Elyce Kolder – Exchange to Kentucky University, 2009-2010

Pre-departure

Inclusion info about visa/passport arrangements, support from partner institution and CSU before you left:

I already had a valid passport and was not required to renew it before departure but I needed a J1 student visa to study in the US. I went to the US consulate in Sydney to get the visa. Getting the visa was expensive as there were different fees for each step you went through. Make sure you read everything carefully when you arranging this. They are strict and will turn you down if you don’t do what the instructions say. I was nervous when I went for my visa interview but the people were really nice and I had no trouble. I don’t recommend booking flights until you have your visa, because if you get rejected you cannot get a refund from the airlines. The most stressful part of arranging your exchange is waiting to get your visa so you can book flights.

I travelled to England and Europe before I came to the US. I took a risk in booking a Contiki trip around Europe before getting my visa. I didn’t need a visa for any of the countries I went to as I wasn’t there long enough. Some European countries require a visa no matter how long you stay so make sure you check that out before you travel.

I suggest emailing the consulate of the countries to be visited to confirm visa requirements. I also registered with the government “Smart Traveller” website and received notifications of developments in each country throughout my trip.

I didn’t have to sign up for classes until I got to my exchange University. This made me a little worried as I thought I wouldn’t be able to get the classes I needed. But the journalism department did everything they could to make sure I was put in the right class.

Travel flight information eg best deals, flying tips, luggage restrictions or lack of:

I booked everything myself, as it was cheaper than going through a travel agency. Shop around to find the best deals. I think my dad and I search for a whole month to find the cheapest way to get from Sydney to London and London to Lexington and then LA back to Sydney. In the end I got all this for around $2000. I flew Delta and United airlines and both of them allow two bags to be checked for free when travelling internationally.

There is no way to prepare for long flights, other than to drink plenty of water, take an iPod and be prepared to be bored! I spent 9 hours in Chicago airport alone waiting for another flight. Security was much tighter in London and the USA than the rest of the countries I visited. I would try and get to the airport at least 3 hours before my flight departed. Relevant documents, such as the acceptance letter into the university, should be kept accessible for immigration.

Insurance travel insurance, health insurance, medical tests/forms to be aware of:

I bought my travel insurance through GIO it cost me around $1000 for a whole year. This insurance covered me for all major categories such as medical, among other things, which was a concern when visiting the USA. I did not use my travel insurance though. In the US, health insurance is compulsory at University and costs approximately $400 for international students, but you can waive the insurance, if you prove your travel insurance covers what they offer. It was a fight to waiver the insurance and I had a hold put on my student account etc but you just have to fight it out to the end. All in all I have saved $800 by not buying the student health insurance. I visited the doctor 3 times and required a prescription, both of which were covered by the university.

Campus accommodation & meals recommendations, campus layout, accessibility:

The University of Kentucky is huge! It is a small town. It has its own police force, postal service and bus service. Dorm rooms are big depending on where you stay. I stayed in Smith Hall the international dorm which is the newest on campus. During my year there I had two roommates both of which I couldn’t stand. Everywhere on campus you have to share a room. You will get sick of your roommate and you will fight. I don’t know one person who hasn’t. Each floor has an RA. Living on campus is very different to Bathurst. The whole campus is a dry campus. You cannot drink or you will
be either fined $150 or forced to go to an AA meeting or caught by the police who have nothing better to do then pick on students. If you have a car you have to pay $250 or more for a parking pass. There is a compulsory meal plan that cost around $1400. When you first arrive it is so exciting to see the large range of food to offer but after a month you will have put on weight and be craving healthy food. But hey you came to America, what did you expect?

Course information subject list, restrictions, comparisons, pre-requisites, study advise:

I am a broadcast journalism major and I can tell you know, the broadcast course at UK is far, far better than the one at CSU. The work is full on and there is a lot of out of class work but in the end it has made me a better journalist. Each week I was required to produce a newscast that aired live on TV around Lexington.

Each week you took turns producing, reporting, anchoring, doing weather and doing sports. I also interned at the local public radio station NPR (same as ABC). I was on air and regularly interviewing people. There are pre-requisites but being international you can get around them. I would advise you to stay calm during your stay; Americans take their work very seriously and study very hard. Truthfully I didn’t do the readings or the homework and I still was getting better marks than the Americans.

Transport public and around campus:

There are free buses around campus but no one rides them. There is also a public bus service that runs downtown and too the mall. I took the bus once and had no problem with it. You will make friends with people with cars and they can take you places. Transport is not an issue.

Expenses university associated fees, personal expenses, exchange rates, where to shop, best prices, money saving tips:

My tuition fees at UK were waived as I was just required to pay my regular fees to CSU, which is part of the exchange arrangement. Accommodation was around $4000 for the semester and the exchange rate was very good whilst I was there, almost at parity with the AUD for much of my time.

I had to buy text books, (as I would have done at CSU) which wasn’t too bad of an expense. At the end of the semester you can sell them back anyway. Shopping at the local supermarket (Kroger) was similar to shopping at an Australian supermarket and prices were about the same or lower. I bought a mobile phone with T-Mobile which was adequate, but tended to cost a little more per month than in Australia as you have to pay to receive texts and calls.

Facebook and Skype were excellent in organising outings and keeping in touch, and both are free. Flights and travel insurance were major expenses as well. Clothing store’s prices are a lot cheaper than in Australia.

Holiday travel destination ideas, tips:

I travelled with Contiki before heading to the USA, which was a great fun and safe way to see Europe. While in the US I visited Chicago, Miami, Nashville, New York, Niagara Falls and drove back to LA from Kentucky on route 66, via Vegas for my 21st. Although the work is full on, there are opportunities to get away and visit these places. Teachers are very understanding too, you are in international student here to see the US, so usually they don’t mind if you skip class to travel (as long as you catch the work up).

Social activities university clubs, international student activities, sports:

There are plenty of sports to get involved in at UK. The gym is free and very close to residence and is currently being revamped. There are events organised for international students, such as dinners and barbeques. Greek life is HUGE. There are fraternities and sororities everywhere and every weekend they have parties with free alcohol. Girls have no problem getting into parties but guys usually have to be part of a frat.
**Cultural information** culture shock, language barriers (if any), do’s and don’ts:

I had been to the US before so I didn’t experience any culture shock. American culture is very similar to Australian culture. There weren’t any language barriers. Some things are organised differently and there are subtle differences in culture, particularly I found with humour. However, it is easy to overcome these small differences as time progresses and it becomes more apparent. The campus is quiet compared to CSU. The legal drinking age is 21, which means most first, second and third years are underage. Tipping is hard to get used to and is expected in restaurants and at bars.

**Weather** what to prepare for, how to cope with extremes:

The weather didn’t get too cold until November. Before that time it was adequate to be outside with long pants and a jumper, just as in a Bathurst winter. In Jan/Feb though, we got a fair amount of snow and the weather turned very cold, typically with the temperature never rising above 0°C. The most difficult aspect of living in the snow is walking everything becomes very slippery with ice. The only way to cope is to spend a lot of time indoors or to layer up when outside with thermals, gloves, a beanie and coat. It is just as important to keep dry as it is to keep warm. I do not really recommend buying expensive snow clothing, as was suggested to me, as I found it fine to layer clothes I had already bought. A waterproof jacket is a necessity.

**What to bring from home/what not to bring** luxuries to keep homesickness at bay, unnecessary items bought from home:

Bring as much and as little as possible from home. It was difficult for me to pack 46kg (I had two bags) that would be my life for 1 year. I suggest just packing items that can’t be bought, laptop etc. Necessities such as toiletries, towels, sheets can be bought on arrival and at a cheaper price than in Australia usually. Remember to keep in mind that American electricity runs on 110V as opposed to Australian 240V, so make sure appliances are compatible before packing them. Be sure to include a power point adaptor and power board. Skype was a great resource to keep in touch with friends and family. I don’t really feel that I took any unnecessary items.

**What you may need to buy** accommodation needs (blankets, irons etc), clothing:

You will have to buy bed linen, pillow and crockery/cutlery, towels, and cleaning items to clean your room. The room only comes with a bed mattress, desk, chair and internet/phone portal. I needed to buy a mobile phone, clothes hangers, alarm clock and groceries. Usually your roommate will bring a fridge, microwave, TV etc. It is probably a smart idea to contact them before you leave, you will know who you are living with before you leave, and ask them what they are bringing.

**Relationships** leaving old friends/making new, homesickness etc:

It was easy to make friends at UK and being Australian helped. Americans love Australians! Most of my friends were Americans. Most people were extremely interested in finding out more about Australia and I met a number of people who were interested in coming to CSU on exchange. Be prepared to speak about Australia! One year is a long time to leave friends from home and, while it was sad, it was not particularly difficult. Although I missed my family and friends at home a lot, I did not feel homesick and felt I made the most of my time abroad. Exchange will be the best thing that has ever happened to you. It is an experience not many people have and the memories and friendship you make will be with you and maybe even help out later on in life.