

October 28 2010

1. Arrival

a. The dorm housing for international students provided by the University of Iceland is very convenient, and there are several other foreign students living there. There is someone living in the dorm in charge of resident life, and you will be given their contact info if you have arranged to stay there. If arriving before the room is available there are two Youth Hostels in Reykjavik. One is downtown and will require early reservations. The other is a couple miles from the University and will probably require reservations as well, though it is larger and therefore it may have more rooms available. There are nice paved trails throughout the city for walking and biking, and there is descent public transportation (buses). There is also a Salvation Army Guesthouse near the University that has very reasonable prices, and there are many expensive hotels around as well. In any case be warned that the water is very hot and smells of sulfur due to the fact that it is obtained from geothermal vents.

b. Orientation consisted of an introduction to some of the staff, as well as an opportunity to interact with other students from around the world (the majority from Europe and Canada). They provide an introduction to the different departments, and some extracurricular activities. There were also some orientation games (The Rat Race) which were a fun way to get to know some of the other exchange students. You will also be contacted by a buddy – an Icelander who should be able to help you for the duration of your exchange.

2. Academics

a. Compared to the University of Washington, the University of Iceland is very similar in classroom structure, instruction, teacher/student relations, grading/exams, administration, and library/computer facilities except that it is a smaller school and therefore most things are scaled down. Unless you know Icelandic, your class selection will be limited to classes taught in English, however several of the textbooks even for classes of Icelandic instruction are in English and it may be possible to get by in certain classes without knowing Icelandic. Most Icelanders know some or even a lot of English (especially from TV/movies).

b. The quality of instruction was very good, the instructors were all very nice, maintained high expectations though were accommodating and reasonable.

c. I would not try to recommend any instructors in particular. All of my instructors were good so I can only recommend taking classes that are appealing.

d. My study abroad focused on education, and it was an excellent opportunity to learn about the Icelandic education system directly through teaching practice. I also learned a bit from other exchange students about other educational systems from China and Greece to Sweden and Finland. I chose Iceland more for the unique environment as well as the culture and social system than for the programs they offer.

3. Housing

a. I was offered a room in the dorm and accepted it. Other options, which require research or inquiry through the school were also available such as guesthouses – homes in Reykjavik set up to house several foreign students – or living with an Icelandic family.

b. I chose the dorm because it was very reasonably priced (I think it is subsidized by the University) , and was very easy to coordinate.

c. My recommendation depends. I was satisfied with my room, it was convenient, clean, and private. It did not allow for very much interaction with Icelanders because the other students living there are from all over the world. If one is interested in learning Icelandic I would recommend living with an Icelandic family. If you know other people studying there or are willing to live with slightly less privacy living in a guesthouse provides a great connection into the social life and a more home style environment.

4. Program/Exchange site

The University is right in Downtown Reykjavik. Reykjavik is a small city by US standards, fairly spread out and situated on the South West corner of the volcanic Island that is Iceland. This is the northernmost capitol city in the world, and the environment can be downright inhospitable. The severe wind prevents the growth of forests and almost all vegetation for that matter – food has to be imported and therefore can be more expensive. The winters are dark with daylight as short as a few hours and less if it's cloudy. Depending on the solar cycle you can expect to see the Aurora Borealis if you are willing to wander in the night (it is quite safe to do so). The campus consists of a dozen or so buildings, fairly modern with a mix of new interesting architecture and older more generic ferroconcrete structures. There are sculptures and statues around, especially towards Tjörnin – the lake and surrounding gardens in the downtown. There is a small airfield visible from most of campus as well as a wildlife/wetlands area. There are several nice paved trails to walk or bike on – especially along the coasts – which are a nice place to people watch or look for birds and are easily accessible from campus.

5. Health and Safety

No health or safety concerns. Except for the harshness of the natural environments – wind, precipitation, and darkness – this is one of the safest environments. There is very little crime of any kind; however I still locked my bike when appropriate. Most other students locked their dorm room doors (from the sounds of it), however I rarely did and never experienced any theft. There are good social services, and very little panhandling.

6. Cultural Aspects

a. Integrating into the culture is somewhat difficult due to the language barrier. Most Icelanders can speak English but conversations among Icelanders are in Icelandic. I spent some time at the public pools and that is a nice place to interact with the community. There are several football (soccer) clubs which could provide an excellent source for socialization. Most students went to the coffee shops and pubs – the night life in Reykjavik is popular and long and

alcohol is consumed excessively despite its high cost. In some classes foreign exchange students are able to participate in Icelandic primary schools as observers and helpers. I took one of these classes and it was a wonderful way to interact with the community, the teachers and students. There are also all of the exchange students to meet and interact with at events, holidays, birthday parties and the like. I went on a non academic trip to Greenland which turned out to be a great way to meet new people, again other exchange students who also went on the trip which lasted one week. I recommend looking into the Kulusk trip in the spring.

b. I actually didn't have much in the way of cultural challenges; I agree with most of the cultural norms I encountered. I think I picked up on a slightly more sensitive politeness in some of the older generation which is very subtle. I think there is a higher level of mutual respect among Icelanders which may or may not come off as elitist.

7. Financial

a. I had a Bank of America account which let me withdraw money from foreign ATM's with a five dollar charge for each transaction and a one percent fee, which turned out to be not a very good way because the limit was around \$350 each transaction. Using my debit card in stores resulted in only a three percent charge. Transferring money directly from Bank of America into an Icelandic account was not practical because there were fees and forms that had to be signed (possibly in person at a Bank of America bank). I also had a Vanguard account and it was relatively easy to transfer money from that account as long as they had a specific set of information.

b. The University of Iceland can provides better information on this, as I recall they recommend a minimum of about \$1000 - \$1500. I think that is very minimal though especially if you want to go to pubs, take tours, or rent cars. In general everything is slightly more expensive than most places in America, and when I went the exchange rate was twice as good that it had been a year earlier. (2008 \$1 = 60 ISK , 2009 \$1 = 120 ISK).

c. My old laptop died of known problems and I had to buy a new one for about 60,000 ISK. I only went to the pub once, but many students went much more often, and I am sure that would be quite expensive. I bought a guitar and a bicycle which were nice to have - luxuries, not exactly unexpected.

d. I did not use financial aid.

8. Program Administration

The IPE was indispensable in coordinating my study abroad program. I met with Anni Fuller several times to discuss plan the program.

9. Program/Student Type

It would be difficult to say. I think it would depend on what the student's expectations are. The main programs that the University of Iceland offers are Humanities (English Literature,

Scandinavian History), Geology, Engineering, Biology, and Education. The Engineering and Biology programs I would say are for upperclassmen who are good independent workers. There are several graduate level courses in engineering and independent biological programs which need to be coordinated with faculty.

10. Overall Experience

On the most general level the experience was overwhelmingly successful. From the decision to study in Iceland, to the application process and finally experiencing another culture and environment, I found the experience to be highly enriching. It provides a sense of accomplishment and broadens my world view. I was most disappointed with not learning the language and not meeting more locals. I studied the language before I left, and while I was there but never enough to be fluent. Most of the people I met were other exchange students where English is the main common language, so there were not many opportunities to practice the language, or meet locals. I think with more initiative and broader interests one could interact more with the native culture.