

Paris Université Descartes

Why

To develop my French, improve my communication skills and live in Paris.

Paediatric Ophthalmology at Necker

I chose this placement because I had previously had an interest in Ophthalmology. After completing this placement, I have realised that this isn't the specialty for me. Necker hospital is a paediatric hospital specialising in rare genetic diseases. If you are interested in Genetics I would thoroughly recommend choosing this hospital for a placement. However, to be honest, I would not recommend doing Ophthalmology at this hospital at all. This is partly because you don't see any of the common conditions; I rarely saw the same thing twice which could be interesting, but as the students were not involved in taking any of the histories or performing the examination, this became boring quite quickly. It was difficult to see what was going on and because the conditions were so rare, there were few learning points that could readily be developed. The pathophysiology behind many of these conditions was very complex, even for the consultants, so things often weren't explained properly as there was little time to spare in this busy clinic.

My role

As a student, you aren't very well orientated on your arrival. On my first day no one knew I was arriving or that I was supposed to be there. This wasn't an issue and the team were very welcoming and friendly, but it meant it was up to the French medical students who were already very stressed and busy to explain my role.

There is a morning meeting most days. This starts at 8am and tends to finish at 9am. On Mondays the medical students condense the patients' notes in to a succinct note to prepare them for surgery in the next week. This was very difficult because the students were pressed for time and so could not explain what every abbreviation meant (which was most words) nor take the time to decipher all the illegible handwriting. As we certainly do not have a consultant ophthalmologist's level of expertise, it was very difficult to know which details were pertinent and needed to be included. There were so many strange codes and drawings and despite having sat the Duke Elder examination and having done an 11 week APEP in Ophthalmology A&E, I realised how superficial my knowledge was.

On Wednesdays the surgical patients are discussed in the morning meeting. This meant junior doctors read out our surgical note. This was often awkward as the Austrian medical student and I often produced 'poor quality' documents. The team wasn't very understanding of this and would take the time to tell us how rubbish the document was in front of the whole meeting (about 30 people). Though they would have seemed rude in England, they weren't being nasty at all. I soon realised the French are much brisker and to the point than we are. They are incredibly direct with each other but they all understand this and take it with a pinch of salt. As soon as the comment has been made its over – no

lingering awkwardness for them, only for us as it isn't what we are used to. However, even knowing this, it was still annoying as none of the doctors would properly answer my queries about what figures meant what and what the illegible handwriting said when I was preparing the surgery notes so it was just the same story every week.

Besides preparing the notes, our role was to observe and to sometimes use the machines (which was difficult if no one was around to explain this). I mostly felt like I was in the way. On the plus side, because there wasn't much space for us in the service, we were often told to leave early. In general, I was only in from 8am-12pm three days a week and 8am-9am 2 other days (or was told not to come in at all those 2 days). We had teaching once a week which was straight over my head (even if it had been in English). I was told by the other students I had to prepare a case presentation, so I painstakingly did but it turned out that seeing as we aren't sitting exams this wasn't necessary and there wasn't any time left, so it was made in vain. At the sign-off, the consultant said he didn't think there was much point sending students there as it's so hyperspecialised.

Réanimation polyvalente at St Joseph

I chose this placement (ICU) because I asked previous ES students which placements they liked the best and this one had a shining review! It was a fantastic placement and despite not being a fan of ICU in general I would highly recommend this. The team are so friendly, there is great teaching and you feel like a part of the team. It's certainly more hands on and my French improved a lot more because I was actually speaking to people. Every day after the morning hand over, one of the consultants stays behind to answer any questions the students might have. This was so useful and the team was so patient and relaxed, I actually felt confident enough to speak up and ask questions. There tend to be lots of students (there were 8 French and one other Erasmus student from Italy) which is great because you make friends and learn a lot more conversational French.

My role

You are expected to be in every day and you do feel useful to the team. You arrive for the meeting at 8:30. You need to be changed in to your disposable paper scrubs and ready to start i.e. sat down in the meeting room at 8:29 unless you want to hear a lot of sighing. Make sure you take notes on each patient because you don't know who you will be assigned or how many patients you will have. After the meeting, a consultant stays behind to answer your questions. Then you go to the board and see what jobs need to be done for your patient(s) – this could involve ringing other departments, ordering special tests or accompanying patients to scans.

You must write a note about how the patient is that day and any important changes/ procedures in their blue folder. There is a big sheet where you have to document their lab results that day and any tests they've had. You examine the patient, speak to any other members of staff about them and then on the ward round you present the patient. This was really nerve wracking, but very useful and they are so patient and kind.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays the student presents the patient on the ward round. Tuesdays and Thursdays follow a different structure with there being a long meeting between about 11:30 and 1pm in the handover room where the nurses present the patients instead. This allows the teams to check they are on the same page and often yields more in depth ethical discussions. Students have teaching once a week usually. Its best when this occurs on the Tuesdays and Thursdays, so you have more time to prepare your presentation. If this is happening on any of the other days, try to take only one patient or 2 who are being discharged as it can take a long time to collate the patient's history.

While this was a great placement with a very caring team, some things were quite surprising. In France, sedation is not readily used for intubated patients. This is based on data from some studies which have shown that patients recover better with less sedation and need to be intubated for shorter periods, reducing pneumonias and freeing up beds. If you have an English ICU placement you will see that the maximum amount of time someone is left intubated and off sedation will be around 3 hours. I asked about this in one of the morning sessions and they said they taper sedation down until the patient can tolerate it. I challenged them on this as many of the patients are agitated and are auto-extubating. They have soft shackles (les monocles) to tie the patients arms to the beds, but the patients still managed to pull the tubes out with their feet. I raised that surely they aren't tolerating it well but they explained it's a cost-benefit analysis and that they would rather them have a greater chance of being well. Don't let this put you off but just be aware that there are big differences between our medical systems.

Differences between France and UK

Briskness

I didn't expect there to be too many differences between our cultures so I was actually really surprised to find how many there were. In particular they are very brisk and can seem quite rude. They argue more freely with each other but then minutes later they are fine. I actually found this quite refreshing with time; they say what they mean and people don't take it personally. It's important not to take things to heart and to just embrace it. It was good for me to see this as I am always so worried about how people will take what I say and beat around the bush a lot. I think this has made me more confident and will find it easier to request scans from scary consultants; if I can do it in broken French then I can do it in English.

Don't give in and speak English

People will always try to speak to you in English, but you need to be firm with them and speak in French. Most jobs in Paris require you to have a good level of English in order to work there, so everybody is always trying to practise. Even with medical professionals, they are required to read all their papers in English and to do some medical exams in English. It can be really awkward, but as I said, if you are firm they won't be offended, and it is what you are there to do. I wish I had been firmer earlier on and stuck to French from the very start.

Paris tips

Money

Erasmus

You will get an Erasmus grant. It was cut severely for us and is being cut more for you. Don't rely on this. You get paid 70% of the grant with the first instalment (1st or 2nd month). You will most likely receive the other 30% when you return home. The card can only really be used in shops and restaurants.

How to get a French bank account— you need this to **get paid by the hospital**

Before going:

Before you go to France or at the medical school MAKE CLEAR WHAT YEAR OF STUDIES YOU ARE IN. If you have **intercalated** tell her it is your **6th year** – not 5th year- as you are entitled to a higher rate of pay. Bring passport photos with you if you have them and print out your certificate of arrival and attendance before if possible (for the student card/ if you get a Navigo Decouverte – no attestation needed).

At the medical school:

In order to get paid, (between 200 euros – 300 euros a month – you are taxed more if you are 26+) you must set up a French bank account. Go to the medical school you are registered with before this and get your certificate of arrival formed. Also ask for proof of studentship (an attestation) while you are waiting for your student card to be made. **Société Générale** gives you 80 euros for free as they have a special deal with Descartes and Sorbonne universities. Book an appointment and ask for a list of what you need to bring (which will probably be inaccurate) – they will not see you on the day.

Ask them for a form showing proof of residency (**attestation de logement**). You need your halls, landlord, or housemate to fill this in. If you are in halls they might be able to do this at the medical school. If you aren't in halls you will also need a photocopy of their passport or ID card and a bill with their first name and surname on it and it has to be something solid like the electricity bill. If it is not possible to get your landlord to do it you can get your housemate to do it. I told the lady in the bank it was a sublet and that it was my housemate. She allowed this but apparently sublets aren't the most legal in France so maybe don't say outright that it is your housemate.

To bring to the bank:

- your passport (driving license doesn't count)
- attestation de logement
- bill with landlord's first and surname on it
- photocopy of landlord's id
- French student card/ attestation.
- A previous ES student told me to bring my birth certificate but I didn't need this

At the hospital:

You go to the hospital with your RIB (something the bank will give you if you ask or you can print this out at Société Générale bank machines but then you need to wait to get all your codes in the post) and fill in the forms. Then they will pay you at the end of the month. If you change hospital you will have to do this again. At St Joseph, you have to go to Cochin for some reason (bureau de personnel medicale). The office is often closed so note the times down carefully. Also bring your **Navigo receipts** (it's meant to be within 4 days of purchase but they do usually do it a bit later).

Which cash card to use

Get a **Monzo** card before you go. You use a secure app to quickly and safely transfer money and can track your spending and see what you've spent in pounds. Ask someone who has one if they have a golden ticket – this means you will skip the queue to get one. It's fantastic - best conversion rate in shops (MasterCard), the first £200 worth of withdrawals each month are free and then there's a reasonable rate for withdrawing cash afterwards but it's better to get it all out in one go. It could be worth getting a **Post Office** card too if you think you'll be withdrawing more than £200 each month as it is cheaper still for withdrawals.

Paying foreign bank accounts

If you want to live in a flat you will probably need to pay a private landlord. Your French bank account will take a while to set up and you won't have enough money in it to pay your rent. We spent ages trying to work out how to do this and avoid paying massive fees (this will happen even with a HSBC account). Transferwise solved this issue. It's a secure online website that finds you the best rate (close to Mastercard rate) and it's so easy! You just take a couple of minutes to both make an account (we made one for our 76 year old landlady with her) and then you transfer the funds. Its easier for the landlord if you get their RIB so you can pay them straight away. Otherwise they have to go through their emails to confirm the transfer by clicking on a link. Here's my referral link for a little discount if you do end up needing it! <https://transferwise.com/u/geraldineh28>

Transport

Getting to Paris:

There are always strikes. We had 37 days of French train strikes during our trip and some affected the Eurostars. There were lots of unexpected Air France strikes. Apparently this happens every year. Flybe let you take **2 23kg cases for the price of 1** if you show a valid student card but actually, their flights are mostly operated by Air France planes where this deal **isn't valid** so be really careful that it is actually a Flybe plane (this may be only one flight a day).

In Paris:

Travel is very cheap. It's only 75 euros for a month and your job (hospital) will reimburse you 40% if you keep the receipts – but you need to send these over quickly. Get a Navigo (like an oyster) and bring proof you live in Paris - an attestation de logement- from your landlord or flat mate to show you do. That way you get a Navigo instead of a Navigo decouverte - the latter cant be replaced if you lose it and doesn't work when renting bikes.

Don't mention you're only here for 4 months because some ticket offices want you to stay for a year; others don't care.

In France:

Trains around France are surprisingly very expensive. Renting a car is too as you need to block off more money as a deposit (1500 euros) and they don't pay car tax so tolls are numerous and very expensive (around 30-40 euro for a 3 hour drive). If you plan on travelling I would look at coaches or carshare websites such as Blablacar.

Accommodation

Halls:

Finding good accommodation is a nightmare. I looked for about 6 months before going and didn't find anywhere until a week before. There's not much point trying to find an apartment far in advance unless it's halls. The halls are nicer than you think but less sociable. It would be good if you applied to the same block with friends. CROUS is reserved for students going for a whole year but if you can get a CROUS room they are very central and about 300 euros! Getting halls certainly saves a lot of hassle and days wasted seeing horrible apartments you can't afford in Paris. Saying this, our apartment in Pigalle was in such a great area and was so homely. It became everyone's hub and was so much better for having guests.

What I did – apartments:

I really wanted to live with my friend, but most places just have one spare room. It's almost unheard of to find 2 spare rooms. In the end we found somewhere for the first month through a friend of a friend by chance. I shared a status several times over the 6-month period. For the last 3 months the two of us found somewhere on Airbnb and asked for a discount. Accommodation is very expensive in Paris, but it's 4 months and you will have a secure job for the rest of your life after that. The first flat was 800 euros a month each and the second was 900 euros a month each.

We lived in Northern Paris in Pigalle (Montmartre) which I would highly recommend despite the hospitals being located in southern Paris. Depending on which hospital you pick you could be anywhere but most of them are in southern Paris. The commute took between 25 mins (St Joseph) - 45 mins (Necker) on the metro. In general, Paris is not good for people with mobility issues due to poor wheelchair access and incredible amounts of stairs, but I would say Montmartre would be particularly difficult as it is so hilly. Pigalle is at the foot of Montmatre so you have access to several beautiful and vibrant areas with fantastic bars and restaurants. People would always say it was the coolest place to live when I told them where I was based. Despite being in the north – it's more like central Paris as it's so well connected. You can get almost anywhere (in terms monuments/ museums/ restaurants/ beauty spots) in less than 30 mins. Le Marais is very central and cool but quite expensive.

Our first flat was in Barbes- Rochechouart which was a little rough but got nicer towards Rochechouart and Poissoniere. It was only 7 minutes' walk from Gare du Nord (avoid going there at night time). There are many cool bars and restaurants with great things nearby such as an old

theatre converted into an arthouse cinema with a rooftop bar/ the canal/ brewery/ amazing vintage shops.

Student discount and activities

Being under 26 (not 26) gets you much more discounts than being a student so make sure you always have your driver's license and student ID on you.

Book in advance to avoid queues where possible. You will queue a lot but its usually worth it.

Disneyland: in the low season they have deals, like an adult for the price of a child on certain dates. This is not available on the English website.

Bakeries: you need to know what you are going to order before you get to the till. They will not wait. Never order a baguette; always order a tradition – it's made in the traditional way and has less preservatives – tastes way better and usually the same price.

Restaurants

- Bouillon Pigalle – so cheap and tasty. Probably the cheapest nice restaurant in Paris. (A litre of nice wine is 11 euros). Not necessary to book but be prepared to queue. The queue goes down quicker than you think.
- Chez Gladines – tasty basque country food, reasonable and good wine. Various locations, southern Paris and St Germain ones best
- Le potager du père Thierry
- Pink mama – amazing pizza. Try to sit on top floor. Not necessary to book but be prepared to queue.
- Kyushu – at Barbès. all you can eat sushi – 5 dishes at a time. Need to eat everything or you pay. 12 euros.