

Direct exchange 2023/2024 academic year – Cornell University

In the winter semester 2023, I had the amazing chance to spend some time abroad at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Due to the generous support of the Freie University, DAAD, the Cornell Club of Germany, and Cornell's astronomy department I was able to stay for the academic year and have a meaningful and inspiring journey in the U.S. I am grateful for the opportunity to work alongside top researchers, meet amazing colleagues, and the opportunity to explore beautiful Ithaca.

Application process

As a physics major with a background in astrophysics, I decided to apply for a spot in the astronomy department to conduct research on gravitational wave detection and pulsars. After submitting a short version of the online application, which is usually required for the graduate school at Cornell, the chair of the department reached out to discuss potential advisors based on my research interest portrayed in the statement of purpose section of my application. The chair of the department reached out to me even before my application was officially accepted and my advisors reached out to me separately to introduce themselves. The department was great at keeping in contact over the few months before my arrival and their staff was amazing at assisting me with every question I had. It is likely that your department will ask you to keep them updated on the status of your application and completion of the required administrative steps as the department is not separately informed of your progress regarding visa, arrival, etc.

Before arrival

After the formal application process is completed, you will get some important documents from the university like the I-20 that you will always need to carry with you when you are traveling, alongside your F1 visa. The "M" status on your visa allows you to leave the U.S. and return multiple times as long as your visa and I-20 are valid. If this is your first time applying for a F1 visa, then you have to book an appointment with one of the embassies in Germany (Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin). To do that, you have to go on their website and complete the process for their DS-160 form after which the website will lead you to a selection of available dates. Usually, the wait time for the next appointment is about two-three months, so I would recommend completing this step as soon as possible. Do not worry, if there is no appointment before the start of your program. All you have to do is go to their website and request an earlier appointment with the reasoning that your program starts earlier than any available appointment and they will give you one that is sooner (for me that was within a week, the first time I requested a U.S. F1 visa). If you already have a valid F1 visa for another university because you also studied abroad during your undergraduate degree, you could ask that university to transfer your status and you save the cost for a new visa or you can get a new F1 visa much simpler, and the embassy usually just asks you to send them the relevant documents per post. I got my F1 visa renewed that way, and it took a little less than a week for them to complete everything and send it back to me. The documents you need are clearly listed on the website, but they include a 5x5 photo (special format and not the same as a passport picture) which cannot be older than 6 months, and the I901 form which is the Sevis fee receipt that you have to pay on the website of homeland security. From my experience either way this process is rather quick once you completed the application, even if you have to go for an in-person interview. If you go to one of the embassies, I recommend taking

someone along as you are not allowed any bags, phones, or other materials than your application documents inside.

Getting to Ithaca

You are probably aware that flights to the U.S. cost a lot of money, unfortunately more than most German stipends offer. My flights to the U.S. in 2022 already cost around EUR1000 but in 2024 a roundtrip is already around EUR1300-1600. I recommend booking through Opodo since I have not found any cheaper flights anywhere, but there are a few things I would watch out for. If you compare flights, make sure that luggage is included because most often Opodo and the airline cannot book luggage for you before the day you arrive at the airport. Of course, it is always possible to book additional luggage at the check-in counter, if that does not bother you. The second thing is watching out for long overlay times. On my flight to Ithaca, I made the mistake to have a 28h total travel time, which meant I was waiting at JFK for over 7h before my flight to Ithaca would leave. I do not recommend having a travel time longer than about 14-16h total. This usually amounts to a 2h layover. As a reference, I flew from Frankfurt to Paris, then to JFK and the last stop was Tompkins International Airport (Ithaca). I rebooked my flight back to Germany and had a much better time going from Ithaca to JFK, then to Amsterdam and back to my home city. Another great option is London instead of Amsterdam or Paris and Munich instead of Frankfurt to keep the cost for flights low. One final thing I would recommend is not going to Ithaca airport but choosing another bigger airport if you can help it such as Syracuse or Rochester and then travel by bus, uber or have someone pick you up. This is due to Ithaca usually only having 2 available flight times a day and they are not exactly convenient. In addition, my flight from JFK to Ithaca was extremely late because of some complications.

Living in Ithaca

As a graduate student that likely will get their acceptance later than regular applicants to the graduate school, I would let go of the idea to get a place to stay on campus. The graduate campus housing is extremely limited and mostly given to families and couples. The prices do not differ significantly from having a room or small apartment around Ithaca for yourself. Some of my friends live in graduate housing on campus and personally I was happier with the room I got from the off-campus housing website Cornell has. Some great opportunities around campus are University Avenue in general, which is at the bottom of west campus, or the Ravenwood apartments which are on University Ave. I only heard good things from Maplewood apartments and apartments on Lake Street or Stewart Avenue. College Avenue and East State Street also have a lot of apartments but those might be annual contracts. East State Street apartments have a shuttle bus to campus, but all of these have great bus route access. For University Ave and Lake St, the bus route 10 is almost directly in front of your house and the others have multiple bus routes going past. Although this has to be taken with a grain of salt as TCAT (the bus system) is not always reliable (much worse than Berlin). In the winter busses sometimes get cancelled or are extremely full in the mornings so that they will not stop at certain stops. The further away you go from campus, the worse it gets. Sometimes busses do not come at all without warning, or they are very late. If you have access to a car, which I strongly recommend in Ithaca, you could consider living a little bit further out along Dryden Rd. which makes rent significantly cheaper and technically the bus still runs along Dryden Rd. (Route 43 and 40). If you consider driving in the U.S. you can go to a Bürgeramt and buy an international driver's license for about EUR13 and that is all you need. When looking at housing opportunities, I want to emphasize again how helpful Cornell's off-

campus housing website was! A few other things you should watch out for are the availability of a washer and dryer. I would always go for an apartment with free access, but sometimes you have to pay for each cycle, or you have to go to the nearest laundromat, which I would not recommend at all. I know AC has a certain reputation with most Germans, but it is your friend, and I would not rent any apartment without AC since it gets super-hot and humid in the summer and extremely cold in the winter. As a side note, most apartments may come without bedding. In that case, a trip to Walmart or Target is a good idea. Do not try to take along anything from Germany because the dimensions are very different from the U.S. and nothing will fit. Lastly, you should expect rent to be between \$1000 and \$1600 a month depending on whether you have a room or a small apartment. Unfortunately, NY state raised property taxes a lot recently, so you might experience higher prices.

Cornell, Campus, and Activities

Cornell campus is quite beautiful, and nothing is better than the view from the slope as the sun goes down on a warm summer day. The meadow leading up the slope then becomes a spot for students to sit together. There is a huge botanical garden that students can visit and a beautiful path behind Mann library that leads up to it. The libraries itself have everything you could wish for including art exhibitions, my personal favorite is Mann library. Central campus and north campus are connected by a bridge that goes over one of the creeks, which is nice to walk along during lunch time to go to Morrison dining hall. The astronomy department is very nice in terms of students (and faculty) interacting and doing things together. Apart from a fall trip they meet every Friday as the Astronomy Graduate Network (AGN) to have one of the students present on a topic that is dear to them e.g. character design that mostly has nothing to do with academics, which is a great way to quickly get to know one another. Afterwards there is an event at the barn for all graduate students called "Tell Grads it's Friday (TGIF)" that is always well visited and a great place to connect with other graduate students. Some highlights Cornell organizes for all students, alumni, and faculty is Dragon Day when the first-year architect students build a huge dragon and parade it across campus. The dragon then battles a phoenix created by the engineering students on Arts Quad. Another great day just before the spring semester ends is Slope Day which is a one-day festival with a big headliner for students to enjoy before the exam stress starts. In 2024 Flo Rida and A Boogie Wit da Hoodie performed, in past years artists like Steve Aoki, Galantis, Taio Cruz or Kanye West headlined the event. But even on an everyday basis Cornell offers many clubs, sports courses, and events to enjoy and facilitate meeting new people. The sports courses are part of the course catalog, and you can enroll during the enrollment period. The enrollment period is earlier for graduate students than for undergraduate students, so you have very good chances of getting a course you want. The sports courses include skiing and snowboarding, which is also cheaper for students on Mondays on Greek Peak Mountain outside the course. They also offer hockey, water sports, various dancing styles, golf, martial arts, climbing, sailing, or archery. Some of the courses have a fee, but it is totally worth it and much cheaper than doing it somewhere else. The large club catalog on the website has something for everyone and if you want to find an opportunity to volunteer, the Einhorn Center has some great options such as volunteering at the local animal shelter, teaching prisoners or local children, or even joining a fire and rescue department that offers fire and emergency medical technician training. I joined the Varna Volunteer Fire Company to see Ithaca beyond Cornell University and made a lot of friends this way. The volunteers range from locals and Ithaca college students to Cornell students and faculty. Apart from being able to contribute something to the community,

helping people that cannot afford health care has been especially rewarding. I got the education to be an interior firefighter, and my personal favorite: Learned and got authorized to drive the fire trucks responding to emergencies. I could not imagine my time at Cornell without the amazing people I met through Varna. If you get to stay in Ithaca for longer than a semester, I would highly recommend stopping by and submitting an application to volunteer!

Cities around Ithaca

The state of NY offers a lot of great places to travel to. New York City is about a 4h drive and absolutely worth it, especially if you can gather some friends for a weekend trip. Upstate NY also has some amazing places to go and visit. There are a lot of lakes and camping spots that make an awesome get-away. The astronomy department travels to somewhere in upstate NY every Fall during the break and it is refreshing how tranquil it is, including the great opportunities to hike, kayak, or just relax by the lake with a book. A little further away are the Adirondack mountains in the northeast. Syracuse is about an hour drive away from Ithaca and has a gigantic mall with a lot of fun activities from shopping to laser tag, bowling, and a huge arcade hall. Just like Syracuse, Rochester is a bigger city that is a 2h drive from Ithaca with a lot of great restaurants. Binghamton is another great option, an hour in the opposite direction of Syracuse from Ithaca. Canada is also worth a trip. By plane you only need an "eTA" to get into Canada with a German passport and that is easily ordered online in less than 5 minutes. If you make the 4h drive by car, you do not need any additional documents. I would highly recommend a trip to Toronto with its beautiful architecture, hockey hall of fame, and amazing nightlife.

Food and shopping

In principle, the meal plan Cornell offers is quite nice and there are a lot of options for dining including religious and vegan dining halls. Big Red Bugs are often included in meal plans and can be used in the various cafes around campus that get you anything from a sandwich to a Starbucks coffee or sushi. This is especially convenient if you do not have a car or roommate to take you grocery shopping. The next stores are P&C, Target, Walmart, Trader Joe's, and Wegmans of which some are hard to reach by bus. There are no grocery stores close enough to campus to walk to, but buying or renting a bike might be an option, too. P&C is the closest store to campus a little off Dryden Rd. Target has a bus from campus stopping near the entrance, which would be convenient if the bus would not stop running that early and run more regularly. Walmart, Trader Joe's, Wegmans and other shopping options along South Meadow are harder to reach with the bus. If you absolutely do not want to take a meal plan, but also do not want to invest in a car or bike, you could subscribe to Instacart, Target's delivery service or another option. These are all around \$100 annually for a subscription. Near central campus, in college town, are some good opportunities to eat a quick bite e.g. College town bagels and a 7/11 which is a sort of small grocery store in a gas station kind of layout. The Ithaca Commons are a 15-minute walk from west campus and often a hot spot when certain events are held such as Apple Fest in the fall or Chili Fest in the spring. Aside from that, a lot of good restaurants and bars are in the Commons and in college town. Four Seasons is great for Asian, Dos Amigos is quite famous among students for good Cali-Mexican food, New Delhi Diamond's has great Indian food, Pokelava Poke Bowls or Bibibowl have nice bowl options, Sushi Osaka has great sushi and Hashimi, a highlight is the Alley cat café with adorable cats and my personal favorite is Brewer's taproom and kitchen on Route 13. You have to try their Cauliflower wings if you ever get the chance! Modern Alchemy is a Game bar that has a lot of

board games that you can enjoy with some friends along with great food and cocktails. Local bars that students and locals go to that I can recommend are Westy, the watershed, bike bar, chanticleer, the range, level B or hideaway. Some of which have special events like karaoke nights or the infamous fish bowls at level B.

Finances

As a warning, life in the U.S. and especially Ithaca is extremely expensive, especially compared to German standards. It even tops rent and living cost in Berlin. Even with the amazing support of the direct exchange and DAAD, you should be expecting some expenses that you will need to cover by yourself. This is also based on whether you want to travel around NY or the U.S./Canada a bit. I personally saw quite a lot of the state of NY and also went to Canada. As for establishing a bank account, I personally already spent elongated times in the U.S. with only my N26 card which worked out well enough, but I recommend getting a U.S. bank account, too. It is mostly free for students, and you can just cancel it once you leave the U.S. I picked Chase (checking account), which is in downtown Ithaca, but you have other options such as the local M&T bank. I personally think American banking is very different from German banking. Be prepared that a bank transfer as we are used to in Germany does not really exist in the U.S. and most things are dealt with by Venmo or cash. Be advised that Venmo is not available in the German Appstore and can only be used/downloaded within the U.S. A good alternative to Venmo is Zelle which you should be able to activate with your Chase account. Bank transfers (national and international) are usually managed through a wire transfer which has a \$40 fee. There is another option of ACH transfers, but I never did anything with that, and you have to activate it with your bank. The best way to pay your rent is by check (you can get some at Chase and it is quite easy to use them), cash, or if your landlord allows it paying everything in advance through an international wire transfer and maybe getting a discount for a 6-month payment.

Some comments

It is quite challenging at the moment to buy a good car. Facebook marketplace is a good space, but you have to be quick and pay in cash. I can help with some good dealerships I found around Ithaca if this should be relevant for you, but I would advise against dealerships in Ithaca since most is owned by Maguire and they are outrageously expensive. Cars are around \$4000 and an insurance is around \$900. Gas is very cheap in the U.S. and a full tank of about 60L costs \$45.

Ithaca caught me positively by surprise and made me want to stay for some time longer. In the near future, I will be living in Ithaca, and you are welcome to reach out to me for any help you might need. This goes from needing a tour guide through Ithaca, tips where you should go eat, the best bars, help in regards with Cornell resources or anything else like just needing another German to talk to. Since I frequently travel to Syracuse, you are welcome to try and coordinate a ride from the airport with me.