

BORN (AGAIN) IN THE US- MY DIRECT EXCHANGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

I took a flight on January 12th to DC Dulls Airport and by that time I did not know anything about one of the most brilliant experiences I had in my life. My destination was Charlottesville where the University of Virginia is. It was snowing those days, but it was always sunny. Charlottesville is the city where the sun always shines on its beautiful parks, its small but precious downtown, the bricks full of history of the campus, and all around the fields of orchard, grape, and hops. Although I went there by myself, I never felt lonely. The people in Virginia are lovely. They will help you without even asking them, they will cheer you up with a big smile and a “hey! What’s up?”.

The first thing I did when I arrived was to visit my new university, and I was impressed by the dimension of the campus, 1,682 acres (yes, you need to get used to American measures!). It was founded in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson and it is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. So much history has passed through those bricks as is shown by the numerous memorials of the slavery that was exploited to construct every building on the campus. Apart from the numerous classes included in the offer of 121 majors across the eight undergraduate and three professional schools, the university is famous for its campus setting. There are three dining halls with a rich variety of dishes among which many are vegetarian, vegan, and made of products from the UVA vegetable gardens. In addition to that, there are many lounges and cafés where you can chill with your friends. When the Spring comes you can sit and study on the benches and tables in the parks that surround the campus. If it is cold, you will certainly not suffer it in the 12 libraries in which during the finals week free bagels and donuts are offered to brighten students’ study sessions.

Apart from the initiatives promoted by the deans, studying at UVA is very enjoyable. Every department has a tutor that can lead through the choices of courses and professors are very helpful and attentive to each student’s need. It is not uncommon that you are asked to introduce yourself, explaining why you picked the course and mentioning which topics you are more interested in. This is made in order to build up the course together and creates a strong connection with professors as well as with other students. It is indeed very easy to establish trustworthy relationships within the academic environment. At UVA you do not only have classmates and professors but future collaborators with whom you might end up working one day. Many buildings on the campus are students’ dormitories. As an exchange student, you can apply for a spot in a dormitory, but you need to do that well in advance. Otherwise, you can easily find a shared flat on the UVA Facebook group.

Mostly every apartment is managed by an agency that would take care of any issue you might have during your stay, but the apartments are usually very new and renovated and they have everything you will need. Parties at home are very common in the US and if you get to live somewhere near the campus you will get the chance to join fraternities' and sororities' parties which are also a fun and interesting experience.

Moreover, students are very attached to their campus as you will notice by their numerous gadgets and clothes with the logo of the university. That is because the University of Virginia is one of the most prestigious academic centers in the States and students are very proud of being part of the community. In fact, they always try to contribute to that by organizing personal events, exhibitions, and initiatives that are all supported by the university. If you have a project, an idea, or just want to try something out, UVA is the perfect place to do that.

When you are done studying you will be spoiled with choices! You can work out which is one of the favorite activities for Americans so you will certainly find a buddy to train with if you are looking for one. Almost every sport you can think of is doable at UVA, they even offer cheap classes for students. On the weekends you might want to go to a match and support the university team (UVA is in the top ranking of basketball and lacrosse) while experiencing one of the most displayed scenes of American life. If you are more of a lazy person like me, you can just grab a beer at The Corner. The Corner is the most social part of the campus, it is full of restaurants and cafes of all kinds, and the perfect spot to have a rest from stressful study afternoons. If you are more than 21 years old and make friends with cars, you really do not want to miss out on the beautiful wineries and breweries all around the hills of Virginia. Virginia has one of the most magical landscapes I have ever seen. It has parks, lakes, rivers, mountains, and hills (even the sea if you travel to Virginia Beach). If you enjoy the urban environment more, you can visit Richmond (the capital) or make a short trip to Washington DC which is very close to Charlottesville. Otherwise, you can have a walk to the downtown mall and enjoy the flea market and the joyful atmosphere.

I cannot be more grateful for this opportunity that has opened so many horizons in my life. I can only recommend this experience to my fellows. Sometimes it is hard to put yourself out there and break the daily routine, but you will be enriched in uncountable ways by a simple journey. You will meet so many people that will change your life and find yourself in many situations that will contribute to your personal growth. There are so many places and lives worth living out there, you just need to pack and book a flight for a fresh start!