Hello! My name is Michela and I've just returned from studying abroad for a semester at SLU, which is the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet), in Uppsala, Sweden. I was in Sweden from August 14, 2011 – January 16, 2012. I stayed in Europe over Christmas and New Years because I had finals afterward, but that gave me a chance to do some traveling! I'm a senior majoring in Biological Sciences while concentrating on Ecology and Evolution and I'm minoring in Natural Resources. I was abroad during my first semester of senior year.

**Visa/Residence Permit**

Obtaining my visa for Sweden was not difficult at all. I had to send in some documents to the Swedish consulate in Washington D.C. about a month before I left, and I received an acceptance about two-three weeks later. They mailed me a letter stating that I was allowed to get a visa and that I would have to pick it up in Sweden at the migration office after getting my biometrics taken. So I just brought that letter to the airport, along with my passport of course, and that was sufficient.

Once I arrived to Sweden, I had three months to make it to the migration office to get my residence permit (visa). No one in Sweden ever asked me to see my residence permit (not even when I was leaving the country), but I did have to show it a few times when I was traveling (in the Netherlands and Finland) after I had been in Sweden for three months. If you are staying in Sweden for a whole year, it is very important that you get your Swedish personal number as soon as you arrive because it is very important and is used for almost everything in Sweden, from paying bills, to going to the hospital, to obtaining things from the school, etc.

**Packing and clothes**

As I mentioned, I was in Sweden from August to January so I thought that I would need to bring clothes for summer, fall, and winter, which I did and ended up packing way too much. There was no need for me to bring shorts, sandals, tank tops, or even many of the t-shirts I brought. When I arrived in August, it felt like fall in Ithaca. It was generally in the 60s, breezy, and sunny. I still wore my sandals for a while because I prefer them to shoes, but I was the only person in all of Uppsala still wearing sandals. All of the Swedes (and many other Europeans) wear Converse sneakers. It’s absurd how many people you’ll see wearing them, so if you want to try and fit in immediately, I would suggest bringing a few pairs.

I brought an eye mask to wear at night because the sun rose very early in the morning in the beginning of the semester (not a problem after about a month). I also brought snow pants, which were very convenient when I traveled to the north of Sweden (Lapland) in December. Throughout the semester, there will be gasques every couple of weeks. A gasque is a ball with a three course dinner and schnapps (Swedish spiced vodka); some are more formal than others, but it is definitely a good idea to bring nice dress or suit. They range from short, cocktail dresses to gowns and for the guys – just a sports coat to a tuxedo. Also bring your bathing suit for the saunas!

In regards to toiletries, everything in Sweden is expensive so it’s a good idea to bring shampoo, soap, deodorant, etc. if you have the space. You also cannot find solid deodorant in Sweden, they only have the roll-on kind.

**Support and resources on campus**

The international office at SLU was pretty good. They hosted a 4-day orientation and gave us free SLU sweatshirts at the end of the semester. The international student coordinator was very good at answering any questions I had and helping me out with everything I needed. The student union has an international student committee, which pairs international students with buddies, organizes many pub crawls, and holds events throughout the semester.

SLU has a central campus that is very small compared to Cornell’s campus. There was a ton of construction work going on while I was there so there are many new buildings and landscaping. The entire campus has wifi and there is one library, but it closes at 6pm on weekdays and isn’t open on the weekends. There is a large cafeteria/eatery on campus where many of the students meet for their lunch break (everyone has a lunch break from 12-1). The student union is also a popular hangout spot; it has a restaurant and a bar.

**Classes**

Picking out my classes was a little difficult because their credit system and their semesters are very different. The semesters are broken into two blocks, in which you take completely different classes in each, or you could take one class that spans both blocks but meets only once a week. For example, I took two classes during block 1 that ended by Nov. 1 (one of them ended by Oct. 3) and then I took two different classes during block 2 that ended on January 13. I also took another class that lasted from Sept. 1 – December 20, but it only met once a week. It confused me, but the international coordinator helped me out and it worked great. I simply looked at the course catalog on SLU’s website and told the international coordinator what I wanted to take and she enrolled me. Depending on the percentage of time the class is supposed to take (one of my classes was 35% and another was 25%), it may meet 4 days a week from 9-4 or 2.5 days a week, but the overall theme of the Swedish education system is class time over homework. I spent a lot of time in the classroom discussing topics rather than doing homework. The only homework I was assigned was two group projects and I had to prepare for a few presentations. They really focus on class participation and working in groups and making sure you are learning the material. The only assignments I had were final reports or papers at the end of the block. I took one test while I was there and it was very straightforward and we were given three hours to take it.

There were no language issues. Everyone in Sweden speaks impeccable English; you can barely hear an accent and their grammar is perfect. I looked for a Swedish course to take, but SLU does not offer any. It only offers classes at an extra charge.

**Bank account**

I received a stipend while abroad so it was necessary to open up a bank account. It was useful because I had a Maestro card (debit card) that wouldn’t get charged extra at ATMs and it contained a chip (American cards do not have these chips) that some stores/businesses required. However, if I did not have this stipend, I probably just would have used my American debit card, but I would make sure that I would not get charged every time I use it (international transaction fee) because that adds up. My bank in Sweden charged me 15 SEK (about $2.50) every month to use my Maestro, but I could not use this card online and did not have an online account.
Housing

I lived in the “Cornell room” on campus, which was about 3 km (15-20 min bike and bus ride away) from the city center of Uppsala. It was a room in an 8-bedroom student apartment-type corridor. I had my own room and bathroom, but shared the kitchen with 7 other students – 5 Swedes, 1 Irish, and 1 Ethiopian. I was on a scholarship so my room was free. The room was very nice and only about a two-minute walk from campus, but if there are several Cornell students going to SLU in one semester and you do not get the scholarship, I would recommend living in either Flögsta or Rackabergsgatan, which are where many students live and are much closer to town. The only downside to living in these two places is that you would need to commute to the SLU campus every morning for class. There are no meal plans available and eating out is very expensive so I cooked every night. All of the nations (more about this later) have food at “student” prices (still pricey compared to the US), and many have themed dinners, which are fun to go to.

Transportation in Uppsala

The only available mode of public transportation is a bus, which is very reliable and runs frequently. Each ride costs about $2.50 if you buy a bus card beforehand and put money on it (can be done at Central Station), but it costs $5 if you buy the ride on the spot – this is difficult because they only accept credit/debit cards with chips (this is one example of where my Maestro came in handy), no cash or American credit cards. Once you get your student ID card, you can buy an unlimited month pass for about $50, which is very economical if you ride the bus frequently. I rode my bike (like everyone else) everywhere until it started snowing and getting icy (not until mid-December).

Communication

I bought the cheapest and simplest cell phone available in Sweden, it was $15 and from Media Markt near Ikea ($30 from the stores in the center of town). The two service providers are Telia and Comviq. I tried both and Comviq has much better deals and all students use Comviq, which is even better because Comviq users text for free and only pay a small fee to make a phone call but can talk for as long as they want. A phone call to non-Comviq users is charged every minute though.

Social life

The social scene in Uppsala is very good, some people even enjoy it more than Stockholm! Two student-cities in Sweden, Uppsala and Lund, have nations, but the nations in Uppsala are the originals and are the best! If I had to relate them to anything in the US, I would say they are similar to fraternities and sororities, but they are so different. There are 14 of them scattered throughout the old town of Uppsala. They are large, old, pretty buildings that have restaurants, cafes, pubs, and clubs inside of them and are all student-run. Each nation has its own special night and character, for example, Tuesday night is Snerikes’ club night, Wednesday is open mic at Kalmar nation, and Thursday is the club night at posh Stockholms nation. They all hold day-long fika (coffee with food and good conversation) on the weekends and have discounted menus for students. You can join one for a fee of about $30 and once you join one, you can attend all of them. Only students can go to nations and you meet new people every time you go. I met and became friends with Swedish students and students from Uppsala University there.

Safety

Sweden is probably the safest place I’ve ever been to. On my first night there, I saw a woman pushing her baby in a stroller at 11 pm at night on a street with no street lights. It is also well-known that if you drop your wallet or leave it somewhere, it will be returned to you within the next couple of days because people turn it in to the police station with all the cash and cards still enclosed. I’ve biked back alone from town late at night several times and never felt in danger or creeped out.

Final thoughts

I feel like I got a good feel for the country and the culture. Swedes are always thought to be very reserved and even cold, but they are some of the nicest and friendliest people I’ve ever come into contact with. People on the street will go out of their way to help you with anything and the “snobby” Stockholmers are very down-to-earth. The education system, as I mentioned, is very laid back and professors really care about their students and want them to learn the material. The country is somewhat socialist so the concept of working is very different from that of the US. You can’t go anywhere (except stores like H&M and grocery stores) or call in anywhere between the hours of 11 am and 1 pm because everyone goes on lunch breaks. Everything is very orderly and the Swedes are very adamant about obeying rules (i.e. not crossing the street when the light is red).

Spending the semester in Sweden and befriending many Swedes and Europeans gave me a good perspective on the United States and the impact that our country has on the rest of the world. I believe I’ve become much more cultured and worldly after this past semester and I think this will help me in my career and in other aspects of my adult life. I learned a lot about myself and about other people in general. It was an absolutely amazing experience and I hope I can have a similar experience again in my life.

EVERYONE SHOULD GO TO UPPSALA!