

The Netherlands

So you have decided to study in the Netherlands. Everyone's experience in foreign country on a study abroad is different- especially when you come to Amsterdam. Amsterdam attracts many different kinds of people because of its almost infamous reputation, and the UvA attracts many different kinds of students for the many programs it offers. I think, because of the nature of Amsterdam and the nature of the UvA's program, it receives one of the most international study body probably offered in the study abroad program.

When people from home ask me what I've been doing in Amsterdam, I generally tell them "the same thing I do at home, but usually on a bicycle." Although I may be in Europe, I've grown to feel completely at home in this city. Of course I do more abroad than I do at home by taking advantage of meeting people, the classes, seeing the city, and traveling, but at the same time I feel comfortable enough here dealing with the little challenges of being abroad. Not only is this city welcoming and comfortable, but it's also beautiful and rich in culture. Coming abroad has been new and exciting, and stressful at times, but no less manageable and every bit worth the experience.

The comments I have on the various topics that people may be curious in are almost exclusively based on my situation.

Before you leave

When I left for Amsterdam I was not ready. I had quit my job three days prior, but had packed my bags almost a week early; I thought I was ready. There was a Giants game, and the freeway was disastrous. It took us an hour to get through the bay bridge, and I almost missed my flight. When I finally arrived at the airport, I was still on my cell phone trying to make all last minute goodbye calls. Turns out, the flight was already canceled due to a strike at Schipol (the airport), and I had to be rerouted. I checked in my bags- all 140 lbs of them- and proceeded to wait in the lobby for another four hours to make another flight.

What do we learn from this situation?

- 1) Pack early. I packed twice; I even took things out. But I figured, "I have 5 bars of soap now, why buy them later when I can just bring what I have?" This mindset continued with me until I had packed just about half of my earthly belongings. Now, I have been in the Netherlands for about nine months and I am begging friends to come visit me so they can take things back for me. I may have to resort to boat freighting. Be realistic. You will spend money whether you like it or not. The most useful things to pack would be: winter clothes (winter is from October-March), English language books, a laptop, pictures of home for when you get depressed in about a month and a half, a camera, and LOTS OF MONEY.
- 2) Plan ahead. Leave with enough time to make it to the airport. Flights are stressful as it is. If you plan to move to another country, leave enough time to actually get there.

- 3) Confirm your flight!
- 4) Call everyone you want to say goodbye to the night before you leave. Make sure you get everyone's email/address/phone number while you are still home. It is extremely annoying to try to reach people when you are in the Netherlands. Calls (mobile and land-line, there is hardly distinction in price) are expensive, mail is slow, and the computer lab at school is always busy.

Preparing and Packing

It's hard for me to explain what those last few weeks in San Francisco were like. I knew I was about to move to Amsterdam, so I had taken care of moving out, saving up some money, spending time with friends and family; yet, even as I was doing some last minute packing I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Taking some time off work and making sure all my travel plans were securely in order a few weeks before leaving definitely took the pressure off the stress of moving, and I highly recommend not working too hard before departing, so when the time comes to leave you're ready to go. I pretty much said all my goodbyes and packed my life up in one day, although I probably packed and repacked about 5 times trying to decide between the necessities (i.e. clothes) and some comfort items (i.e. pictures), while trying to make sure I would be able to carry everything to and from the airport on my own. No matter what items I finally decided on, I'd probably still look back and wish I had brought just one or two more things, but in the end all I really needed were a few basic clothing items, my music, a camera, and my laptop. Once arriving there were so many new things I wanted to buy anyways, just to help me assimilate into Amsterdam culture, that packing up my whole life wasn't worth not being able to carry my own luggage. Less was definitely more in this situation, especially since there seems to be a lot of walking with a lot of stairs, and very few elevators. Besides, anything I felt was missing could easily be purchased at one of the many local markets, and within a couple of weeks I felt completely settled and at home.

Academic life

Dutch Language Course

The first class I took in Amsterdam was the extensive Dutch language course. This course is not needed to survive Amsterdam, but attending the class is a prerequisite for the study abroad program. Because it is extensive, you won't learn enough. Because it is Dutch, even if you learn it people will laugh at you when you try to speak it. Even if people answer you, chances are you won't understand, and will have to eventually use English. This is not a problem when you are in Amsterdam, as soon as you venture to other cities, beware: not all Dutch people speak English!

My advice to people who come here is to bear the Dutch class, date a Dutch person, and watch Dutch television. The class will give you the basics and a place to practice where people are as clueless as you are. Also, there is a rumor if you pass the class you get your money back, or the next level class for free. The dating Dutch is essential because you get to practice little phrases, and you are introduced to other Dutch people who will egg you on to practice more. If you have a link into the Dutch world (which is much different than just living in a Dutch city) you can really come to understand how they talk, and how simple the language really is. Dutch television is bad, but if you watch the news it is maybe the most understandable accent you will come across.

The ISHSS

The International School for Humanities and Social Sciences is undergoing a major change. Soon, it will only be the International School for Social Sciences, and soon all classes will be in a semester format. The main office is moving to Prinshendrikkade as of June. You may still find classes all over Amsterdam; there is no central campus.

The ISHSS has many types of students. There are the:

1. Certificate students: students who are non-fee paying (meaning they pay their own institution, not the UvA). The two American direct exchanges are with SFSU and Boston College (Do not be surprised if you room with them, the ISHSS tends to room us together). We do not receive a degree, we are only here for exchange
2. Council Travel Students: They come from all different school around the States, they are mainly housed together, and they have classes specifically made for their program. They are also on a non-degree exchange program, but they pay significantly more money than any other exchange student. While not officially recognized, they are given first priority in classes because the UvA receives the most money from them.
3. Erasmus students: Us but in European form. They are usually outraged that we pay so much to come here. They can be undergraduate or graduate students here for an exchange. They receive the cheaper housing.
4. The graduate students: they are fee-paying, degree students. Usually they complain that they are forced to take classes with undergraduates who bring down the level of class discussion.
5. Dutch students: sometimes they are graduate students; sometimes they are undergraduate students. The Dutch system is slowly evolving into the American system, but for now, there is no clear distinction of what level a Dutch student is. In most classes leveled 2/3 you will have at least one.

Course Organization

Classes usually have a reasonable amount of course literature, and are assessed by a final paper. At the beginning of the course, you are usually given a course syllabus, and where you can obtain your reading materials. English language books are expensive and difficult to find, so usually the professor will make readers of the required literature. Readers are usually no more than 30 Euro, so usually you spend less on course materials here than at home.

Your grade in most classes will be completely dependant on your final paper. This year, trimesters last for three months, and professors expect a paper (around 4000-6000 words) by the end. For semester students, classes last for about four months, and you have one month off to write your papers. Because the system is changing as of next year, it is difficult to determine how the courses will run. Now, increasingly there are more classes that are not completely dependent on the final paper, but don't count on it.

The classes you will be taking are either 2, or 2/3 level. No undergraduates are admitted into level 3 courses unless under extraordinary circumstances. Be happy for this. Professors expect a lot from their students; courses cross-listed under Development Studies, Good Governance, and International Relations are at a high level. I suggest if you have no prior background in a subject, do not start now.

There are two student-run organizations associated with the UvA that are designed to help international students. The first is the International Student Network, who provides new

students with Dutch mentors, an introduction week, and sponsor events during the year such as film viewing and parties. They are the organization that link Dutch students to international students. The second group is the Student Advisory Panel, that function as a relay between international students and Dean Hagedijk. This group consists of five international students (three graduate, two exchange), and they also sponsor events for international students such as museum trips, jazz concerts and film showings. I was able to work in this organization and really get to know the staff, and how things work at the university. It is some-what like a student council (you are elected), but the work is easy and it is paid with what is designed to be a tuition stipend (really it is just cash into your bank account). Working three trimesters has paid off more than 75% of my tuition.

More on Academics

Starting classes also helped me adjust to being abroad, because life becomes much more routine. I find classes here to be similar to my experiences at home; some are more challenging, others are more interesting, and some involve a lot or a little amount of work. Some of the classes are for only a quarter, while others last the whole semester, and its important to remember that it does matter if you attend class and a lot of times there is homework every week. I personally found my classes to be slightly more challenging than the classes I've taken at home, but at the same time I'm only enrolled in 3 classes to be a full time student. On the other hand, I've talked to other students who feel their classes are much easier abroad, so it depends on the individual mostly. The school also offers Dutch language classes which can be fun and useful, although don't expect to be fluent in Dutch after only one quarter, and you do get your money back for the class if you pass the test at the end. The other students in classes are from all over the world, including Dutch students, which adds such an interesting perspective on different topics and giving you a chance to understand these differences especially getting to know them during class breaks, either on a peer to peer level or an academic one.

The grading system here is on a scale from 1-10 with an 8 and up being very good, a 7 being pretty good, and a 6 being average. I believe you need a 5 to pass. The important thing to remember about grades is that it is generally hard to get an 8 or up, especially while trying to adjust to other areas of life abroad. However, it is by no means impossible with effort nor is it hard do well in a class as long as I remember that I came here to study, and also I do enjoy the subjects I'm studying, which it makes the studying aspect of being abroad much more fun and easy to manage.

Living

Housing

. You hear that there is no housing, and it is really expensive. That is the truth, but I refuse to believe it is as bad as the situation in San Francisco. Amsterdam is not a city, it is a town, and the Netherlands is overpopulated. This is why you will pay 450 Euro for a resident permit, and you will be discouraged in finding a new apartment.

De Key

After you are accepted into the program, you will receive notice from Short Stay De Key offering you a room. De Key works on a take it or leave it basis, under the assumption that you will take it. You may be told that you will receive your own room by SFSU. This is false—most students are put in shared rooms. If you are put in a shared room, you will be “randomly” put

with another student (the process is not completely random, Spanish with Spanish, Americans with Americans, Asians with Asians etc.). Being American, you are almost guaranteed the best housing. But be prepared, you will also pay the most. Shared rooms are around 280 Euro, double rooms start at that and go up to 350, and studios start at 400.

Many students complain about De Key. If you feel you are being cheated by them, make sure to let the SAP, De Key, the caretakers, your program manager- anyone that will listen know what your issue is. There were problems this year with a number of apartments with no heating for at least three months, but compensation was fought and received. The way to get any sort of service in the Netherlands is to make a lot of noise.

If you are really unhappy with your living arrangement, it is possible to get out of it. You may terminate your lease at the end of a trimester or you can sometimes change rooms within De Key legally. Changing rooms is almost impossible unless you are extremely persistent. First it is necessary to get a letter from your program manager, and then you take it to De Key. The more noise you make, the faster you get a new room.

Arrival and Housing

After orientation at SF State, the other students going to UvA and I decided it would be a good idea to make arrangements for the same flight and share a hotel room for the first couple of days (since UvA's orientation started before we were allowed to move into our rooms). This worked out to our advantage because they weren't lying when the school told us that you'd really be on your own in the bilateral program. As soon as we stepped off the plane we had to figure out what to do from there with no one to guide us anymore, but between four of us everything was manageable. However, the international club at the UvA (ISN) can arrange for mentors to meet up with students at the airport, so no one would ever be left totally lost. I think the hardest things about arriving those first couple of days were trying to deal with the jetlag, figuring out how to use the payphones, grocery shopping when everything is in a language you don't really know, and walking around until we got bikes. But, with enough sleep the jetlag was gone, getting a cell phone was easy and fairly cheap, we still figured out what all the food was, and getting a bike made life so much easier in Amsterdam. In fact, the only way to get around practically is by bike. There is public transit, which seems much nicer than that in San Francisco, but it can be much pricier if used a lot, and taxis seem to be pretty expensive here considering how small the city is. The way the Dutch get around is by bicycle and this city was really made for that. Of course, the best way to get a bike is through the school program, ASVA, and not buy it from a junkie on the street (which only perpetuates the cycle of bike theft in Amsterdam).

While getting settled, the first week of orientation was not only fun but a great way to meet students from all over the world, especially because the default housing for SFSU students was Narwal, which consists mostly other Americans. There are advantages and disadvantages to all the different housing units for students. The pros are a large room, with possibly your own bathroom and kitchen, the building is brand new, no utility bills, high speed internet and cable is included, and the area is nice and close to the center of the city. The downside is that the building seems pretty far where all the other international students stay and it is one of the most expensive of the housing units. However, I'm very happy with my choice, and rent is actually still cheaper here for me than in San Francisco, even with the dollar as weak as it is. The other apartments the rental agency offers to students are similar to Narwal, but some may involve sharing a room or kitchen and the buildings might be older. The advantage to other places may

be cheaper rent, a more international environment, and a different location if there is a specific area preferred. Either way, if I had lived in another building or not, the best way to go about housing is through DeKey Shortstay through the school, because trying to find a way of living on your own out here is not only complicated but most likely not worth the effort and the actual place compared with student housing.

Money and Banking

I remember the days when the Euro and Dollar were one to one. Alas, those days are no more. When working with banks either in the States or in the Netherlands, be prepared have every transaction take at least one week, and to pay for multiple fees in the meantime. Banks, when given the opportunity, will try to charge you for anything and everything. Before you leave, make sure everything is settled with your bank. Maybe you can finagle free checking without direct deposit, or waived ATM fees because you are studying abroad.

Being able to move into the rooms was a big help in trying to adjust to the new city. However, the first few weeks are hard in terms of finance! Getting settled costs a lot of money between flights, food (eating out seems to be pretty expensive, but groceries are fairly cheap), paying for books and classes, and registering with the foreign police which costs about 400 Euros. After registering though, I was given the possibility of opening a Dutch bank account. Instead, all I do is take out a couple hundred euros from an ATM every few weeks, that way keeping any extra charges to my account fairly low. All and all, living abroad can be very expensive, especially if you're making no income at the moment and using money to travel, but at least Amsterdam is still much cheaper than many other places I could have gone to study abroad. Money has been one of the biggest stresses of studying abroad for me in particular, but it always works out and the experience alone makes everything worth it. The most important thing is just to be financially prepared for expenses you might not have expected and an ever changing exchange rate.

Transportation

Like most major cities, Amsterdam is complete with a train, metro, tram, and bus systems. With these, you can go virtually anywhere without much walking. However, most people opt for biking. If you chose to bike, make sure you have good locks, and a good bike. There is no competition on bicycles. You can spend minimum 70 euro on a used bike. If you chose to buy a cheaper used bike illegally, be prepared to face the consequences of a possible 200 euro fine if you are caught. One problem with used bikes in the Netherlands is they are always breaking. Invest in a bike repair kit and at least two bike locks.

Health and Travel

The school also has a health center for students, which is easy and convenient to use. All I've had to do is call to make an appointment and then pay 25 Euros when I get there to see a doctor, which they then give me a receipt that my insurance company at home will deal with. As a warning, I didn't bring any medicine with me when I came, and there have been days where all I wanted was some Nyquil or Sudafed and couldn't find any, but the local drugstore always has something and all you need to do is ask for some help. Generally it's not a problem, and since everyone speaks fairly good English, communicating with people for things involving health isn't too difficult. Of course, trying to stay healthy is important too. Between school, enjoying

the city, and traveling it's easy to get sick, but I've found taking care of myself becomes easier and easier as time goes on and the more adjusted I become. The school also offers a gym membership for relatively cheap, and there are also other gyms all around the city, so maintaining your health can be easy and affordable.

Traveling is also something that becomes easier and easier with time. The benefit to staying a year is that I don't feel the pressure to travel somewhere new every single weekend, which is good considering I couldn't afford it. However, when I do decide to travel I find it very easy because the Netherlands is so central to the rest of Europe. It's easy to find cheap flights, trains, and busses to plan just a weekend trip to many different countries. So far traveling has been such an amazing experience, but at the same time it always feels nice to come home to Amsterdam. The city is fairly laid back and quiet compared to most other European travel spots, but at the same time when I'm in town there is still plenty to do. When first moving here it was nice not traveling, and getting used to the city since being abroad is overwhelming as it is, but now that I feel comfortable here I find so many opportunities with so many places to go, and of course the best advice is to take advantage of that.

Conclusion(s)

My overall experience in Amsterdam has been extremely positive. Of course it's challenging coming abroad, but only because basic things like doing laundry, grocery shopping, getting a library card, become a challenge as you try and orient yourself to a completely new place. However, I feel I couldn't have chosen a better place to experience all this. Amsterdam is a beautiful place with so much history and culture, there is so much to do, and the people in the city are always friendly. Also, although, it's hard to meet Dutch people, once you do it's very easy to make friends with them. Amsterdam is an easy city to be social in or to take time alone, it's easy to get around in and to travel outside of, and it's comfortable and fun. I feel completely at home in this city after only two months, and no matter what your preferences are, Amsterdam has something to offer.

This somewhat short introduction to living and studying in Amsterdam may help you. I thought it might be comforting to know a little about the place you are going to spend the next year to help with the settling-in process. I tried to think of all the information that would be of help to you, information that I found by experience. To really get a feel for what Amsterdam is like, you **really must stay here a full year**, even if you are sick of it by April. Because one last thing, from October until mid May I experienced the worst weather of my life. There is no use complaining about the weather because it only gets worse. Freezing winds, unrelenting rain, biting hale, snow, ice, DARKNESS. You just need to tell yourself when spring comes its all going to be ok. Just be happy that you are in Amsterdam because everyone at home wishes they were in your shoes.