Elaine R.
Major: Biological Sciences – Plant Biology
Name of Host University: BOKU
Period/Time of Exchange: Fall 2011

Practical Information

Visa information
Because I am from NY, I had to apply at the Austrian embassy in person. They wanted three copies of bank statements, and I had only brought one, but they were fine with me emailing the rest of the documents, so I did not have to go back. I would recommend getting there early (when it opens) because it filled up pretty quickly, and there was only one lady working there.

It was easy to get in the European Union. I had a class C visa that let me stay in the country for up to six months. I had to check-in and check-out at the municipal department office (within three days of arrival/departure). It was pretty easy once I knew what to do. My housing gave me a form proving my residence, and then I brought it to the government office with my passport.

Packing
What did you not bring from home that you wish you had?
Probably more clothes. I got tired of wearing the same things and they started to fall apart. Hiking boots (had to buy there), and peanut butter – because it was hard to find.

What items do you recommend not bringing?
I was pretty conscious not to over pack, and actually used everything that I brought.

Is there anything that was not available in your host country?
Most things (aside from certain foods) are available – just a different brand. Shoes and clothes are more expensive.

International office at Host University
BOKU had welcome days (orientation). The Erasmus student network (ESN) also organized some welcome parties and events around Vienna for international students of all Vienna universities. The orientation was good for meeting people, but I still had many unanswered questions about the school and classes. But over time everything was figured out

Did you receive (or were you offered) a buddy?
Yes, my buddy was very nice, but not always available. It was nice to know a BOKU student, because most of the people I was introduced to were other international students.

Were there orientation activities?
Yes, one day of talking to us, and introducing us to departments, and a scavenger hunt around the main campus. Then we got a tour of one part of the Muthgasse campus. There was a “herugin” traditional dinner that we could register for. Then each week we were invited to a “stammtisch,” which was a gathering at a bar for BOKU exchange and Erasmus students and their buddies.

How was the international office staff?
They were very nice and friendly, but not always available or with answers to my questions.

Academics

The University
Is there a centralized campus?
Yes, but there are two campuses.

Where do students hang out?
In the park, or at the TUWI building, or by other places on campus that sell food.

Are there accessible computer labs, wifi, libraries, etc?
Yes the library has some computers, and then there is a lab in the basement of the Exner hause. Right before I left there were new computers for the main lab. But figuring out the login and printing can be confusing.

Courses
How did you enroll in classes?
I used the BOKU online system. I looked at courses in English and chose the ones interesting to me. I was over enrolled, so then dropped after the first couple of weeks.

How many classes did you take?
10, but some were as small as 1 ECTS credit, and as large as 4.5 credits. My total was 31 ECTS, which is 15.5 Cornell credits.

How were the classes structured (mostly lecture? discussions?)
Most were lectures. Some were only student presentations. One was a field trip that had a lot of forest walks and observations.
Was homework given? If so, how often? How much?
Hardly any. Most of the assignments were preparing presentations for your final grade.

What types of exams were given? How do they compare to those at Cornell?
I had one written, three oral, and the rest were presentation based. They were easier than Cornell’s exams.

Were you allowed to take your exams early? If so, what was the process?
Yes, I just spoke to the professor about how I had to leave BOKU before the semester was over. I chose most of my courses to end before my departure date anyway, so it was only an issue for several classes.

Life Abroad

Language
Did you have any language problems with faculty? With other students? In daily life?
No, most of the faculty and even people in Vienna knew English. I took intensive 2 week course, which made small things like ordering coffee, asking for directions, etc easier. However, my classes and social life was pretty much all English. Nearly all of my international friends knew more English than German.

Would you recommend taking a language course before departing?
No. I do wish I knew more German just because I enjoyed using a different language, and it is a great opportunity to improve. But certainly not necessary. Many others in the program did not know any German.

Was a “crash course” in the host language offered at the university? Was it useful?
Yes, I took it before classes started. It was helpful, and allowed me to use a bit of German, and was a good way to meet other BOKU international students. But you can certainly get by in Austria without it.

Banking
Would you recommend opening a local account? If so, which do you recommend?
I did open an ESTRE student bank account because it was free. It was helpful for paying housing bills and setting up a Sim card account, and it came with a “quick card” which I used to laundry and printing. Also, I found all train and public transport ticket machines did not take my American bank or credit cards, but did take the “maestro” Austrian bank card. However, you can also get by without it, and pay bills in cash or go to a local bank. I found that most Austrian ATMs do not charge extra fees for taking money out with a foreign card.

Housing
I was with the OEAD – student housing. It was good because I had the housing guaranteed, and the OEAD office was open most days for questions. However, other people who had flats had overall much nicer apartments. Many people came to the country without housing, and looked when they got there. It sounded really risky, but has the advantage of choosing exactly where you will live.

How much did you pay for housing? How did you pay for rent and utilities?
It was 283 euro per month, but the OEAD also takes out I think 14 euros per month, and then there was a 40 euro cleaning fee at the end.

Where did you eat? Was there a meal plan?
No meal plan, but you could eat on campus at the mensa. I only did a couple of times. It was about half of making my own food or eating out. I only had a stove top – so lots of stir fry and pasta!

Transportation
What modes of public transportation are available? How much do they cost?
There are trams, buses and subways, and then trains for further outside the city. I think a one-way ticket is 1.6 euro, and you can also get 24 hour, or 48 hour passes, etc. Vienna transport was cheaper than most western European cities

How/where do you pay for tickets? Are there monthly or commuter passes?
There are ticket machines and also people who sell them at booths of main transit stations. I was able to get a student semester pass for October-January, which let me take any form of transit within the city zone. I think it was 180 euros.

Communication
I bought a Samsung cell phone for 35 euro, and then a Bob sim card. Bob is cheap, but also really annoying because there are no customer service options, unless you pay 1.9 euro per minute of calling them. You can either set up a Bob plan with a bank account, or pay as you go and buy bob credit. It was helpful because it also worked in other countries (with roaming charges). For calls to the States, I used Skype.

Social activities
Did you meet students from the host country?
Yes, I was given a buddy and she introduced me to other Austrians, and I also met some in my classes, or though tandem learning (where you practice language with another BOKU student or alum)

Did you get involved in any social organizations or clubs?
Not really. I did a hiking weekend and then a skiing weekend, which were mostly international students and not BOKU students.
Throughout the semester were there any special activities arranged for exchange students?
Yes, the weekly stammtisch, and a couple other events. The Facebook group for BOKU exchange students let us personally post what social events were happening, and many organized their own events through the group.

What do local students do for fun?
Going to dance clubs, hanging out in pubs. You can sit at cafes for hours. In the winter there is ice skating in the city, or you can take a bus to ski places.

Health and Safety
How safe did you feel in your host location?
Very safe – more safe than in most of the other cities that I traveled to. I was seldom worried about being pickpocketed or harassed if walking alone.

What advice do you have for future students regarding their health and safety?
If you need to go to the hospital, check before if they are English speaking (unless you know German). Bring Tylenol or Advil if you use it, because I never saw it sold in Austria (note: it’s available at pharmacies).

What resources were available in case you needed medical attention?
I never needed them, but I would have had to ask my buddy or someone local where to find an English speaking doctor. The people the pharmacies may also be helpful if it is not a medical emergency. I only had colds, and just used vitamin C, and citrus fruits, and rest.

Overall exchange experience

Did you get a good picture of the country? The local and school culture?
Yes, I think I did, although if I stayed longer I know I would get an every greater understanding. But I was fortunate to see both the country and city side of Austria, and the people I met did give me lots of insight into the culture and traditions.

How did the exchange experience affect you from a cultural and social viewpoint?
It was so amazing to meet people from such different backgrounds. I really enjoyed asking people about their home countries, and what is considered politically correct, etc. and discovering the similarities and differences of Americans in comparison to Austrians, or other international students.

What influence do you think the experience had/will have over future career possibilities?
The experience did not change my future career goal (to be a pediatrician). But I did gain much personal growth, and was put in situations where I had to figure things out for myself, which I think will help me in ways I interact with people and situations in the future.

Final thoughts
All of the friends that I made abroad were truly amazing people. Everyone was so kind, friendly, and open minded, and it was so nice to be a part of this nearly utopian Erasmus community. I was really sad to leave Vienna, but hope that with Facebook and letter writing, that I keep in touch with the friends I made, and we all are able to visit each other in our home countries at some point in the future.