

Europe in the World, 2008-2009

Introduction

I think the entire year constitutes a memorable experience, from battling the Dutch language, Oktoberfest and Berlin, a ten-hour bus ride to London, to landing in Århus. Nothing has been ordinary or short of amazing. Learning to travel completely on my own has probably been my one biggest accomplishment.

Preparing to Leave

See if you can do everything beforehand. Going to the Netherlands, you wait to get your visa when you get there, although you really have to follow up on it to make sure it goes through (plus, it's expensive). In Denmark, they will most likely give you the paperwork while you're in the NL, so try to go to the embassy in The Hague, or do it immediately on arrival in Århus.

Also make sure to send in your packet to SFSU with plenty of time before you leave, just in case you forget something. (It's much harder to do from overseas, believe me!)

I knew both countries would speak a lot of English, but it would have been nice to try to prepare a bit- even if it's difficult. People will have a bit more respect for you when they know you are trying.

Also, I was hit with paying a lot of money for linens both semesters. If you can, try to bring them yourself or make time to go to IKEA or another cheap store (I was charged 50 euro for sheets/duvet/pillowcase, which was maybe only \$15 or \$20.) The same stands for Denmark, so whatever you buy in the NL try to bring it with you.

Most importantly, at least ATTEMPT to set a budget. It's all very exciting being here, but with the conversion rate not so good, and everything being so new, it's easy to get carried away. If you want to travel a lot, it's easy and usually cheap, especially in Utrecht because it is so central. But if you know you like to shop or go out a lot, try to spend less on other things. Cooking your own meals helps immensely, and you'll notice people rarely eat out anyway. By the time you get to Denmark, going out for a coffee or beer is like the highlight of your week!

Climate

The climate is confusing. The first weeks in Utrecht were quite warm, more than I thought, but then it got cold pretty quick. They say all it does is rain in the NL, but that wasn't true in my mind. It snowed a couple of times in both countries, but it's chillier than anything else. Coming from SF, you may be used to the rain, but the sheer cold never failed to amaze me. Bring a couple of warm jackets, especially with hoods. You should plan on layering more because it's cold out. Riding your bike makes you warm, then you go inside, cool down, and need to layer up again. But if you're from California like me, seeing the snow is still so amazing, you don't care if it's wet and cold. The mere fact of waking up to all white is just too exciting!

I think the NL goes through all four, because it was warm, then cool and breezy, then snowy. In Denmark, I think the seasons are less defined, with not much variation, besides lack of snow. Denmark was a bit miserable in the dead of winter, but the springtime is absolutely gorgeous and (almost) worth 4 months of being stuck inside. Everything in bloom and warm sunshine leads to plenty of days out by the canal, and even a bit of a sunburn in my case.

Jackets, layers, and boots, I made the mistake of not bringing the latter, but it's good there are a lot of cheap boot shops. Also, a pair of good gloves and a hat is good especially for biking in the winter/at night. Make sure your shoes are protected for rain and snow, you can buy spray for that.

Packing

Refer to above paragraph. An umbrella is a nice idea in theory, but it is often too windy that it doesn't matter. You would be better off with a jacket with a hood and good hat.

H&M flourishes here, and you can buy everything you ever dreamed of, so forgetting something won't matter. It kind of just comes down to how much you want to spend. But bringing things that remind you of home, even a comfy t-shirt, blanket, or food items (ahem, peanut butter and Tapatío!) will make you feel a bit more comfortable.

I brought 2 big suitcases with me at first. When my mom visited me over winter break, I sent the biggest one back home with her, though I had to ship some stuff to Denmark. Pack light because it's a hassle to lug it around, but know that there will come a time you will HATE your wardrobe, because you've worn it so many times!

Flight Information

Like any long trip, be prepared for glitches. If you can find a one-stop flight, do it. My flight got stuck in Washington for 3 hours, so I missed my connection in Frankfurt to Amsterdam. I was planning on meeting someone there, so that was difficult to work out. Charge your iPod, be prepared for bad airplane food and movies, and make sure to keep hydrated, especially if you've never flown on a long flight before.

In my experience, I gave up my seat to a man two rows in front of me because his family was in my row, but then was stuck between a large Indian family talking to each other in different rows, and a man falling asleep on my shoulder, which was just awkward. You'll also love yourself if you bring a toothbrush, toothpaste, and deodorant- the little things that make you feel human again.

Basic airline rules apply. I had two big suitcases that got on fine, no extra fees. I think you need to keep them below a certain weight, but if you get there early and fly on a major airline it's not really a problem. That being said, I sent close to half of my things home halfway through the year, so only bring what you really need.

Once you get here, you will depend on the cheap airlines to get around, so bring a large backpack or duffel for shorter trips.

Arrival/Rules and Regulations

At the School in the NL, there is no one to pick you up at the airport, unless you arrange something on your own. The orientation week starts before you can move in, so there's a big scramble for cheap accommodations, which are hard to come by. BOOK EARLY! I CANNOT stress that enough. Everyone got a chance to bond much earlier by staying in the hostels with each other. I ended up finding a woman with an empty room in Amsterdam, (through Craigslist, make sure to check) and shared the room with another girl from SFSU. It wasn't the cheapest, especially with transport to and from Utrecht, so think about it early enough to find a hostel or something else. It would have been nice to have someone there to meet us, get us settled, but we didn't look into it. I know there is a 'buddy program' you can do, but I don't know if that applies to airport pickup.

In Århus, they have a student who has a car that can pick people up as they arrive. Very useful, comforting after a long flight, and nice to not have to battle the public transportation right off the bat.

If there isn't such service, then look into what transportation you need to take to your destination, but never hesitate to ask. There are helpful people everywhere!

In Utrecht, students will have a comprehensive orientation. They have a day where all the internationals watch a presentation about the school and country, and then have time to mingle and sign up for a tour. The tour is by ESN, the Erasmus Student Network. Our guide took us around the city, showing us historical and cultural highlights, cool hangouts, bars, the employment center, and ESN house. The next day, our class also had a brief Europe in the World introduction to meet the other students and professors, and get a tour of the school.

In Århus, we had a tour of the school, but already knew each other so it wasn't such a big deal. We all asked about a city tour, which wasn't provided, but would have been really helpful, especially if you don't live in the city center.

If you have questions, make sure to ask them as soon as you can at the orientation. If a city tour isn't provided, check it out through the local tourist office.

Students will need to file documents with the host country's government. In Utrecht, you transfer the money for your visa before you get there, but will fill out paperwork once you arrive. Again, make sure to do it with more than enough time so the money goes through by the time you get there, and then you can fill out your papers ASAP. In Århus, you have the option to do it before you get there, which is a good idea. Also, you have to register with the local municipality for a residence permit once you get your visa.

A visa or residence permit is necessary for getting a bank account, and is a good idea to avoid bank fees for withdrawing/converting money, if you can do it. Unlocked, cheap cell

phones are widely available in Utrecht, and phone cards are sold everywhere. Good idea to get one soon to get all the numbers of your new friends, and for making interview arrangements. In Århus it is harder to find cheap phones, so keep your phone from the NL, or buy one online or at the Bazar (Big Turkish market). For some reason, they don't have as many or as cheap phone stores, so be ready for it.

Housing

Check what exists and link

-Short Stay Solutions, big housing company in Utrecht:

<http://www.shortstaysolutions.nl/>

-Where I lived in Utrecht, Baden-Powellweg:

http://www.shortstaysolutions.nl/cm/I_am_a_tenant_-_Accommodations/Baden_Powellweg.html (also full list of SSH apartments)

-Where I lived in Århus, Skjoldhøjkollegiet: <http://www.skjoldhoej.dk/> (English part isn't so good)

-Kamernet: www.kamernet.nl (Basically pay to send emails to people with places, up to them to respond for you. Don't know of anyone who had luck with this though...)

You won't have to find your own housing if you don't want to. In Utrecht, you will most likely find something through the Short Stay Solutions website. Very nice of them to offer their services, but they generally hike up the prices for foreigners, and charge a finder's fee of sorts. It is also through here where you can get (expensive) linens. If you look ahead, you might be able to find something on Craigslist, or Kamernet. In Århus, again the school took care of it. Same thing with more expensive rent as an international, and you can probably find something in the center for the same amount, but it is much more difficult. They don't offer bedding options, so bring your own or head to IKEA.

In Utrecht, there were multiple student dorm situations, but also people spread out all over the city in apartments with other students. The bigger places hold mostly international students, and are a great way to meet people. But living in an old Dutch house is a fun experience, and can often be in a good location. Most of the people I've met in Århus live in bigger student dorms, but some live in other apartments and houses, mostly if they have connections from people who lived there in the past.

For me, I really loved living in Baden-Powellweg, a dorm right in the middle between school and the center. It was off the beaten path, so there were lots of student parties. I actually lived in a disabled-equipped place, so there were 3 of us in a huge flat. There were students all around and I met tons of people, plus it was right by 2 supermarkets and close enough to the central station. There were other dorm accommodations, like Parnassos and Beneluxlaan, with the same feel, as well as multiple ones on campus. Living at school was okay for some people, but being far from the center was kind of a burden. Other students living in single apartments had the same feeling, because they

were located all over the city. Many of them wished they could meet more people by living with them.

In Århus, I lived in a place called Skjoldhøj Kollegiet. It is a huge compound, with mostly student but also young families. There are apartments with 5 flats, each with 1 or 2 rooms, a kitchen and bathroom, but they are all completely separate. Others have 10 or 12 people in one flat, some with shared bathrooms, individual bathrooms, a huge shared kitchen, and living room. There is a supermarket (little pricey) open everyday, a sauna, bar, tanning room, music room, free laundry rooms, a bus stop right in front, and various sporting and group activities. Unfortunately, it is quite far from school and the center, but the bus stop makes it manageable. Not the best area either, but there is another cheaper supermarket, bank, and small shopping mall nearby, as well as Bazar Vest, a huge indoor market with tons of fresh fruit and vegetables.

There are other student accommodations (Though not sure of the names). One is across the street from the school, and most students are located here. It is the best way to meet people from all over, and gives a certain freedom that living with a host family or in someone else's apartment doesn't allow.

Academics

Be aware that the first semester is very theoretical. I knew a little about this going in, but there is not much journalism going on in this part. It is very unfortunate, especially while being in a JOURNALISM program in the JOURNALISM faculty of the school. Some of the classes I took include Utrechtviews. I was sent out with a partner to interview and write an article about something happening in the city. This is a good way to get familiar with the city and meet new people. In Optional Investigative Journalism, everyone presents a report on investigative journalism in a certain country. The coolest part is the conference at the end of the semester in Brussels. Four students went, presented their 'findings,' and met tons of other journalists. Europe and Islam was a good class that is very interesting and timely. With the large Middle Eastern immigrant population in Western Europe, it's important to know about different cultures. The class discussions are usually pretty stimulating.

The Århus program is much different, and very practical. Some of the classes I took include Daneviews. It's similar to Utrechtviews, but on Denmark as a whole. I received a lot more help throughout the process and feedback on the work. Students can work in pairs, and at the end are critiqued by professor. I learned to not only to work for the professor's approval, but to better myself as a journalist. Even though politics isn't my area of interest, I liked the class World Politics. There is a focus on US and German foreign policy, with a bit on the UK, and then ends with a look at Eastern Europe. There are two assignments, one about Germany and one about the US, and they are read and critiqued by your fellow classmates and reviewed in front of the class. It's not scary, but constructive especially in regards to structuring papers and keeping to a certain topic. In the Euroviews class, our topic was Eastern Europe, 20 years after Communism. I had to go to one of the former Warsaw pact countries, and report on how life is economically, socially, culturally, politically, etc in the present day. It should be exciting, and there

aren't many parameters so you are free to write about what you want. I was pushed to do my best with the skills you had. I did my assignment in Prague, and wrote about a recent law that punishes journalists as well as the impact of tourism on the city. Others wrote about Roma/Gypsy issues, failing governments, poverty, art, and modeling.

I think every major at SFSU works differently, but the Journalisthøjskolen in Århus is really great because everything is practical. In Utrecht, you learn the European Union system and how it works. The second semester puts you out in the field, talking to people and writing stories, which is what everyone wants to be doing. At SFSU, there are a lot of pre-requisite courses that don't have you out writing, but even in news writing and reporting, nothing is published. Here, everything goes on the web and in a magazine, which is something you don't get at SFSU until publication lab.

For the Hogeschool portion, being very theoretical, your grades are mostly based on your performance on the written assignments, rather than attendance or participation. Classes are usually only 6 weeks long.

At the Journalisthøjskolen, everything is practical. With the exception of World Politics, you are out reporting, writing, and then preparing to publish it in the web. Besides that, there is individual coaching with the professors. Most people enjoy working at the school and being able to help each other with ideas, coaching, etc. In Denmark, there is a big emphasis on the coaching aspect, which is really beneficial.

Campus Life

The Hogeschool in Utrecht is quite large with the accompanying university across the road. There are dorms, a medical center, a super market, a large library, restaurants, athletic facilities, and Stef's- the bar and hangout. During the warmer months and sunny days, people are out and about and often stay after class to hang out.

The Journalisthøjskolen is far from the center and the main university. It is just a small building. Though not aesthetically pleasing, its size is comforting. There is a library, TV & radio studio, large cantina/cafeteria that is the main meeting place, and the Friday bar every week. People don't really stick around after class. They prefer to go to other places to meet up, but Friday bar is always a good time and great to meet Danes.

Both schools are usually empty by 3 or 4pm, but in Utrecht they would randomly have us start class at 3:30pm, which was a bit of a bummer. Also, in the first semester they seemed to change the schedule weekly, so be prepared for that. Lots of confusion!

It's different and nice not to have a huge campus. I liked that Utrecht has the same vibe as SFSU, without the size, and kind of miss it in Århus. It would be nice to have access to all the same services you are used to at SFSU, like a big library, ATMs, food services, etc.

Both schools have an abundance of computers, and free Wi-Fi everywhere. Since most people bring laptops, the computer rooms are usually open. The computers are relatively new with all the cool software and no time limits.

In Utrecht, there are 2 restaurants, plus a huge supermarket, as well as Stef's bar. In Århus, the cantina has some prepared foods and fruit, but it is kind of expensive, but not so great, and only open until 2pm. Better off bringing your own lunch. A supermarket is down the road, but only good if you have a bike.

Social Life

So far, living in a dorm has been the best way to meet people. Also, the Friday bar at the school is good to meet other journalists and Danes. The Student House is full of mainly internationals and offers cool events, parties, and concerts.

In Utrecht, everyone was part of the ESN program, so we went on the same trips, the same parties, and saw each other at school. As an international, especially in EitW, you have all your classes with the same people, which makes it more difficult to meet others. But then again, you automatically have 20 new friends. Definitely take advantage of every opportunity, even if you're a bit wary. You'll regret it later when you wish you had befriended all those people whose countries you might visit on your reporting trips from Denmark.

I've met most of my friends through ESN and the student dorms. When you always run into people, you're bound to start talking. Plus, at the beginning that's all anyone wants to do-meet new people from around the world. In Utrecht, being an American was an asset because we were fewer. However in Århus there are many more, and it's a different situation entirely. Being at the journalism school is nice because you already know you have something in common with everyone else there. Plus it's so small that you always meet up with the same people.

There are some good bars and clubs in both cities, so meeting locals is also relatively easy. But they usually aren't used to being spoken to in English. Both cultures are more reserved than many of us Americans.

Nightlife starts late, and ends later. Not going out until 11:30pm or 12am, and staying out till 4 or 5 is normal.

In Utrecht, ESN is a great way to meet people and learn all about Dutch culture through their various field trips. Don't miss the ESN trips, like canoeing, day trips, and dinner parties- always a good time and automatic friends. Events like 'Museum night' in Amsterdam, where all the museums are open late into the night and offer drinks (museum hopping, with alcohol) and Cultural Sundays are always great. There are lots of gyms you can join, and other student groups. Alas, the main thing uniting students seems to be parties, one of the best ways to make new friends!

In Århus, the Student House looks for volunteers at the beginning of each semester, as does the Friday bar at school, which can be pretty cool. There are some events like the Kapsejladsen, the annual drunken boat race at the University, various street festivals, and special events at the J-school.

Religion

Neither country is very religious, but especially the Danes. Most of them claim to not practice anything, and attending church services aren't popular. Islam is definitely a growing religion across Europe. There are churches everywhere. So finding a place of worship shouldn't be too difficult, but asking questions about it might be.

Most people believe in God or a higher spirit, but it isn't something that is that important to them or that they practice in their day-to-day lives.

Leisure

From Utrecht, Amsterdam is only about 40 minutes away and great for a day trip or a night out. Easily as accessibly is The Hague, Rotterdam, Delft, northern and western Germany, and Belgium, especially Brussels. In the city itself, there are plenty of shops to peruse. There are always cafes open with tons of outdoor seating during the warmer months. There is also canoeing, a community pool, and various football and other sporting groups to take part in. Just biking around the outskirts of the town is popular.

In Århus, the Aros museum and the "Old Town" of Den Gamle By are interesting. It is also a harbor city, so there is easy access to the beach in one direction, and the Brabrand lakes in the other. Once it's sunny, Scandinavians love to barbeque! There is live music on week nights and on Sundays at some cafes. Both of the cities are large enough to attract good music acts, and I've been to some great concerts over the last year.

The Nieuwe square of Utrecht is my favorite. It's always full of people, colors, and is the center of the Netherlands Film Festival. It is near the central station with shops all along the main road. Café Belgie and Mick O'Connells Irish bar is a good central meeting spot, especially during football matches. Tivoli is a great concert venue, and Maria becomes the ESN bar every Tuesday night. Coffee Company is a cool café with Wi-Fi and Falafel City has the best...falafel!

The Student House is definitely a main hangout on Tuesday nights, as well as the weekend for different events. Friday bar at school has pool and foosball. Café Ris Ras is nice and cozy, and UnderMasken is a hip place surrounded by Buddhas and fish tanks. They serve as a café during the day, and bar at night. The main canal is full of people on sunny days. I really love the beach in Århus, so spending time there became a favorite for me.

Every last Sunday in Utrecht is "Cultural Sunday", where all the businesses are open. It is also home to the Netherlands Film Festival in October.

The Danish J-school doesn't hold many legendary events, but there are a series of Lectures from the university you are invited to attend. There was an open house we participated in, and various events and lectures you can go to, but are all in Danish.

Football (soccer) games between Utrecht and Amsterdam Ajax are big. In Århus, handball is the main sport for which the country is famous. There are tons of football teams to be a part of if that is interesting to you.

Shopping

In Utrecht, the biggest mall is attached to the central station. Most of the shops in the surrounding streets are very commercial. But there is a market 3 times a week. Some of the smaller streets outside the center are filled with boutique shops. Specialty food shops are everywhere, from bakeries to seafood.

Århus has quite a large shopping area as well. All the restaurants along the canal are individually owned. There is a shopping mall attached to central station, as well as one in the north called CityVest. There is also the Bazar market.

Clothing sizes are not a problem, as many stores are international and have many sizes on the label. Once you find your 'European' size, you will know what to look for. The Danes are VERY fashionable, and love looking good for any event. In both countries it is not acceptable to go to the supermarket in your pajama pants.

I thought buying cheap shoes would be good, but it doesn't exactly pay off. I wouldn't buy bags that have "Utrecht" plastered all over them for fear of being seen as a tourist in any country and more likely to be pick-pocketed. There are also some cool and memorable souvenirs. But I keep a precious journal where I stick notes, postcards, drink labels, ticket stubs and cards inside.

Travel

You have to take advantage of the multitude of cheap travel options while in Europe! Utrecht is so central; you can pretty much take a bus anywhere, which is usually the cheapest (Eurolines.com.) For flights, your best friends will be easyjet.com and ryanair.com. If you book in advance, then you can find flights for less than 10 euro. But they add charges if you take a baggage (best for quick trips, weekend, etc.). Also, most flights are really early in the morning or late at night, and fly to smaller airports outside main cities. A site called whichbudget.com shows all the discount airlines and where they fly. Kayak.com can be better for less domestic routes.

When you get to Utrecht, make sure to buy the discount card for the train. It's 50+ Euro, but lasts for 3 or 4 months. You also get 30% discount off all trains for you and 3 other people! You will regret not buying it, because it will pay for itself in 2 trips to Amsterdam ☺

Every place you go is an adventure. I never felt scared or in danger anywhere I went. Just absorb it all!

Closing

If you can, make the most of the cheap travel options from Utrecht- so much cheaper and closer than in Denmark! But Utrecht and its surroundings are really beautiful, so make sure to enjoy all that it has to offer. Try all of the national cuisines, even if you think you won't like it. Same goes for the different beers! Enjoy living with people who speak English as a second language. Try to learn Dutch or Danish if you can, it will only add to the experience. Don't get discouraged if you don't like the courses in the first semester, it will get more journalistic in Denmark! Homesickness will probably set in, but you will get over it. I'm glad I didn't go home for the winter break. I think it would have been a difficult transition back to the US way of life, and then have to switch to Danish life. Find someone to stay with for the holidays, or go traveling like I did. You won't regret it! Also, as Californians, the weather may get to you. The first four months in Århus were a bit discouraging, but make up for it by taking advantage of living in a student situation and being surrounded by peers. Remember everyone is also away from their home, even if they're only from Germany. It can be hard on everyone, so depending on others may help make it a bit better.

As I write this I am in Dublin working on my final assignment. Thinking I only have 3 weeks left is terrifying. When the first semester ends, you already think it has flown by, and I was in no way ready to leave. The hardest part from me isn't going back to 'real life' back in the States, but leaving my friends and wondering when I'll get the chance to see them again. I am excited to head back to SF, and think I will be that much more appreciative of the numerous cultures there.

You'll learn more about yourself, how to deal with being so independent, so far from home, and in a constant state of movement, or so it seems. Prepare yourself to change a lot, in ways you would never expect. For me, I'm preparing myself for the fact that everyone at home has changed as well. You'll never be the same after this year, but it's something you will never think twice about.