Practical Advice

Visa

Luckily the visa process is really easy for Australia; all you have to do is fill out a form online. I was worried that they would call me in for an interview, but luckily that didn’t happen. I don’t remember whether or not I had to pay a deposit for the visa, I feel like I did…and I would budget for one, and be pleasantly surprised if there isn’t one. The visa arrived in my email 24 hours later after I applied, and there’s no need to send in your passport. It’s some new electronic visa that shows up in their system when you arrive at immigration, so that was pretty nifty.

Packing

When it comes to packing, I would definitely recommend packing light. I know that’s easier said than done, especially being girls because we just have so much…stuff, but trust me. If you pack light, you’ll save yourself all the extra baggage fees you will most probably end up paying at the airport when leaving. Side note: call your airline in advance and find out what their policy is on extra baggage before you go. You may or may not have extra baggage on the way back and it’s good to know how much you can really afford to bring back (learn from my mistakes, I ended up having to buy another suitcase at the airport in order to get out of paying 600 dollars for extra luggage). I was told that Sydney winters were pretty cold, and I packed all these coats and scarves that turned out to be totally unnecessary, and just took up extra weight in my suitcase. Their winter is basically like 60 degrees all the time, and you’ll be fine in a coat and boots especially if you’re coming from an Ithacan winter. It did rain every so often, especially towards the end of November so it might be wise to have an umbrella on you, but other than that there was nothing too crazy weather wise.

Arrival/Orientation

The orientation program was spread out over the course of a week, and the first few days basically involved getting acquainted with all the different people involved in the exchange office, resources for exchange students, and learning how to sign up for classes/picking the right classes etc. They explained how their system works, how to add/drop classes and basically answered any questions that we had. They also arranged a few social events for the exchange kids throughout the month, like a trip to Manly, a tour of Sydney, a harbor cruise and an exchange party at the university bar to name a few. After the first month however, there were no more school arranged events. I know they also had some activities set up prior to orientation week, like a two day surf camp and vineyard tours that a lot of people really enjoyed. I took the trip to Manly, and went to the exchange party at the bar and both those events were really fun, I’d definitely recommend going to any and every event arranged by the school in that first month since it’s where you’ll meet the brunt of the exchange kids, and everyone’s looking to make new friends.

Apparently we had buddies assigned by USyd to us, and I remember meeting a few people at Orientation events who mentioned that they were buddies and that they would be getting in touch with us soon…but that never really happened, or at least my buddy never got in touch with me, I
don’t know if any others did. It wasn’t a big loss, but it would have been nice to have someone at the university to help in picking out the right classes and stuff, but oh well.

Academics

The University

The university itself is divided into the Camperdown/Darlington campus, and two other subsections in Rozelle and one another area that I can’t remember, but you’d have to take public transport or have a car to get to the other ones. Camperdown/Darlington are basically across the street from one another (it’s like 15-20 minute walk from one end of the campus to the other) and luckily all my classes were based there so I didn’t have to worry about getting to the other campuses. There are plenty of computers in the libraries, and they have a few computer labs sprinkled throughout campus. The only thing that kind of annoyed me was that the main library on campus, Fisher, closed at 10 PM on weekdays and 8 PM on weekends…even during STUVAC (study vacation a week before finals) and exam period itself. I like to study later at night, so it was always a struggle trying to find a nice spot. There is a 24/7 computer lab with sitting space in the Carlslaw building, but it was hard to find a spot there once the library had closed.

I never really hung out at the International Office, but they did help me out when I was trying to find the right classes but I always saw a lot of people in the building. In terms of social activities on campus…it’s mixed. Because most students don’t live on campus, and commute from home, not a lot happens because everyone tends to leave once they get done with classes. They did have a really cool week-long festival at one point during the semester, and sketch comedy shows called revues hosted by some of the societies (more on those in a bit) another week, but not much else.

There unfortunately isn’t much to get involved with on campus either. In order to join societies/clubs you have to pay. If you purchase an Access card, which is about 47 dollars, there’s a discounted rate to join the society (about 2-4 dollars) and you also get discounts throughout the semester at on campus restaurants and stores, as well as movie tickets and other restaurants near campus. Without the Access card, joining societies can cost anywhere between 10-20 dollars. I purchased the access card, and it really helped because I ate and got coffee on campus pretty frequently. It ended up paying for itself by the end, especially when buying USyd souvenirs. I joined a bunch of societies, but barely any of them held events during the semester and the few events that happened always seemed to clash with my classes. They do have some really cool societies, like the chocolate society, the tea society (those were the only two that really held any events) but honestly, I didn’t see any overall benefits in joining societies. Also, yes, there is a bar on campus (two in fact, Manning and Hermann’s) and yes, students do hang out there during the day and it’s pretty normal to grab a drink after class, and they have events going on there during the weekend. Bonus: if you have an Access card, you get a discount on drinks.

Courses

I had researched classes before I left for Sydney, and had gone through course descriptions thoroughly so I thought I was pretty solid in what I wanted, but I ended up changing all my courses when I actually enrolled. Their enrollment process wasn’t as scary or hard as I thought it was going to be, they basically made us fill out forms stating what classes we wanted, and then we had to log on to our MyUni portal in order to check our time table. For better or for worse, you can customize your time table to have certain times and days off, but every time you change it, you can’t go back to the old time table you had before you chose to customize it. While this may sound scary, you can almost always get it back to the way it was. You can block off times, or entire days for that matter, and the system will try its best to move around tutorials and lectures to get you that time off. Tutorials (their version of sections) will always take attendance and usually count for some portion of your grade, so don’t skip those! I would, of course, recommend not having Friday classes. After some maneuvering, I was able to have Friday off and it made traveling a LOT easier/cheaper and I definitely took advantage of that and traveled as much as I could afford to.

My experience with my classes was definitely mixed – I enjoyed some of them a lot, and I really struggled in others. Classes tend to have 2-3 assignments that you hand in throughout the semester, and then a final exam. The only thing is, each assignment is usually worth like, 30-40% of your grade, and then the final is worth a lot as well, so you have lesser number of assignments…but you have to do really well in them in order to secure your grade. I made the mistake of taking a Biology class while I was there, and I really didn’t do well in it (I was also told later by a lot of USyd students that I picked the Bio class that apparently all the students tend to avoid the most…so yeah, that’s my luck) In any case, I didn’t do well in a lot of the assignments earlier on because I didn’t quite understand what was expected of me, and by the time I kind of understood, it was too late and there weren’t enough assignments left to save my grade.

The general academic philosophy there is really laidback (actually, that applies to the entire country and their life philosophy) and students are generally very much aiming to pass, rather than get really high grades, and students don’t seem to get as stressed out/panicky during exam times as they do at Cornell.

Life Abroad

Budgeting while abroad was definitely difficult, and despite being told often how expensive Sydney was it, always caught
me off guard...especially when you end up paying 15-20 for a quesadilla and a soft drink. Eating out can be very expensive, but most places (especially the ones around the university) have lunch specials where entrees will be around 10 dollars (side note: appetizers are referred to entrees there, and what we call entrees are called mains there) and with some dedication, you can find cheap deals and specials on food. The good thing is, tax is always included in prices so you always know how much you should be paying. Most places will take credit card (or EFTPOS, as they call it) but it’s always a good idea to carry cash because a lot of places have minimums and/or charge fees for cards. Also, as tempting as it may be to blow all your cash in Sydney, just remember that you will be traveling, and that will always be a costly endeavor so try to budget for that accordingly.

Language

Obviously there was no language barrier, although some Aussie slang can be a little confusing. People were generally incredibly friendly, and always happy to give recommendations on where to go in Sydney/Australia and what to see. Yes, Australians weren’t exactly clamoring to be friends with us exchange kids but there are many factors for that besides the fact that we were leaving at the end of the semester. Most students don’t live in the city, or near it for that matter and commute into campus (it’s anywhere between a 30 minute to 2 hour commute from home) and so making plans can be kind of difficult since so much more planning goes into it, and most Australians rely on public transport, so hanging out in the city is a bit more complicated.

Banking

As for finances – I primarily used my Bank of America account, used my card in most places and withdrew cash as often as I could. Unfortunately, I didn’t learn until the end of the semester that Westpac (a local bank) and BofA have some sort of agreement where you don’t get charged for withdrawing money from their accounts and I could have saved a lot in terms of fees had I known that...so oh well. The lesson: always call your bank before leaving and find out if they have agreements like that with local banks etc. I also opened a local account at Commonwealth Bank just in case, which was a pretty smooth/fast process and I really liked the bank. As for cell phones, I used my iPhone while I was there and got a monthly package from a local carrier, Optus. I paid about 30 dollars a month for like 500 MB of data, unlimited calls and unlimited texting domestically (which I thought wasn’t too bad, I feel like I pay more than that for Verizon at home). I would definitely recommend trying to get your smartphone to work there (I think you can get it unlocked from your carrier before you leave) because it does make communication a lot easier. I used Viber to phone and text home (it’s free calling anywhere in the world as long as you have wi-fi) and WhatsApp to text friends. Having WhatsApp can be really handy, as most international kids also use it and if you have wi-fi, it’s free messaging anywhere in the world. The other reason I’d recommend having a smartphone is Google Maps. I have a horrible (read: no) sense of direction and got lost A LOT. Having Google Maps was really, really handy especially in Sydney since they have walking directions AND public transport routes, and made life significantly easier for me.

Housing

Housing was a complicated matter, when I first signed up for exchange; I was told the Cornell kids had guaranteed housing in the International House on campus. After filling out the form, paying the 100 dollar (non—refundable) deposit and a Skype interview...I was put on a waitlist (it was apparently because I submitted the application late, and because it seemed like I wasn’t willing to be “involved” in the house). I was eventually offered a spot in the house but I’d already found other housing by then, so I said no. Ultimately, I’m incredibly, incredibly glad I didn’t live on campus. Like I said, most students commute, so not a lot live on campus as it is, and on-campus commute was far more expensive, and there wasn’t any real added convenience at the end of the day.

I looked through a lot of options for housing, and a lot of the housing geared towards international/exchange kids was pretty pricey (i.e. Urbannest) I ended up picking a company called Semester in Australia, and was incredibly happy with my experience. I lived in a townhouse in a Glebe area with 5 other exchange students, and absolutely loved it. The area was great – 5 minutes away from campus, 10 minute walk to the grocery store/cafes/restaurants etc. and the bus stop to downtown Sydney was right across the street from us. Although it was slightly pricey (I think in total, it cost 8600 a single room for the semester...and I tacked on about 2 weeks extra on top of that, which they let me free of charge) and it included everything. The house came fully furnished with a TV, and they had everything set up for us when we got there. They also had someone come pick everyone up from the airport if I’m not mistaken (I didn’t take this option though, but that’s because I had family in Sydney who picked me up), and when I moved in, one of our...landlords, for a lack of a better term gave me a welcome package (it came with guides and maps to Sydney, and a bus pass for the week among other things) and showed me where the university, the grocery store and other things were around the area and that was incredibly helpful/made the experience of moving in far less daunting. . The Semester in Australia team also did an event of the beginning of the semester to introduce us to the other people living in their housing near us, which was really fun AND I won a free skydive through them, so that also was pretty great.

Since they don’t have meal plans at USyd, I was on my own for food, which was probably for the best because the catered options in the on-campus housing never seemed all that appealing/the meal plan was pretty expensive. I don’t
know how to cook, so the first month or two mainly consisted of a lot of sandwiches and mac and cheese, and then I learned how to make pasta and grilled cheese, so my options became a bit more fancy. I like to eat out and try new restaurants, so I basically took advantage of being near Glebe Pt. Road and tried most of the restaurants on that.

As for the people I lived with, we were 6 people total, 2 guys and 4 girls—I got lucky and absolutely loved all 5 of my housemates. One of the girls living with me was also from Cornell and her and I had met once or twice at Cornell prior to exchange so there was one familiar face. The other four people I lived with were all also American, and we got along really well, and I count them as some of my closest friends now. I know that, for the most part, the other people we knew in the Semester in Australia housing felt similarly about their housemates and most people primarily hung out with the people they were living with, or living near at least. I’d also met some of the exchange students at Cornell last year, and two of them were from UNSW (the other big university besides University of Sydney) We’d kept in touch, so they were really helpful when I was picking out housing, and we hung out every so often while I was in Sydney and I met some of their friends, and they gave a ton of recommendations on what to do while in Sydney so that was also really nice.

Overall exchange experience

The best thing about my semester abroad was: Getting to explore a new city, make new friends and learn to be independent

The most challenging things about my semester abroad was: Trying to figure out what food I could make that required no culinary experience

How did your semester abroad change your perspective? I’ve learned that life isn’t a race, and that you don’t have to be competing all the time with everyone. You can just let go, have fun and go with the flow. I feel like matured a lot while I was there, and really grew as a person while there – as cliché as that sounds

Tips for future students: STEP OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE, say yes to every opportunity (even if you don’t feel like going out) and travel as much as you can!

Transportation

Public transport can be slightly confusing in the beginning, but you can catch on pretty quick. Basically, they have a bunch of different options. You can get a 10 ride bus pass, or a MyMulti Pass which consists of unlimited travel for a week on buses, ferries and trains among other options. I usually stuck to the my10 bus pass, since I didn’t take trains or ferries all that often. As an exchange student though, you have the added bonus of concession. Take advantage of this as much as possible. Concession basically means that all we get up to 60% off on all public transport, and makes getting around significantly cheaper. The only thing that tripped me up was the zones – the city is divided into three zones and you need a different pass to get to the other zones, but you can double dip your zone 1 if need be. I never ended up needing anything past Zone 1 usually because I mainly stayed in the city, or went to close by areas like Bondi. I think in order to get places like Manly you need a Zone 2 or a Zone 3, but you can always ask at the train station/ferry stands and people are more than willing to help out. You can get public transport passes at almost all convenience stores (they’ll usually have a sign outside saying they sell them) and on campus, plus at the stations themselves.

Social activities

I personally loved Sydney itself. I’m a city girl through and through, and I love exploring cities so I had a blast in Sydney. There’s always something to do, incredibly friendly people,