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Studying Abroad at San Francisco State University

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Student Perspective From:
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How difficult/easy was it to obtain a US visa?

Obtaining a US visa was the worst of my-pre departure experiences! It took up so much time and money, and it got drilled into our heads that if we filled the forms out incorrectly we would have to start from scratch, and not receive a refund. Very stressful! Make sure you contact your school for help if you have any questions at all. The final process ended up costing about \$500-\$600 after you added up all the fees.

You're constantly filling out question after question, and applying for appointments, so get in early because it can take up to 6 weeks to get you into an interview. Make sure you have all the forms and photos you need placed in the correct order because they were not friendly about wasting time, if you don't have a criminal record, your interview should only last for about 30 seconds – best part of the day! The Visa itself once approved arrived in the mail the next business day. I recommend buying an express registered envelope because it's not something you want hanging around Australia Post for too long!

Where and how did you find temporary housing when you first arrived? How much did it cost? Describe your experience.

I arrived in San Francisco with a girl I had met through the IEEC Facebook page. We were both from Melbourne, and arriving on the same date. Her SFSU Buddy agreed to pick us up from the airport and take us to a hostel. At the time, we had no idea where he was taking us, but now I know the area more it was in the Sunset district, near the zoo. He had taken us to a rundown hostel that looked like something off a horror movie. We were both mortified and we made him take us to an International hostel on Union Square. We paid about \$200ea for 5 nights. It was right in the heart of the city and we fell in love with San Francisco!

Where and how did you find permanent housing? How much rent do you pay? Are you happy with where you live? Describe your experience.

I found permanent housing through the website craigslist.org. I had been applying for housing before I left Australia, but there was no point, the rooms were always taken before I had the chance to walk through the house.

Once I arrived in San Francisco, I decided to find a room to share with the other girl who came from my home city as well. We jumped at the first house we saw; it was a house in Park Merced, right by school and we shared a big master bedroom for \$700 each. No bond, no utilities etc. the other 2 American boy roommates were great fun for a while. We did a lot of American College things played a lot of Beer Pong, partied, Studied, etc. I moved out for my second semester, took over a room that other Australians were renting while being J1 students here. I ended up paying \$1100 rent a month and having to buy a \$60 MUNI pass to get to school. That was a bad idea too, only because of the money. Be careful where you decide to live!

How difficult/easy is it to get around? What mode of transport do you use primarily (public transport, bicycle, car, walk)?

San Francisco has an amazing public transportation system. You can get everywhere using a bus, tram or train. The Subway trains here even turn into trams. Every 2 blocks of San Francisco I guarantee there is some form of transport from that corner, and if not, it's very easy to walk most places from any major train station. You will need to buy a MUNI pass when you get here because you will take MUNI everywhere. The Muni system includes buses, trams and trains etc. You can get around San Francisco without using BART—BART is more for extended traveling further out of San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley.

How do you access your money? Did you open an American bank account? If so, was it worthwhile?

For the first half of my stay, I used an ANZ travel card, No Eftpos Fees, and I only got charged to transfer more money onto the travel card. The second half of my stay, I didn't set up a bank account, and instead, I continued using my Westpac Bank Card from back at home. I got charged large fees to withdrawal money from the ATM's and every Eftpos transaction I made I was getting charged Foreign Transaction fees. I would recommend starting up an American Bank account to save all the worry of the money exchange.

Did you obtain a California driver's license? If so, was it worthwhile?

No; I drove on my International Driving Permit. I didn't get pulled over, I'm not quite sure what would have happened if I did, I was told my driving permit would be fine if I was a tourist, but because I was a student for 10 months apparently you need a California Driver's license to be allowed to drive. Don't be scared to drive either, Once you start, it just feels normal!

Did you find San Franciscans to be helpful if you were in need?

Everyone is very helpful, you can stop anyone on the street and ask for directions. The streets are numbered, and most go down the Alphabet too. So if you need to get to a certain place it's pretty easy for someone to work out how to get there for you. Everyone loves talking to us foreigners too.

Where did you obtain furniture for your room?

My first apartment we furnished from Ikea in Emeryville. The furniture was relatively cheap and good quality. I was also able to sell it easily at the end of my stay via craigslist.org. Don't go overboard with what you buy. You really only need a bed and a desk.

Primarily, do you buy groceries or do you eat out? Where and why?

Eating out becomes very expensive, but it is something you have to do in San Francisco! San Francisco has amazing food for great prices, but after a while, I recommend going to Safeway and getting yourself a Safeway Club

Card. Having this card and swiping it at the checkout automatically allows you to save about 30% on most of your groceries. Buy in Bulk too; buy big bags of chicken, mince, etc. and freeze meals – it's so much cheaper to buy in bulk!

How difficult/easy was it to make friends? Describe your experience.

At the start I made friends easy, I met a lot of people through IEEC activities, country ambassador meetings, California Academy of Science Night life, Pint nights etc in my first semester here. I also made really good friends with my roommates' friends who we would hang out with us every weekend. You just have to get out there in the first week, and introduce yourself. If you don't, it gets harder to get involved later in the semester. You get set up with a Buddy before you get to San Francisco though, make use of this person! Get them to show you around etc.

What IEEC commitment did you choose (flyering, tabling, language exchange, country ambassador, IEEC officer, special contribution)?

Describe your experience.

I chose to be a **country ambassador**. I'm really glad I did this as I met so many people from lots of countries. Most of all, I met great Australians that I will be friends with long after I go home, so not only did I make friends in America, I made friends I will keep for life, who also shared this great experience with me. The study abroad fair was a lot of fun; promoting our country, and getting to see what everyone else had to offer. You also have to spend 5 hours in the OIP office doing whatever little things they need done to help them out.

Were you able to enroll in the classes you wanted?

The first semester, I got every class I wanted, I enrolled on time, and had planned before the registration period every class I would take and back up ones in case I couldn't get into those ones.

Second semester, I had to crash classes during the first week, and I found it a lot harder to get accepted by teachers, but I kept being persistent, showed up for every class I wanted to get into for the first two weeks, spoke to the teachers every lesson, explained I was an exchange student, and I would really like to take their class. I ended up getting the Add Codes for everything I wanted!

How do your classes at SFSU compare to your classes at home?

At home, we only have one 3 hour tutorial and one 1 hour non-compulsory lecture a week for each class. Here, I found my classes were all twice a week, and 3 hours each and compulsory to attend. My Classes at home are more based on one big assignment that you work towards for the entire semester. I have noticed over here every class has readings, homework, midterms, finals, group assignments etc. It was very different! However I felt the work load was less because you were doing so many mini things, instead of one huge assignment that required a semesters worth of planning. As long as you stay on top of your readings, you will be fine. Buy the textbooks too!