

4 months in Rennes, North West France

Why the European Option?

I decided I probably wanted to study medicine at the end of year 11 when I was choosing my A-level subjects for college. To get on a medical undergraduate course, the required subjects were always chemistry and biology with a 3rd A-level in any other subject. I definitely wanted to do maths because it was my best subject, but I was advised to choose a 4th subject in something more artsy that could be a 'break' subject from the other 3 science/maths A-levels I'd chosen. In the end, I thought about what would be most useful for me in life, and what I would actually like to achieve, and becoming bilingual suddenly became a lifetime aspiration for me. I saw that Manchester also offered language tuition alongside the medical degree which confirmed that doing a foreign language would be worthwhile.

After a lot of research, I realised that Manchester offered the best opportunity to achieve a good level of proficiency. Throughout my time on the course, I had several friends who dropped out because they found the workload too difficult, yet they all had a higher standard of French than I had and it made me question whether I should continue with French. In the end, it was the other people in my class, who had become great friends of mine, who convinced me to stay. I progressed ever so slightly each semester and made sure I did all the homework and revised for tests.

When it came to take the DALF C1 exam at the end of June in 4th year, I listened to the radio every day for a month and revised all the tenses and certain higher level sentences I could use for the written work. All of us went into the exam doubting our level, yet the majority of us achieved the minimum 50% to pass. And who knew, I managed to get myself 53% by doing the minimum amount of work possible and I was more than happy with the result!

Why Rennes?

When submitting my choices for the 5th year placement, I chose Lyon as my first option with the hope I could learn to ski being so close to the mountains yet also get the nice weather in Lyon itself. I chose Rennes as my second option because I knew it had a huge student population and was less expensive than Paris or Lausanne. In the end I was allocated to Rennes with nobody else from the course joining me, which I actually saw as a positive. This way, I would have to find my own way round a new city, make my own new friends and really throw myself into life here.

Before you arrive, a French medical buddy is assigned to you and I also found another buddy through the Erasmus group here. I also met a student from Rennes when they had come to Manchester on exchange, so I had more than enough people to ask any questions about starting my new life here.

Finding accommodation

There is a huge student halls here called CROUS, that costs about €250/month for a long, narrow room with a private small bathroom and a small fridge. Most international students I have met went for this option and found it very convenient. Each corridor consists of about 20 separate rooms with a shared kitchen between everybody. The kitchen has around 6 electric hobs and 2 microwaves but no oven. You also have to buy your own pans, kettle, plates and cutlery so for a 4 month stay, it's not ideal. I love cooking and I wanted to live with people that wouldn't mind me using their stuff rather than having to buy all my own things. The advantage is that you quickly meet a lot of people and a lot of people are international students so everyone is really friendly!

At first, I reserved a 1 week stay in an AirBnB in the centre and was planning on room hunting in my first week there. Fortunately for me, I dropped lucky and my French buddy here put me in touch with her friend that had a spare room for 3 months. It was with another 5th year medical student in a flat in the centre of Rennes by the metro stop Anatole France, next door to the hospital, who had a spare room while her sister was doing a 3month exchange. It didn't cover the full duration of me being here but it was perfect otherwise and the rent was only €220/month. I sort of went against the advice of university by accepting a place I had only seen pictures of, but no money was handed over until I got to Rennes and was in the apartment, and it was more trustworthy because she was another medical student needing a housemate. It was more than worth the risk though because the apartment was gorgeous and my housemate was so kind and patient whilst I found my feet here. She was French and so we only ever spoke in French which was also invaluable at improving my linguistic skills. I was sad to leave and she said she was sad to see me go as well, we had a meal together on my final night in Rennes to say goodbye!

For my final month here, I mainly used a French website called Leboncoin to find a room. It's the French equivalent of gumtree in the UK. I found a room next to the university and hospital in an area known as Villejean which was slightly outside of Rennes, but it's next to a metro so getting around is still pretty easy. I looked for a flat share with housemates, known as a 'colocation' with 'colocateurs', so that I could borrow their kitchen equipment and also continue to socialise with French people and practise my linguistic skills.

In general, expect to pay between €300-450/month for a private room in Rennes. You can find places a little cheaper the further out of the city centre you go but I would recommend avoiding the area known as Kennedy, which is next to the university and the final stop on the metro, because it is slightly poorer, often in the Rennes news for some theft or assault and you don't feel safe walking round there.

I would recommend living near the metro stop Anatole France which is within walking distance of the hospital and the city centre, and appears to be where most medical students prefer to live. After that, I would recommend the areas around the metro Sainte-Anne which is in the city centre and then République, also in the city centre and the main transport hub so easy to access anywhere from there. Although south of République starts to get a bit unsafe, particularly at night, so don't go much further than the next metro stop of Charles de Gaulle. I spent my final month right next to the university in an area known as Villejean. It has been a great choice as well, but it's neighbouring

the area I wouldn't recommend, Kennedy. So make sure you stay as close to the university as possible – which is where the CROUS halls are located as well.

For help with rent, you may have heard of the French social aid system known as the CAF which is offered by the government. As students, you can get approximately €70/month off your rent, but as you will come to realise, it takes a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with French administration to get it. You will need to set up a French bank account, provide your birth certificate and proof of salary in the last year (or write a sentence and sign it stating that you haven't had a salary because you are a student) and provide a whole host of other supporting documents that take several weeks to process anyway. Since I found a place with a student who already received CAF, my new housemate knocked that off the rent so I was indirectly already receiving it, and so I didn't bother going through the rig moral that many other students have been confronted with.

In summary:

- Post on Rennes medic and Erasmus facebook groups about room hunting and you might drop lucky.
- Ask your French buddies allocated to you if they know anyone searching for a housemate, particularly anyone also leaving on a 3 month exchange.
- Search leboncoin for places perhaps a couple of weeks before you arrive to see if there are any options rooms available for when you arrive.
- Book a temporary accommodation on AirBnB
- Ideally find a place by the metro stop Anatole France
- Avoid the area of Kennedy and make sure any places available in Villejean are closer to the university (East) rather than Kennedy (west)
- Apply for CAF if you're staying in the same place for the 4months and it isn't a sublet room.
- Useful words: colocation = houseshare, colocateur = housemate

www.Leboncoin.fr - Rennes, post code 35000

Getting organised for the placement

Although we found out our placement allocation in the March before we came, I still hadn't received any welcome e-mails from Rennes medical school by October and everyone in my class had everything more or less sorted for their departures. The European studies team were really helpful trying to contact the Rennes international coordinator, Carole Pegeault. It is at this point that I became aware of how terrible French administration is. After several e-mails, it became evident that I could choose any specialty that I wanted while I was here although wasn't told how many I could choose and how long each would last. Carole asked me to meet her on my first day, where she organised the dates of my placements there and then. I also had to go for a medical examination and get a 4th whooping cough vaccine (you only need 3 in the UK) and a mantoux test. I was given a piece of paper that had the details of the wards and each 'chef du service', which you use to find your way on the first day in the hospital sectors by hunting secretaries and explaining who you are. I ended up doing 9 weeks in psychiatry in Guillaume Regnier hospital that is a 15/20mintue bus ride from the centre, followed by 5 weeks Oncology at Centre Eugene Marquis (at the main Pontchaillou

hospital site) and 3 weeks of infectious diseases at Pontchaillou. I would recommend choosing 4 placements for the 4 months to keep it interesting and it will allow you to see/do more.

Psychiatry at Guillaume Regnier hospital, Service Deniker

The psychiatry placement was really interesting and I definitely have an excellent understanding of schizophrenia after 2 months ('service' in French). The students are 4th years who do 3 full time weeks 'on' and 3 weeks 'off'. I was told by the administrator that I should only do mornings throughout my placement, which is what most students do on other placements, which is how I started my placement here. Other Erasmus students I met did the 'on/off' system that suited their duration i.e. 2 full-time weeks 'on' then 2 weeks 'off'. So if you want to do a bit of travelling, I would recommend this placement! The students are also provided with a cooked, simple lunch every day consisting of salads to start, a main meal of meat with vegetables and a dessert of cakes, yoghurt or fruits. I found the lunches were a good time to try and chat to the other students in French and play some table football or pingpong. It was also a way of making some friends that I used to meet throughout my time in Rennes. However, 2 months on this ward was too long and I would recommend only 1 month. As students we didn't have much to do on the wards apart from observe, and take an occasional history from patients that were less ill than the others so it got boring towards the end. Otherwise, I got to observe ECT and TMS on patients, gain a better insight into the variation of how schizophrenia affects people differently and get a free lunch every day for 2 months!

Oncology at Centre Eugene Marquis, Service Chevreil

Next, I started doing oncology at the main hospital site in Rennes. I was allocated to a ward that cared for palliative patients who were not yet at the end of life, but required treatment for complications of their disease. For example, infections, losing weight, occlusive syndromes, general deterioration, lung effusions or neurological manifestations of metastatic disease. I saw a huge variety in patient presentations and types of cancer, including extremely rare cancers in young people. After 2 months in psychiatry, I realised how much other medicine I had been missing and I felt much more comfortable being able to examine patients daily and even beginning to take simple histories from patients with the help of other students. The Monday of my second week there, I witnessed my first death of a patient that had been really kind and helpful towards me as somebody trying to learn French, so I was quite sad. Especially as during the following 2 weeks, another 5 patients died who I'd got to know quite well. Although it was sad, it was a good learning experience to face the feelings that follow the death of a patient, particularly as this is an inevitable part of life as a doctor. The staff in the centre are all extremely nice and helpful and I would recommend a placement here.

Infectious Diseases at Pontchaillou

My 3 final weeks in this service flew by. I spent 2 weeks on the ward, trying to write a synthese for my patients and following the internes around. I got the opportunity to present my patients to Professeur Michelet, the chef du service as well. Each patient was really different and I saw a wide range of diseases and begun to build a basic understanding of antibiotic therapy.

My final week I spent in the hospital du jour and sitting in on consultations which again, saw a huge range of patients, mostly with HIV, hepatitis or infected wounds from surgery or ulcers.

Most mornings we would start at 8:30am for a lesson and then head to the ward, finishing any time between 12:15-2pm. I found this placement really interesting so would recommend it. Although they do expect you to be in for this placement so don't expect a Friday off for travelling around France or welcoming visitors to Rennes!

Living in Rennes

Socialising!

Rennes has been a great place to live as a student and I have really enjoyed my time there. A quarter of the population there are students, and there is a huge international network of Erasmus students that organise bi-weekly events so there are always things to do and people to meet. Notably the Monday night meet up at the Irish bar O'Connell's which I went to a few times. Through the Erasmus network, I gave a presentation in a school to 10 year olds about England and the UK and I also went to a retirement home and did some arts and crafts with the residents there. For things to do, you have the usual activities of cinema, ice skating, bowling and of course an abundance of places to eat and drink.

One of the highlights of Rennes, is the huge Saturday morning food market at Place des Lices. It is renowned in Brittany for its seafood but most people do their weekly shop for fruit, vegetables and meat here as well (including me!). You have to try the galette saucisse from one of the food vans, which is the perfect hangover cure, especially a complet galette with ham, cheese and egg. Not to mention the cheese vans have a huge selection of French cheeses at really cheap prices, cheaper than the supermarkets.

There is a large choice of restaurants in Rennes, but I would recommend La Saint Georges for fantastic gourmet galettes and crepes at reasonable prices, Picotta if you like tapas and great pizza, or Mezzelicious if you like Libanese food! Make sure to reserve a table at these places though because they are often full.

Getting around

When the weather gets nicer half way through the placement, it's also worth visiting the coast which is meant to be the most loved region of France by French people. I visited Le Mont St Michel via a bus available from the main station. I also visited St Malo, Dinard, Dinan and Nantes. I would have loved to explore the coast more but it's so difficult without a car. Blablacar is a great place to find lifts at affordable prices (covoiturage in French) when exploring the area which I used several times, otherwise I'd recommend trying to befriend a French person with a car, especially if it's your housemate!

The public transport in Rennes itself is fantastic. It costs ~£30/month for unlimited travel on buses and metros which you upload onto your 'Korrigo card' (like an oyster card in London). They also have bikes available for quite a cheap fee with loads of stations around Rennes to get around easily. This is provided by a company called Star that have an office by republique, take a passport photo with you for your new card.

The trains between cities are relatively cheap and fast if bought about 3 months in advance. I went to Paris twice via train which is a 3 hour journey, and it cost about £80 in total for 2 return journeys. Expect to pay extortionate prices the longer you leave it.

Buses are just starting to become popular in France so there's quite a limited service. It's easiest using a comparison website to compare your options to get around, ouibus and flibus are the 2 most popular ones at the moment. However, blablacar is known to be quicker, have more options available and in some cases, cheaper!

Blabla car website - <https://www.blablacar.fr/>

Train website - <https://en.voyages-sncf.com/en/>

Star website - <http://www.star.fr/fermeture-station-metro-gares/>

Transport Comparison website - <http://www.kelbillet.com/>

Sports

Sport wise, we are a little late in arriving to sign up for the university sports teams which fill up quickly, so if that's something you're interested in then you need to sign up before you arrive (if that's even possible). I've always played rugby so I found a new ladies rugby team through facebook, that was actually part of the business school who were happy for me to join them. The canals in Rennes are also a nice place to run by and the beautiful Parc du Thabor always has runners if that interests you.

Learning French!

The first couple of months here, I used the Erasmus OLS+ platform that we had to take our language test on. It has so many resources and mini activities to build up your level of French in lots of different scenarios. I found it extremely useful. However, half way through my time in Rennes, I stopped using it as much as I found my French and confidence improved, so I got lazy in learning more French and preferred going out with friends instead!

I also signed up to CIREFE, the French tuition for foreign students at Rennes 2. I should have taken a test on my first day at 9am here but I didn't go because I still hadn't got any of my student details here – it turned out that didn't matter anyway. When I went in the afternoon, the receptionist put me into classes that had space available, an oral class and writing class, 2 hours each per week for 10 weeks, that included 2 weeks holiday in the middle. I asked to stay at C1 level because I felt like I needed to improve further and provided my certificate so she knew I was this level. The teaching is really good and I met some friends in these classes as well as improving my French.

What did I think of living and working in France?

The medical students here have to work really hard to pass their exams, which seem to focus on really pointless details or calculations that they're never going to use as a practising doctor. Everything is geared to their academic knowledge rather than examining patients or speaking to patients which they pick up during their placements (stage in French). Their system for getting their first job as an interne relies on the results of a national exam called the concours, so there's a lot of pressure to perform well if you want a certain hospital. They seem to have much bigger hospitals in France but this is because they have fewer district generals, so people often travel for 2 hours for a routine cardiology appointment. I've seen a lot of students and foundation doctors examine patients in random ways but I don't think they've been taught how to do it methodically. The senior registrars however, are just the same as ours in the manner of skill and knowledge. Everyone on my placements has been extremely welcoming and kind, and the medicine in general is pretty much exactly the same as the UK.

This 16 week placement has given me a huge insight into other cultures and how to meet and talk to new people. There's nothing more out of your comfort zone than arriving in a new country, not knowing many people, the area, the language, or the etiquette of what people expect from each other. I feel like I've got a much better understanding of French culture which is something you only really understand when you've spent an extended period surrounded by it. Not to mention the cultures of Ireland, Spain, Italy, Argentina, Mexico, Germany, America, Finland and Slovakia...you meet people from all walks of life. I've also learnt a lot about people, and how most people are kind and keen to help you, even when you first meet, and no matter the nationality or culture, people will always have something in common and being friendly and kind to each makes you realise how much fun you can have together even though your backgrounds may be so different.

My top tip is to throw yourself into life as an Erasmus student. Say yes to everything and you'll leave having made the most of your time there and fantastic memories!!