Personal information

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Major: Communication
Name of host university: Università Bocconi
Period/Time of Exchange: Spring 2016
Address of blog if you had one: N/A

Practical Advice

Visa – Definitely plan as far in advance as possible when it comes to getting your Italian visa. Italy is one of the only countries in Western Europe that still requires you to obtain a visa in person so you’ll have to make an appointment at the nearest consulate at least a few weeks before you intend to go abroad.

Packing – Don’t go too crazy with packing but definitely invest in a portable phone charger (it will come in handy while traveling). Bring what you would usually bring to college each semester but divided in half. If you’re going abroad in Italy, you’ll definitely want to save space for items you purchase while studying there. Also, Italy doesn’t have a lot of the name brand food products that most Americans are used to so you might want to pack some of your favorite snacks.

Arrival – To be honest, your first few days might be a little intimidating and might make you a bit flustered. But this is completely normal and something that I and most of my friends experienced during our first week abroad. Meeting new people, getting acclimated to an entirely new city and country, starting orientation programs and courses, etc. can be a bit much at first but all of that stress will subside very early on.

Academics

The University – Bocconi’s campus, like most urban European campuses, is not your typical American college setup and is simply an arrangement of buildings in a quaint neighborhood of Milan. I didn’t spend much time there (only for class and group project meetings really) but it was still very nice. ESN (Erasmus Student Network) at Bocconi does a really great job of keeping international students busy throughout the whole semester and I suggest you take part in the fun activities and trips they plan for you. They’re a great way to meet other international students and always give you something fun to do.

Courses – Enrolling in classes was pretty simple. They have a system similar to Student Center that lets you choose which courses you want to take. Your coursework load throughout the semester will not be remotely as demanding as your work at Cornell. This might sound great but it only makes final exams that much more powerful in determining your overall grade. You should expect some of your courses to count final exams and/or midterms (though rarer) as up to 90% of your overall grade. Exams were pretty basic for the most part. You will have a leg up coming from an English-speaking country/university because the international courses are all taught in English. I was one of the few students who took courses in both English and Italian (you have this option as well). Most exams are pretty standard format (multiple choice, written responses) but some (particularly courses taught in Italian) require an oral examination.

Life Abroad

Language – There was a required crash course in Italian at the beginning of the semester for international students. I personally did not take the course because I speak Italian but I heard that it provided students with the basics of the language before the semester began. I definitely had a different experience than some of my peers at Bocconi because of my ability to speak the language. You don’t need to be fluent, but knowing the basics and being able to understand even a little bit makes all the difference. Milan is an international city and the second largest in Italy after Rome, but it is not the most touristic of the Italian destinations, so you will certainly come across individuals who have very limited knowledge of English.

Banking – Take out a bunch of euros (if you can) before you go abroad and keep it in a safe place in your dorm/apartment when you’re there. International credit cards are always useful, especially when traveling to countries with different currencies. When I went to Switzerland and the UK, I didn’t exchange any of my euros for francs or pounds. I simply used my credit card everywhere I went. This might not always work, but don’t exchange money until you really need to.

Housing – Bocconi guarantees housing to all international students, so if finding an apartment in a new city stresses you out and you want housing to be done for you, not to worry. However, I would recommend at least attempting to find housing through other platforms (like www.Bakeca.it or
www.dovevivo.it/en, for example). I think most exchange students would tell you that their only regret from their semester abroad at Bocconi was staying in Bocconi dorms. They are far from campus and you will most likely be placed in a dorm in the outskirts of the city. I used Dove Vivo and other sites linked to it to find an apartment in the city center. I ended up in a six-bedroom apartment with five other amazing international students who all happened to be on exchange at Bocconi for the semester (three Americans, one Dutchman, and one Belgian, to be precise). The apartments might be more expensive than the dorms, but it’s certainly worth the upgrade. My apartment was a ten-minute walk from the Duomo, a five-minute tram ride to campus, and absolutely beautiful (and large). I paid almost about the same as what I normally pay in Collegetown per month, and this was in the heart of a major European city.

Transportation – In Milan, you have the chance to get a discounted monthly urban pass for students under 26. You can get them at any major metro stop in the city and then recharge them each month at those stops or at any tobacco shop. This pass will give you unlimited access to all trams, metros, and buses in the city. I used the tram every day twice a day to get to and from campus, the metro here and there, and the bus mostly at night when trams and metros weren’t running.

Health and Safety – Definitely be aware of your surroundings and acknowledge the fact that Milan is a big city. Though pickpocketing may occur less frequently there than in other European cities, it can still happen if you’re not alert. Once you become one with the city and learn its streets and neighborhoods, you won’t have to worry about this. Bocconi makes sure that you have all of their emergency contact information, but definitely inform “la polizia” or “i carabinieri” if you feel unsafe. I thankfully never had to use any of these services.

Overall exchange experience

The best thing about my semester abroad was: Meeting amazing people from all over the world and traveling to some of the most beautiful, unforgettable places.

The most challenging things about my semester abroad was: Getting acclimated during my first week. Adjusting to new environments is a challenge for me to begin with and this was especially difficult in a foreign country.

How did your semester abroad change your perspective? My semester abroad opened my mind to (literally) a world of possibilities. It gave me hands-on, impactful experiences with cultures I never thought I’d be exposed to and truly shaped how I view myself and my future.

Tips for future students: Always have an open mind. Don’t compare the cultures you come across to your own, but temporarily adopt those cultures to learn about yourself and the world around you. An open mind will turn your abroad experience into the making of a global citizen.