Preparation for Exchange

When I was picking out my exchange university, I was overwhelmed by the plethora of choices available. I first narrowed down universities that offered anthropology-related courses, then, I picked out the most intriguing countries among them. Originally, I had intended to go to Iceland, purely due to its mystique (and only about 60 thousand people in the world can say that they've lived in Iceland!). However, they only offered about two courses that I thought might be related to studies back at Uvic. So I began to look elsewhere. Upon further research, I found out that universities in Scandinavia offered quite prestigious anthropology programs; and so I finally settled on going to Denmark, partially because its geological location is said to be more temperate than the other locations in Scandinavia. It was a random, last minute go-all-in decision, nonetheless.

I knew ten months of exchange plus travels would nearly break my bank, so I worked two part-time jobs in the summer to save up my funds. This however, meant that I did not have much time to actually prepare for the intense year ahead. By September, I could only vaguely point out on the globe where I was going to live for the next 10 months, and could speak only a word or two of this seemingly supernatural utterance called “dansk”. I had packed relatively light for the year. One suitcase full of bulky winter gears, as it was rumoured that we’ll need it basically upon arrival in September. Thankfully, the thick winter coats did not make an appearance until late October, at the earliest that I could remember. Before departure, I also exchanged about 500 CAD into Danish Kroners in cash just in case, for the immediate food, transportation, or a cozy call home once I have arrived in the city.

After airplane transfers from Vancouver, via Frankfurt, I finally arrived at my “home state” for the next academic year. From the airport I hopped onto the Metro line was built into the airport itself, which provided at least an easy start to the long journey ahead. For the first night, I had to stay in a nearby hostel because the international had already closed by the time I arrived in town. I had printed out a google map direction sheet that told me where I needed to go. The next day, I ventured into the city center in search of the international office. It was inconspicuously cornered on the bustling street called “Fiostrade” and took a bit of getting lost to find. If you are coming from the airport directly, simply take the Metro towards Farum, and get off at Norreport station (you will become very familiar with this
station in the next few months) and walk about 200 m up Fiostrade from there. Once you get to the international office, remember to take a number! And don’t be intimidated by the long lines; the rumours about Scandinavian efficiency are totally true. The international office will get you set up on your housing and registration (of course, you will have hopefully done the bulk of it online before arrival).

In terms of housing, I applied for student housing along with my exchange application, there’s a box on the form you can check to apply. My room was actually a den, while my roommate had an actual room. So every time she would go to the bathroom, kitchen, or go out, she would have to pass through my room. Although it could get irritating at times, it was still manageable. For second term, I found a room in a house in Emdrup, a suburb just north-east of Copenhagen with a newly-wed couple. My advice with renting a room in Copenhagen is to ALWAYS LOOK UP YOUR LANDLORD, AND READ THE CONTRACT BEFORE SIGNING IT. And if possible, make sure you get some sort of housing insurance to cover you for any possible “damages” your landlord may claim. There are too many cases of people not getting their deposit money (two month’s rent) back, living with conditions not previously promised, or being thrown out with little notice. So get insured, or choose student housing. Now back to the academic experience!

The university hosts an inauguration ceremony before the first day of the semester for all international students. There is also an introduction (though felt a bit more like a sales pitch) to the Danish Culture classes offered at KU. Finally there are school-sponsored parties that everyone is invited to, and they’re actually pretty cool.

I found the classes in KU to be quite different from those at Uvic. First of all, they are smaller. Although this could be due to the fact that I only took classes offered in English, which is mostly taken by international students. In any case the cozy learning environment provided a lot of opportunities for student input, and the lecturer always sets time aside for student discussions in each class. A full course-load at KU is three to four classes. At first I could not believe how little lecture time there was, thinking, “what do these students do with all that free time?!” Turns out, they do plenty. Most of them take up part-time or full time jobs. Some have children to take care of on top of that, and others are involved with extracurricular activities like soccer, choir, and activism. Anyway, I found the classes at KU much more challenging than those at Uvic, because you are constantly required to think critically and creatively, and to engage with the prof, and your peers. Much of the class discussion is based off of assigned readings, which by the way are quite extensive. However I find that the discussion tends to be taken in any direction mostly dictated by the students which I really enjoyed. The prof is not afraid to get off track and pursue the students’ line of thinking, neither. One of the major differences in evaluating students is that there is usually one assignment for each class upon which the student is graded. In anthropology, the assignment usually comes in the form of a term essay. It constitutes 100 percent of your grade, which is sort of an ultimatum. The paper is graded out of 12; 12 being a superb paper, and then 10, 7, 4....so on. Seven is considered an average passing grade. For some of the courses you may be put into groups for fieldwork, which is always good fun. On top of the anthropology courses, I also took the Danish language courses, as well as a unit in psychology. I would really recommend taking the Danish courses; you’ll be amazed at how much you can learn in merely a few months.
Outside of school, I volunteered at a Church on some weekdays as an English assistant; on Sundays, I was a volunteer server for the homeless meal program which proved to be very rewarding (and I’m not just talking about the delicious dishes they cook up or the endless supply of bread you could take home after the shift). I also frequented the Trampoline House in the heart of the Norrebro neighbourhood dedicated to refugees and asylum seekers in Denmark. They offered many social programs and everyone is welcome. During my time off, I also explored a lot in and around the city, familiarizing myself with the distinct neighbourhoods on my bike. I forgot to mention, your bike will be your best friend in the city! In my experience, it is truly the fastest, most efficient way to get around in Copenhagen. I got a bike the second day I arrived, from a second hand shop in Norrebro for 500kr (which is about as cheap as it gets in Copenhagen). Later on, I “interned” at a bike shop and learned a few tricks about maintenance and repairs.

In general, goods are slightly more expensive in Denmark than in Canada, but not to an absurd degree. In fact, some things such as milk, beer, pork, coffee, shampoo, kababs and pizzas can be a lot cheaper than in Canada. Cheap places for groceries include Netto, Facta and independent ethnic shops like ones found in Norrebro. My personal favorite is “Istanbul Bazaar” on Frederiksborgvej. Copenhagen also offers a lot of free activities such as free opera and free museum days. Look up the special admission-free days when planning your trip! The museums are excellent.

Traveling around Scandinavia and Europe is fairly easy from Copenhagen. For example, the nearest town in Sweden, Malmo is only a half-hour train ride away from Central Copenhagen. Flights to other parts of Europe are also comparatively inexpensive.

In the ten months of exchange, I have experienced so many things that I never would have experienced otherwise, both good and bad. I have made life-long friends and still send postcards to different corners of the world today. I did not have much expectation of how the experience would or should turn out, but in retrospect, it is almost magical how doors opened up, and how life could take you places you would never dream of. You never know what’s in store!
My trusty ride. Sept-Feb. RIP.

Fun trip to Greve.
Cooking with friends! This is what my room looked like with standard-Ikea furniture.

Christmas in Copenhagen.
Trip to Roskilde.

Dyrhaven, a nature reserve park north of Copenhagen. February 2013
First day of spring, hanging out with buddies at a nearby harbour-side.

Street art! Near Osterbro.