Jessica McKinley – Exchange to Orebro University, Sweden in 2008

Pre-departure

It was necessary to obtain a study visa to go on exchange in Sweden. This you can download from the internet. It is quite a detailed application, 12 pages in total, so it is best to avoid leaving this until the last minute.

Travel

I got a round the world ticket, so my circumstances are a little different. I think this was a really good way to go, because it meant that I never had to sit more than 11 hours straight in a plane.

It was also good because many of the exchange students I met came from places that I visited on the way, or would visit on the way home. It gave something to talk about, and also was great to get suggestions of places to see. Generally, flying around the world I recommend taking only the bare essentials. I took one bag weighing 15kg. This is not too much to travel with, and leaves room for those extra things to take home (which you WILL inevitably gain). The maximum weight to London is 20kg. I got a really cheap deal through STA travel for round the world. I find that if you go in and talk to somebody it is much better than doing it all on the internet.

Insurance

Travel insurance is definitely a must. If you are going away for 6 months it is definitely worth paying a bit more for more cover. I went with Covermore Options, and although it was slightly more expensive option with this company, the difference in price paid off with the additional cover. I ended up having to make 3 claims on my travellers insurance, so it is really worth investigating to make sure you have the right cover.

When studying in Sweden, the Australian Government has an agreement with the Swedish Government, and any health care you need should be covered by medicare. I am not too sure how this works, as so far I have not needed to use it. It is still necessary to purchase travellers insurance, and also insurance from Orebro university (mainly for property in your student housing) campus – Orebro has 3 campuses (I am told…) however 2 of them are quite small and are for the school of culinary arts.

The main campus is located in Orebro and is the home to all other faculties, and around 12,000 students. It is quite large, and can take an easy 15-20 minutes to walk from one end to the other. The campus is divided into a number of buildings, and is very easy to navigate around. The university is divided into a number of “Akademic centres”, where you must enrol in your first week. The buildings are quite new, and very bright.

Many students use the campus as a meeting place for lunch and coffee, so there is quite a busy atmosphere. There are a number of cafeterias on campus which serve a cooked lunch for around 65SEK. A cup of filter coffee costs about 12SEK. There is no catered accommodation, so students must cook their own meals. If you are not living on campus, the main campus is easily accessible by buses (running every 20 minutes) and the bike track.

There are two types of accommodation offered to exchange students; corridor style and apartment style. The apartment style living is located about a 20 min walk, or 10 minute downhill bike ride, to uni. It is situated in Brickebacken, where one shares an apartment with 2 other students of the same gender. The corridor style living is literally, roll out of bed and walk to class, very convenient and close.

Course information

Orebro have a very efficient way of presenting their course information. Actually, most students chose to come to Orebro just because of the ease of access of information. They have one big PDF file which lists every course taught in English for each department, and in each term. Anything not on the list is being taught in Swedish.
The Swedish semester consists of 2 terms just like CSU. However instead of studying 4 subjects at one time, you study one subject at a time, and once completed, move on to the next. You can study a mixture of part-time (full time load is 4 a semester) or full time subjects (2 a semester). The tricky thing is matching up some good subjects so that you are not doing too many all at once.

Within the Natural Science department there were a fair amount of prerequisites. But they are fairly lenient to exchange students. Overall, Orebro is much more intense than CSU. There were periods during my first term where I would be at uni from 8:30 until 4:30 5 days a week, for an entire month. And then you must go home and are expected to read. The standard is also much higher. There is so much knowledge that is just assumed, and a firm grasp of basic biology, chemistry are essential in any courses that are taken. The grading system is quite different too. The grades used are a Pass, or a high pass.

The subjects I studied were Soil and Plant ecology (credit for vegetation disturbance 16pt ), Biogeochemistry and global cycles (2 electives) and Swedish language and culture 1 (1 elective). I do not recommend taking the Swedish language and culture class to anybody. It was a disgrace. The class sizes were too big, the contact hours were reduced from 3 a week to 1.5 a week, the teacher would only speak in Swedish and would not cooperate. Overall, little was learnt, 50% of the students failed, and it was a waste of time and money. The things we did learn can be easily learnt from your classmates and watching tv.

Transport

Orebro has a very extensive bike track network. You can get pretty much anywhere on a bike. The university rents out bikes to the exchange students very cheaply (125SEK a month). This is the best option for getting around, as everybody has a bike, it is social and convenient. There is also a bus system that runs quite frequently during the weekdays (one every 20 minutes). However on weekends and after 7 there is only one bus every 40 minutes, so can be quite difficult to get around. There are also 2 train stations, with hourly connections to Stockholm and Gothenburg. The trains can be a little expensive. The Swedish train company SJ auctions last minute tickets on the Swedish version of ebay, which is good to know.

Expenses

Overall Sweden is very expensive! For university fees you must pay the 200SEK which is mandatory for the student union membership. Sweden is definitely not a cheap place to go. I was quite shocked when I got here, as groceries are expensive. Alcohol is pretty much reserved only for special occasions. Going out to the pub occurs very rarely due to the expense.

The cheapest grocery shop is Coop Extra. The secondhand shop is quite good to pick up kitchen items and warm clothes for winter, is near the train station. The main shopping mall is located near the bus stop Vaghustorget. I found it was cheaper to take money from the ATM in bulk, to save on transaction fees. You have the opportunity to open a Swedish bank account in your first week here, but I didn’t do this because of the fees you get from transferring money into other currencies.

Holiday travel

I would think that a trip to Sweden is not complete without visiting the Lappland. Also, Norway and Finland, as well as Russia are very close and easily accessible. There are no official holiday breaks during semester, so I have had to do most of my travelling before and after my studies. The university also organise a bunch of trips to surrounding areas, so you can go with other exchange students to Tallin, the arctic, Russia etc.

Social activities

I think all of the university clubs at Orebro university are in Swedish, so I didn’t join any. The International office always organises things, such as trips to Russia, Finland, local markets and day trips to places. They also organise I number of events, such as the international buffet. Each week the international office rents out a hall and there is a party hosted by a different country each week. There is also the university gym and many of the exchange students organise things amongst themselves.
**Cultural information**

Swedish is spoken in Sweden, although everybody speaks very good English as well. Swedish people can be very reserved, so making friends can be difficult and it takes a long time. Swedish people are very punctual and orderly. They can be very quiet and a bit closed minded. They are very loyal however. The Swedish diet is very different to Australia, with much more processed foods, and little fruit and veg that are fresh.

**Weather**

It is four seasons in a day in Orebro. It is quite rainy in November, and November/December all the way until February there can be snow. There are few clear days, and some days you don’t see the sun at all. The sun sets very early, it is dark in winter by 3:00. In Summer it is bright until 1:00 apparently. It can be very cold in winter, not reaching above 0 degrees.

**What to bring from home/what not to bring**

Winter clothes, gym clothes, a flag is good to put up in your room and some vegemite. Do not bring too many summer clothes; it is not too hot in summer.

**What you may need to buy**

Things such as a pillow/blanket/sheets you need to buy. Usually there is cooking utensils already in the kitchens, although it is very basic. A warm winter coat and winter clothes are important, and you can get this at the big second hand shop near the train station.

**Relationships**

It is quite easy to make friends with a lot of exchange students. There are about 130 each semester. The international office organises many social events, and puts you in a “fadder” group with about 7 other exchange students. The Swedish can be quite shy and can be hard to make friends with, so it is good that there are so many other exchange students.