courses. There are a lot of them, but spending the time to shop around will be worth it. Also, if you decide that you want to take a different class you’ll have a week once the semester starts to adjust your schedule accordingly. As for grading it depends on what kind of course you take. The majority of my grades came from essays and presentations, but if you are looking to take a math or business course for example you’ll probably have weekly assignments and two exams.

Life Abroad

Living in Sydney, as I mentioned already, is quite expensive. You should expect to pay around $150 to $220 per week on hosing. If you limit yourself and cook most of your meals you can get away with spending $40 per week on food. If you go out a few times, though, you will definitely spend more than that. Transportation costs will depend on where you live in relation to the university. If you live out of walking distance and need to take the train every day you will be spending near $30 per week. If you can walk to class every day, however, you’ll probably spend $15 or less. Books depend on the classes you take. They will probably cost you about as much as usual.
Language

Being an English speaking country, there isn’t much of a language barrier to deal with. I didn’t have any problems but some of my friends, also from the US, found people difficult to understand at times due to thick accents.

Banking

I really recommend opening a local bank account. It made life a lot easier. I set up an account with Commonwealth Bank before arriving, which is something worth considering. You can transfer money in before you arrive and have access right away as long as you do it at least a week ahead of time.

Housing

The university did not arrange any housing. If you want to live on campus apply as early as you can. There is limited housing available and it fills up fast. I found my housing through a third party company called Semester in Australia. They did a great job and placed me in a really nice apartment with five other international students. Utilities were included in the rent and there was a $500 deposit. The only problem I had with them was that they were horrible at communicating. It took several emails at times to get a response from them. In the end it was worth the headache though.

Transportation

Sydney offers a plethora of public transit options including buses, taxis, trains, ferries, and water taxis. You can get a bus ticket with ten rides on it for about $8. You can also buy a mymulti ticket which will allow you to take the bus, train, and ferry anywhere you want as many times as you want for one week for just under $30.

Health and Safety

I felt very safe in Sydney. Although I really didn’t see much crime, if you’re out late at night I would still recommend having someone with you. Health services are also good here, and the university has a helpful student health center.

Overall exchange experience

By far, the best thing about my semester abroad was the people I met. I made a number of great friends both from around the world and the United States. Everyone seemed to find some place to fit in, so don’t worry about that. The whole experience was amazing though. The locals were extremely friendly, there was always something to do, and the country was beautiful. It was everything I imagined it to be and more. Honestly, the most challenging thing I experienced was leaving.