Okay, haha, here we go.

First, I think it took them a little over a month to get back to me. I applied in early January for the fall semester and I heard back on Valentine’s Day.

In terms of technical information, you’d be living in an apartment in one of two neighborhoods (Pangrati or Kolonaki). Pangrati is a little bit closer to the CYA center, and the neighborhood I lived in. I think all students live here unless there’s a particularly high enrollment. Pangrati was absolutely wonderful – there are at least 5-6 tavernas within easy walking distance from any of the apartments, as well as supermarkets, bars, etc and you’re only a 5-10 minute walk from the CYA center and the classroom building.

Apartments house from 3-5 people (all students in the program) and are equipped with the basics (kitchen, 1-2 person bedrooms, living room, one bathroom, fast WiFi). It’s random grouping unless you designate someone in particular you’d like to live with, and I think you also had the option to request a single room within an apartment, if you wanted.

I know what you mean about hearing mixed reviews about Athens. As European cities go, it’s known for its history, architecture and archaeology, and that’s about it. But I actually really liked it – there is a wide range of different neighborhoods that fit together well without feeling like a big city. (For future reference, if you go: Plaka – the touristy area around the acropolis, full of restaurants, souvenir shops, etc but also a couple of gorgeous rooftop cinemas (I saw, randomly, Vertigo and From Rome with Love there, haha); Monastiraki – the shopping district, mostly comprised of one big main pedestrian street that turns into a massive flea market at the end; Syntagma Square – where Parliament is, hub for governmental stuff, next to Monastiraki; Gazi – the “going out” neighborhood, full of bars, clubs, restaurants, etc – a lot of my compatriots met Greek friends here, it’s definitely the hub for young people at night. There are more neighborhoods and sub-districts, but these are the main ones.) Anyway, it felt like a real city, not a caricature of itself like some big cities are, if that makes any sense. Real people – everyone’s trying to survive in the recession but they’re still sincere and generous with themselves. There’s an endless list of things to do and see – I didn’t get anywhere near experiencing the whole city. Plus, it’s ridiculously easy and safe to get around on public transportation – their metro is brand new, clean, bright, and cheap (.70 euro for a student for an hour and a half of on-and-off transport).

Okay, haha, I’m getting wordy so moving on. I did end up leaving a lot on the weekends, with about an equal mix of independent (couple of trips to England and a weekend in Istanbul as well as travel around Greece for me, but I know people who went everywhere over Europe, and even to Abu Dhabi) and CYA-sponsored travel (examples: climbing Mt. Olympus, visiting the monasteries in Meteora and Metsovo, Andros Island, week long trips to the Peloponnese and Crete). There’s a lot of time during the week to see Athens, and after a couple of long weekends there, I felt comfortable using the time to go see everywhere else. If I have one piece of advice, it’s to sign up for as many CYA-sponsored trips as you can take without it cutting into your independent time too much. There was a trip to the island of Andros that happened on my first weekend in Greece – I had signed up for it over the summer, I think. About 20 of the 60-70 CYA students went and it made meeting and connecting with people so much easier – which leads into your next question.

I’m exactly like you when I go into a new social situation – it can really freak me out, especially cause I hate the small talk and posturing that goes on in a group of people who just met – I feel like I just can’t be myself. And not gonna lie, the first week was awkward, as it will always be, but it was awkward for everyone, and everyone was in a new place with a weird language and after that week, the people who came with friends start to branch out and everybody mixes together. My best way to connect with people is through shared experiences, so the trip to Andros really helped…when the 20 of us got back, we had connected as a small group and I had 19 people I knew better than the 40 others, and suddenly they seemed like my best friends, haha – I don’t know if you’re the same way but either way it was a fun trip and a great way to ease into Greek life.

In terms of the other students…I didn’t know anyone before I got there, and I was the only person from UM. I know it’s a steady program for UM, but enrollment tends toward the summer months so fall and winter semesters usually only get 1 or maybe 2 people. It totally freaked me out at first, but once you’re there for a few days and get to know your roommates a little, it gets easier. I was on good terms with my roommate, two girls from Union College in New York, but they weren’t my best friends in the program…pretty standard new-school/living situation stuff. There were a wide variety of people there, from all majors and schools (though exclusively American colleges). A few people were there because Greece is perceived as a party study-abroad, which it could be if you make it but is not inherently. A few major archaeology-, economics- (for the recession stuff) and classics-nerds (myself included haha), but for the most part everyone was adventurous, friendly and culturally-aware.

Holy cow, I’m writing you a thesis. Haha, I hope this is interesting or helps in some way. For your last two questions, and with all the above being said, I think my least favorite part about the program was the slightly high-school nature of the group. Especially for us, coming from Harbor, a group of 60-70 people feels like our graduating class, with all the attendant drama. So people clicked up a little, hooked up a little, clashed for different reasons, etc …but in trying to avoid the drama, you’ll undoubtedly find other people attempting to do the same so it’s never a lonely feeling, just annoying sometimes.

My favorite part of the whole program was probably the CYA-led smaller trips…they just gave everyone a chance to go adventuring together in places that we probably wouldn’t have found on our own. Plus you get to hang out with your professors in a really relaxed environment where they don’t have any pressure or expectations to lecture or teach and you don’t have any pressure to learn. So you can just hang out and ask all kinds of questions and connect with them. (…and if you find a class you might like that’s taught by John Karavas, take it. He’s hilarious, passionate, brilliant and crazy.)

Also – the food. Period. Yum.

So anyway, I hope this isn’t tedious to get through haha, and I hope it helps a little or a lot. And bring on more questions if you have them!