

**ERASMUS REPORT**

**PARIS DESCARTES 2017**



## **Why European Option?**

Being brought up in a French-speaking country and having studied French until the A-level, I had been immersed in French culture since my youth. When I got accepted to the University of Manchester and upon learning that they offered the medical degree with the European Studies Option, the questions I asked myself was: why NOT European Option!

I'll admit that two-hour long French classes every Monday evening for three years was not the most appealing idea, especially during the short and cold winter days and before final exams. However, they did help to improve my medical French, they prepared me for the DALF exams in year 4, and they were also an opportunity to make new friends, some of whom I would spend 4 months in Paris with.

Paris was a natural first-choice option for my electives. Paris, for its diversity of culture, the richness of its history, its metropolitan life, and its unique gastronomie. I was thus really excited and grateful to have been given this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend my 4-months electives at the Université Paris Descartes. In addition, the European Option gives the option to undertake the year 3 Student Selected Component (SSC) in France. I spent these memorable 4 weeks in Toulouse, also known as "la ville rose" for the colour of its houses.

Overall, the European Option enriched my experience as a UK medical student and I would recommend it to anyone who has an ever so slight interest in the beautiful country of France. Also, graduating the medical school with European Studies is an added bonus on your CV!

## **Living in Paris**

### **Before you leave**

Since the electives start very soon after the finals, I would recommend organising everything as early as possible, to avoid being overwhelmed when finals revisions start to accelerate and intensify and to ensure you have all your documents at hand before leaving.

- Visa. Make sure you know the visa requirements before travelling to France for 4 months, especially if you do not hold a European passport. This is something that I wished the university had informed me of. It would have saved me the rush of having to go to London straight after my finals to apply for the long-stay visa and starting my elective placement late because of a delay in getting a visa.
- European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). We were made aware of the possibility to apply for an EHIC, which would cover our healthcare in France in the unfortunate event of an emergency. We were told that it was not compulsory to go on electives, but once in Paris, the University Paris Descartes actually

requires you to have it, to complete the registration process. It might not have been a prerequisite for the other French universities, but I would suggest that you apply for the EHIC to be on the safe side. There are no application fees but the waiting time to receive the card can take up to a few weeks so apply early!

- Passport photos. It always comes in handy to have a few passport-sized photographs with you. They are required to register at the university in Paris or to buy a Navigo Pass.

## **Accommodation**

With regards to accommodation, I rented an Airbnb studio for the whole length of the electives. I was aware of other options such as the university accommodation (CROUS) or living in the Cité Universitaire but I chose the former option as it was simpler and required less paperwork, albeit more expensive. My studio was in the 14ème arrondissement, in the South of Paris (rive gauche), and I grew to love this residential area. It was well located in relations to the hospitals, as most hospitals associated with Paris Descartes are found on rive gauche, and it was a 25-minutes metro ride journey to the centre of Paris. The 14ème arrondissement had everything I needed in close proximity to make my stay comfortable; supermarkets, food market, primeurs (independent shops selling fresh fruits and vegetables), metro stop and a gym. Another aspect, frequently overlooked but nonetheless important is safety; I felt safe walking around my arrondissement even when late, which cannot be said of all arrondissements in Paris.

Each arrondissement has its ups and downs and there is not one that is better than the other. But there are a few things to consider when choosing your accommodation.

- South Paris. The arrondissements found in South Paris (6ème, 7ème, 14ème and 15ème) are closer to the hospitals associated with Université Paris Descartes and to the university itself. They are usually more residential areas.
- Centre ville. Most of Paris' main tourist attractions and sites of interest are concentrated in the arrondissements in the centre of Paris (1er, 2ème, 3ème, 4ème, 8ème and 9ème). The rent will be more expensive but the area is very lively and you will be at the doorstep of most restaurants and bars.
- North Paris. The arrondissements in the North and periphery of Paris (17ème, 18ème, 19ème and 20ème) are usually the cheapest options in terms of rent. However, they can include long commuting times in the public transport and they are not the safest areas to live around from what I have heard from other Erasmus friends who lived there.

## **Arriving in Paris**

Once you arrive in Paris, try to pop by the university as soon as possible to get all the administrative paperwork sorted out. The person you would be looking for is *Mme Erichetta Mazérat* ([erichetta.mazerat@parisdescartes.fr](mailto:erichetta.mazerat@parisdescartes.fr)) and you will find her at the

*Bureau des Relations Internationales* on the first floor of the Université Paris Descartes building. Upon presentation of the required documents (you will have been emailed a list), she will give you your student card, sign off your certificate of arrival and issue a letter of 'attestation d'inscription', which you will need to open a bank account. Her office is usually open in the morning until noon and in the afternoon from 13.30 to 16.30.

Mrs Mazérat will also be your first point of contact if you have any queries regarding your elective placements. She is very helpful and her email response rate is very fast.

Before leaving Paris you will also have to stop by Mrs Mazérat's office one last time to get the final paperwork signed off. In addition to the certificate of attendance required by the University of Manchester, the Université Paris Descartes would have previously sent you a '*carnet de stage*' that has to be signed off by the *chef de service* from each of your placements in order to validate the placement. I would suggest you fill this '*carnet de stage*' as you go along your different placements. I am aware of a few other Manchester Erasmus students who did not take this seriously and therefore had to chase their supervisor after their placement in order to get signed off.

### **Travelling around**

Paris has an extensive and a very well connected public transport system that comprises of metros, RER, trams, and buses. I got a monthly *Navigo* pass, which is the counterpart to a London oyster card, and will allow you to travel as much as you want. The *Navigo* pass is easily purchased at any metro station at the cost of 73 euros a month. The card's validity runs from the start of the month to the end of that same month. Therefore, it is advisable to purchase the *Navigo* at the start of the month and top it up at the end of the month.

The card might seem pricey but I got my money's worth of travelling and could not imagine living in Paris without this precious card! In addition, you can get 50% of the cost of the card reimbursed to your bank account by the hospital upon presentation of the receipt. In summary, get your *Navigo* pass and keep your receipts safe!

Another popular mode of transport in Paris are the *Velib'* bikes. I have not used them myself as Paris is not particularly known to be a bike-friendly place but they are a good and cheap way to explore the city. There are bike stations everywhere around the city and the first 30 minutes of your ride are free so if you can change bike before the 30-minute mark, you can cycle for free.

However, in my opinion, one of the best ways to explore the city is to walk. Paris is not a big city and I found that the streets of Paris are full of surprises. I have particularly enjoyed strolling along the river Seine, *rue Crémieux*, *l'île de la Cité*, *le Quartier Latin* and *Les Marais* on a Sunday afternoon.

## Finances

It does not come as a surprise if I say that life in Paris is not cheap. However, we did get some financial help with the Erasmus grant and our hospital pay.

The Erasmus grant is paid in 2 instalments, with the money being directly credited to your Mastercard account. I received about 70% of the grant (just under 800 euros) around 3-4 weeks of starting my electives and the rest not until the end of the placement, which I found defeated the purpose of the grant. I was able to use the Erasmus Cash Passport in shops, restaurants, as well as for online payments. However, I have heard from previous students that there is a small fee for taking money out of the ATM using the Cash Passport.

I also opened a bank account with a French bank so that I could get paid by the hospital. Not all banks will offer their service for such a short stay of 4 months but I went with Société Générale on 23 Boulevard Saint Germain, near the Université Paris Descartes, and the whole process was pretty straightforward. They will ask for your passport, a proof of address in France and a letter proving you are a student (*attestation d'inscription*), which you can get from Mrs Mazérat. I would recommend sorting out your bank account early as it can take up to 2 weeks to receive your debit card by mail.

## Exploring Paris and beyond

There is always something to do or see in Paris or even around. I initially thought that I would get bored by the end of the 4 months but I really wished that I could have stayed longer and enjoy the long and warm summer days!

Paris has a lot of beautiful museums, and most of them are free for students of 18-26 years. I do not claim to be a connoisseur of art but a few of my favourite ones included *Le Musée d'Orsay*, *Le Musée de Picasso*, *Le Musée Rodin*, and of course *Le Musée du Louvres*. The latter has such an impressive collection of paintings and sculptures that it deserves at least a few visits. There are some self-guided thematic trails that can be downloaded on their website (<http://www.louvre.fr/parcours>), which I found particularly enjoyable and enriching to follow.

If you like running, don't forget your running shoes! Parisians love to run and you can enjoy stunning green spaces and breath-taking scenery, such as running along the Seine River, *l'île aux cygnes* (from where you can admire a smaller version of the Statue of Liberty and a stunning view of the Eiffel Tower, or along the *Champs Elysées* from the Louvres Museum to the *Arc de Triomphe*.

However hard you try, forget your diet plan while in Paris! French and Parisians are proud of their gastronomie and rightly so! You can easily find food to satisfy any sort of cravings or sweet tooth. However, a lot of restaurants/brasseries offer overpriced

menus of questionable quality but they tend to attract a lot of tourists. My advice would be to do some research and to plan where you want to eat beforehand to avoid being disappointed. I could write an entire report about Paris and its food but in general, you can find good and affordable food on Rue des Martyrs in the 9<sup>ème</sup> arrondissement, *le quartier Japonais/Coréen* have some excellent food spots, and I would also recommend going to food markets, particularly *Le Marché des Enfants Rouges*, to enjoy freshly prepared food. You can also find delicious and reputable *boulangeries* and *pâtisseries* wherever you are in Paris. Parisians also love to go out for a drink at night so I would also recommend going to a bar during the weekends to experience this part of the Parisian culture.

Depending on your placements, you might have more or less free time to visit places beyond Paris. Train services can take you anywhere but they tend to be expensive, especially if the tickets are booked last minutes. Buses/coaches are cheaper alternatives to explore other French territories. Companies such as Flixbus, OuiBus, Eurolines, offer relatively comfortable bus lines if you are prepared to sit through a longer journey. There are a few Erasmus groups that you can join in Paris that organise regular activities, events and trips, such as *EIAP (Echanges Internationaux A Paris)* or *To Be Erasmus in Paris*. Be sure to check their website or join their Facebook group as you might find something that interests you. There are so many beautiful places to visit in Paris but some of my favourites that I have visited during my electives and over previous visits to France are:

- Amiens for its magnificent cathedral, cute houses by the canal and gorgeous green spaces.
- Normandie for its historic Mont Saint Michel or wooden panelled houses in Rouen, the city of Jeanne d'Arc.
- Lyon for its gastronomie and for the pleasure of getting lost in *le Vieux Lyon*.
- Bordeaux for its wine and Place de la Bourse.
- South of France and the famous Côte d'Azur.

## **Hospital placements**

### **Obstetrics at Port Royal, Hôpital Cochin**

My first placement was in Obstetrics at Port Royal, Cochin Hospital. This hospital has a regionally and nationally renowned maternity ward, lead by eminent professors and doctors. I spent this placement with 5<sup>th</sup> year French medical students and was treated as one of them. I was able to rotate within the different departments of the specialty, such as the echography suite, theatres, obstetrics wards, consultations, and the day hospital. *Externes* (French medical students) have a lot more responsibilities in hospital than UK students and I found their job to be the equivalent of that of a foundation year 1 doctor in the UK. I had a very hands-on approach and was allowed to manipulate the ultrasound probe, assist in theatres, follow my own patients on the wards and present them to the *internes* or the *chef de service* during the ward rounds. One of the particularity of this placement was the

daily morning staff, during which all the *chefs*, doctors, *internes*, *externes*, midwives and student midwives would all meet and discuss patients who had given birth on the previous day, patients who were in labour or who were listed on the surgery list, as well as patients admitted on the ward. The *externes* also had the task to present patients who were newly admitted on the ward in front of that whole audience. I was initially very reluctant and apprehensive about doing it as I was not confident enough with my medical French. However, the *externes* were very patient and guided me through the structure of presenting patients and, after my first hesitant attempt, I grew to enjoy it. It was a way to put me out of my comfort zone and helped me greatly improve my medical French. After the morning staff, we would all end up in the café for coffee, with the *chefs*, *internes* and *externes* all sitting at different tables to maintain the hierarchy. That was one of my favourite time of the day as I got to sit down and catch up with all the other *externes*.

Despite an early morning start at 8am everyday, I was usually done by 1pm, which gave me the whole afternoon to spend at my liking. My idea of my electives was one where I could relax and not go in hospital as often, especially after the finals. However, I grew to love going in everyday and I learned a lot by being on the wards and attending the teaching sessions. French doctors and *internes* are very keen on teaching medical students and although their teaching is very much geared towards their exams, I still benefited from a lot from them.

Another massive positive point of this placement would be the possibility to do *des gardes* or on-calls. It is compulsory for the *externes* to do the on-calls during their placement but I also managed to do a few during my time there. It can be very easily arranged, as they are more than willing to give up their *gardes*. A typical on-call lasts 24 hours (from 9am to 9am), which initially sounded unreasonable to me, but there is the possibility to sleep in a specially accommodated room if it is not too busy at night. I also got compensated 50 euros for each *garde* and had the following day off as a *jour de repos*. During the obstetrics on-call, I was able to follow women throughout their labour process, do their vaginal examination and assist in their delivery, all under the supervision of experienced midwives. I was also bleeped to assist in theatres for C-sections by passing instruments to the surgeon and could clerk patients presenting to the obstetrics emergency. The only way I got to experience some gynaecology during my placement was through the gynaecology on-calls during which I would mainly see patients presenting to the gynaecology emergency. I would be expected to take a history, present the patient to the *interne*, and I would then have the opportunity to do the pelvic examination and the endovaginal ultrasound under supervision. Despite being quite tiring, these on-calls were an unexpected and a great learning experience that I would recommend to anyone on this placement. In addition, all the medical staff was extremely nice and friendly and you get dinner paid for by the *chef* at the only condition of bringing in a cake!

## **Urgences at Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou (HEGP)**

The A&E department at HEGP is divided into different sections:

- Circuit court: consists mostly of minor trauma patients and those whose presenting complaint is likely to be managed rapidly
- Circuit long: consists of patients with more complex presenting complaints and who are more likely to need further management
- Portes: consists of patients who have been admitted and hospitalised in A&E to receive further treatment before they can either be transferred to specialist wards, different hospitals or discharged home.

I was much more independent during this placement as it is a 6<sup>th</sup> year medical student placement, who are in their final year of medical school are very much treated as doctors. Essentially, I would clerk in patients by taking a history and doing a relevant clinical examination, I would document all my findings in the computer system, present my patient to the *chef* and suggest further investigations and prescribe appropriate treatment and management. I was responsible for that patient until they were either discharged or transferred to another ward. There is also the opportunity to suture minor cuts and put on a plaster, which I had never done before.

Most *chefs* were really great and patient but they expect a lot of the medical students and I sometimes felt that I was not able to live up to that expectation. This was especially true in the first few weeks on my placement when I was still getting used to the hospital, the staff, French medical jargon. However, reflecting back on this placement, I do realise that I have learned a lot as I came across a wide range of conditions, especially regarding the management of emergencies and I was much more comfortable in talking to both patients and doctors by the end of my placement.

## **French versus UK medical system**

I found that the UK and French medical system differed on several levels. Firstly, the education of French medical students is quite different from ours. French students have a very solid basic clinical knowledge. Having attended their teaching session and having spent time with them on the placements, I was sometimes intimidated by the depth of knowledge that they had. They also receive a lot more teaching than we do, both at the hospital and at the university, and their teaching is very much geared towards passing their exams. I felt that their syllabus was better structured and they were better supported than us.

The University of Manchester is well-known for producing doctors with excellent communication skills. A lot of emphasis is put on teaching us how to communicate effectively with patients and we even get assessed on our communication skills during OSCEs. In contrast, French medical students do not get taught how to



communicate with patients and this reflects directly in the way I have observed some doctors addressing patients, with some being very direct, patronising and sometimes slightly rude.

Another stark difference that I have observed between the UK and French medical system is the working environment and atmosphere within the medical team. In France, the members of the medical team are close to each other, they are more relaxed at work, joke more, and the hierarchy between nurses, junior doctors and consultants is much less rigid than in UK. They even regularly organise events outside working hours. I really enjoyed working in this environment and I felt like an integrate member of the team. This is something that the UK medical system could benefit from as I often feel that in UK hospitals, the strong sense of hierarchy within the medical team is a hurdle to better teamwork.

### **What Paris did for me**

#### **Linguistic development**

I was already fluent in French before my electives, having been brought up in a French-speaking country. Although I had no particular difficulty to understand or converse in French, my fluency would sometimes be at my disadvantage as French doctors and patients would assume I was a French *externe* and would expect more from me. However, spending 4 months within the French medical system has greatly helped to improve my medical French such that by the end of the electives, I felt more confident when discussing with patients, presenting patients to doctors and writing in patient's notes. Whatever your initial level of French, spending your electives in France will be a great opportunity to massively improve on your French within a relatively short time.

#### **Culture**

Paris has such a rich culture and there is so much more to Paris than the typical postcards pictures. Each arrondissement has its own character and hidden gems that just await to be discovered. Everyone has different interests but the uniqueness of the museums, the magnificence of the historic buildings and the beauty of the green spaces are bound to suit all tastes.

Paris is very well connected to other parts of France by train and bus lines. I would strongly recommend travelling to other French places if time, budget and weather permit. Disneyland is also only 1h30 minutes away from Paris and you can get relatively cheap tickets if you go during the non-busy season.

## **Future plans**

These 4 months in Paris have been one of the highlights of my medical school years and I really wished I could have stayed longer, especially to enjoy the summer in France.

I do not have any immediate plans to return to France as I want to focus on getting through my foundation years. However France will always be one of my favourite holiday destination, and I might even consider returning to France once I have fully qualified in the UK.

My last advice would be to enjoy your electives to the fullest as 4 months in Paris will just fly by. If you have any questions, feel free to email me!